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# Warsaw, 2004 – Gdańsk, 2017. Evolution of the Polish museum boom

**Abstract** The purpose of my research is to investigate the development of the ‘museum boom’ in contemporary Poland and analyse the so-emerging new museum model. The ‘new museum’ has grown into a ‘memory device’ which shapes and transmits a vision of the past by offering a specific influential remembering pattern. As part of the research work, a comparison between a ‘pioneer museum’, i.e. the Warsaw Rising Museum (opened in 2004), and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk (2017) has been drawn, with both exhibitions subjected to analysis in terms of their affiliation with certain memory politics and their spectacular and meaningful design, to show trends and tensions in the field of ‘new museums’.

**Keywords** Polish museum boom, historical museums, memory device, politics of memory, Warsaw Rising Museum, Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk

## Introduction: Polish museum boom. Museums as memory devices

Among the many phenomena of the ‘memory boom’ in contemporary Poland, the ‘museum boom’ is of special importance. Its beginnings can be precisely set in space and time: it dates back to 2004, when the spectacular Warsaw Rising Museum, first such institution in Poland, was opened to the public. From then on multiple new institutions of this type have been founded, and several traditional historical museums have rearranged their permanent exhibitions to follow the trend. The boom continues and is not likely to cease (i.e. the Polish History Museum in Warsaw, established in 2006, is to open its permanent exhibition within the next few years). The most recent episode of the series so far was set in Gdańsk, where the Museum of the Second World War (MSWW) was opened to the public on 23 March 2017. The MSWW, the newest of the Polish ‘new museums’, will be the central topic of this article. I will use it as an example to outline the development of the boom.

A major change in the way the ‘new museums’ are designed is the shift from educational function (knowledge transmission) to a function that can be defined as experiential (Ziębińska-Witek 2011, 42–51). According to the new perception, the main task of a museum is to produce a powerful and memorable experience for the visitors, through the use of diversified media, making them interact with the exhibition and immerse in the world created within its confines. In this way a historical museum becomes a persuasive tool of memory politics, used with a view to transmitting a particular vision of the past, integrating members of a group and strengthening the sense of identity.

When presenting the ‘new museums’ as ‘memory devices’ I refer to Michel Foucault’s “apparatus theory” (1980), transferred to and developed in the area of memory studies by Laura Basu, who coined the term “memory *dispositif*” (2011). My intention is to draw on these concepts to propose a term that can be used in investigations of contemporary memory cultures in terms of their complexity, dynamics and politics. I apply the memory device term to the memory research on three general levels (Kobielska 2017): firstly, the whole system of a memory culture can be described as a mega-apparatus in the Foucaultian sense, i.e. a network of power relations or a heterogeneous entanglement of various elements used to manage the human subjects, making them remember in particular ways whilst discrediting others. Secondly, the ‘memory device’ can be understood as a specific fragment of this very network: a set of interrelated elements that produce a certain tendency

of remembering. Thirdly, specific cultural texts, spaces and practices that organise the remembering by encouraging, supporting and modifying mnemonic content for their ‘users’, are ‘memory devices’, too. The last variant is essential for the analysis of museums that I discuss in this text.

Thus, my perspective is that of memory research: I discuss museums as memory devices and analyse them as part of the Polish memory culture, in terms of the experience, or memory training, that they create for the visitors. Consequently, I pay more attention to the design of exhibitions and possible ways in which they can be used in the remembering processes than to official museum documents, their strategies, management or organisation, although some of these will be important in the investigation of the Museum of the Second World War.

### Museums and politics

After 2004, the Warsaw Rising Museum (WRM) became an impactful model of ‘new museums’, creating a pattern followed by other Polish museums. Memory shaped within the WRM’s exhibition can be described not only with the use of epithets such as *attractive*, *interesting*, *immersive* or *convincing*, but also in terms of politics (Żychlińska and Fontana 2016; Kobielska 2016). From its very beginnings, the museum has been politically linked with the right-wing conservative party Law and Justice (it was promoted by the late Law and Justice president, Lech Kaczyński). It is fully devoted to commemoration of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, an operation by the Polish resistance Home Army to liberate Warsaw from German occupation, unsupported and lasting over two long months, with a tragic death toll of 200,000; it is therefore not surprising that the museum’s narrative concentrates on warfare.

Soldiers of the Home Army are the protagonists and subjects of the WRM’s narrative, while civilians appear within its framework as one of its many objects, a collective background character rather than the subject of individual stories of suffering. The museum space is full of young and beautiful faces of insurgents: the exhibition opens with phone boxes where their over 50-year old testimonies can be heard. Their combat is shown in two aspects: as an attractive adventure anyone would like to take part in and as a heroic, yet indispensable duty, maintained by bravery and virtue and rooted in religious faith; an effort that mystically saved the identity of Poland, its

dignity and honour, even if not full independence. The Warsaw Rising Museum would be thus a memory device that supports a rather conservative vision of the past, in which the national identity, patriotism, tradition, religion, military heroism and sacrifice are valued most and in which the Polish national perspective is the default one.

The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk has been expected to serve as a “liberal answer” to the WRM, as it was started under the auspices of the centrist government of the Civic Platform party in 2008. After the CP handed over power to the Law and Justice in October 2016, the MSWW (still not opened to the public at that time, but with works on the permanent exhibition heading towards the end) and its management became an object of massive criticism from the part of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage and the pro-government media (Machcewicz 2017). In his statement before the Parliament in May 2016, the Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, pronounced that the “speed, determination and generosity of transferring public money” to the MSWW by the previous authorities had been “astounding” and that the shape of the then planned permanent exhibition was “a problem”, as it would propose an “universalistic story about the war and the nations involved” instead of “concentrating on the Polish narrative and interpretation of events”. “It is the Polish point of view that should be presented in this museum, just like the British point of view is presented in the Imperial War Museum, the German in German museums and the French in French museums. This seems obvious” (Gliński 2016), the Minister concluded.

Several weeks before the aforementioned speech, in April 2016, the Minister of Culture announced that the MSWW would be merged with a newly established institution of 2015 under the name of Museum of Westerplatte and the War of 1939. As the merger marks the formal birth of a new cultural institution, the contract of the hitherto director of the MSWW expires automatically. The MSWW management, the local authorities of Gdańsk and the Polish Ombudsman (Commissioner of Human Rights) tried to prevent the merger at court. They managed to have it delayed enough to let the ‘old’ museum team open the permanent exhibition in the previously prepared shape to the public on 23 March 2017. Two weeks later, the institutions were merged and a new director, Dr Karol Nawrocki, was appointed by the Minister. Meanwhile, the public success of the MSWW became obvious: by the time of the merger, the exhibition had been visited by 20,000 people, by the end of 2017 – by over 400,000. In 2018, too, it remains steadily popular with visitors. Right

after his nomination, Director Nawrocki announced in the press that the exhibition awaited changes that would show the “Polish contribution to the history” (Nawrocki 2017). Several months later, his reproaches were officially upheld by the Minister, who declared that the exhibition “would be changing little by little” because of its “unacceptable malpractices”; adding that, for financial reasons, the general idea “would not be modified” (Gliński 2017). The very first changes to the exhibition were introduced in autumn 2017 and included adding new elements, modifications of existing elements, removals and replacements. The biggest change, however, involved the final section, where a touching video footage, combining pictures of the 20th-century history with alarming current images of refugees and war victims was replaced with animated film entitled *The Unconquered* (fig. 1, p. 110). The video, extolling the Polish bravery and suffering during the 20th century, was prepared by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), the main institution of state politics of memory. In the description below I will mainly focus on the initial shape of the exhibition, as I believe that the history of its modifications needs a separate analysis.

### **Comparison: Warsaw Rising Museum as a pioneer**

Taking all these circumstances into account, a comparison between the Warsaw Rising Museum, the oldest of all Polish ‘new museums’, and the newest one can be informative. As my research shows, the relationship between the two exhibitions is not black and white. Unquestionably, the WRM sets a precedent for its followers in that it prepares the visitors for contact with untraditional space. The exhibition owes its attractiveness to its diversity, interactivity, multisensuality, affectivity and the use of pop-cultural means. Its suggestive space makes the visitors explore its construction and drives them towards a certain effort of perception and interpretation. Visitors to the Museum of the Second World War, on the other hand, are probably already ‘trained’ in crossing rooms that are designed unconventionally, i.e. require following the labyrinthine visit path and proceeding from text to video, from examining exhibits to searching digital databases, as well as in dealing with and understanding such space. As the WRM introduced many of these solutions, it can be called a ‘pioneer museum’, whose patterns are to a certain extent echoed or emulated. Such echoes are easy to indicate within the MSWW’s exhibition. The similarity of



Fig. 1: Museum of the Second World War, interior, 1 April 2017. Video footage, later removed from the exhibition. ©Maria Kobielska

some elements in both museums provoke the treatment of certain MSWW's rooms as references to, or even quotations from, the WRM's exhibition. For instance, in both museums there is a large hall dominated by a plane suspended from the ceiling, filled with cases displaying military equipment, as well as a scenography showing a typical Polish pre-war street at the beginning of the exhibition's story, just to show the most obvious ones.

The exhibition area in the MSWW is over 5,000 square meters (it is most likely the most spacious of all such museums in Poland, including the vast building of the Polin Museum (Musuem of the History of Polish Jews) in Warsaw, and one of the biggest historical museums in the world). The exhibition consists of 18 thematic parts (arranged in three chronological groups: before, during and after the war) and of over 60 separated sections – from tiny rooms and maze-like corridors to huge galleries. The size of the exhibition is striking, it dominates the visitors' first impressions (undoubtedly it would be impossible to see it thoroughly during one visit). It is located underground, which strengthens the visitors' immersion into the overwhelming



Fig. 2: Museum of the Second World War, interior, 1 April 2017. Shocking photos by Julien Bryan. © Maria Kobielska

inner world, separated from the outside. Consequently, the impression of plenitude, completeness of the museum's story, its persuasiveness and attractiveness may be even stronger than in the 'pioneer museum'. The Museum of the Second World War can thus be seen as more than simply the fulfilment of the Warsaw Rising Museum pattern, as it surpasses its ambitions, simultaneously developing some solutions that can be considered controversial or polemic considering the mainstream strategies of Polish historical museums, both in terms of the way the exhibition is organised and of the type of memory it proposes.

### **Museum of the Second World War: defying the patterns**

The strategy of showing 'the shocking' firmly distinguishes the MSWW from other Polish museums. On the one hand, its exhibition is in this respect the most daring and the most difficult to bear. The pictures of violence and death

are fully exposed, which is in opposition to the common tendency to conceal them partially and let visitors decide if they want to see them, for instance, by placing them behind curtains, in boxes or drawers. In the MSWW gruesome, large-scale photographs cover all walls of the galleries, with every single detail visible. Among the numerous examples of such exhibits is the photo showing a frozen corpse of a Soviet soldier in a room devoted to the Winter War with Finland, or pictures by Julien Bryan, who photographed September 1939 in Poland. There is for instance a photo showing a ten-year-old, Kazimiera Mika, kneeling in despair over a bloodstained body of her older sister who has just been shot (fig. 2, p. 111). Equally striking are records of the very moments of executions that can also be found within the exhibition; a disturbing video showing close-ups of mental patients being driven to the place where they would be gassed (during one of the first Nazi “experiments” with this way of killing, in Mogilev in 1941) is one of the most unanticipated materials to see. Nevertheless, as all the most extreme pieces of the exhibition are documents, i.e. archival photographs and films, it is more the authenticity than scare that rules here, making the place represent the poetics of testimony rather than that of a horror.

The MSWW defies the established pattern of showing the war mainly on a battlefield, as a series of purely military events, combats, fighting led by memorable commanders, with a central figure of a soldier-hero. In fact, in the museum the military aspect is somewhat hidden in the exhibition space, which is paradoxical for a museum of war; for instance, descriptions and visualisations of all the battles of the WWII, though very detailed, can only be found in databases accessible to the willing via touchscreens. Two big galleries presenting the course of the war concentrate on soldiers’ everyday life and its conditions or on war industry and its impact on the eventual victory, rather than on the situation at the fronts. Civilians become dominant in the narrative; the visitor has no doubt that they are given the floor, especially when reading and listening to their testimonies. While in the Warsaw Rising Museum all the leading witnesses were insurgents, in the Museum of the Second World War there is at least a dozen stands with video testimonies of civilians or other similar audio recordings. Even the excerpts from soldiers’ letters that can be heard in the above-mentioned gallery with a plane, weapons and other equipment, are mainly focused on their daily and emotional life and often express discouragement from fighting. Not a single testimony of a famous person from governments or army elite was used. At the same time, biographies of ‘ordinary people’ are sometimes described very

carefully, as if they were well-known historical figures. For instance, boxes commemorating Józef Stach and Zdzisław Wysocki, two unremarkable, one could think, Poles killed by the Germans in the first years of war, are very much alike those telling the histories of Leni Riefenstahl or Sophie Scholl and Rudolf Cleveringa.

The above-mentioned multitude and opulence of the exhibition is organised, among others, by the akin gesture of integration. People of various nations and citizenships, situations, tragic events and resistance strategies of different times and places are juxtaposed, merged within the exhibition rooms. Their parallel design makes one repeatedly think about similarities in people's experiences: like in the parts concerning displacements, where stories of those deported by the Nazis and by the Soviets, the people expelled and the Germans who resettled to colonise Eastern Europe mix together, shown in several identically arranged chambers. Such a parallel can also emphasise the link between fates of people from the opposite sides of the front.

While in the WRM the Warsaw Uprising is shown as a crucial event of the German occupation, a milestone in the history of Poland and an exceptional representation of the Polish spirit, in the MSWW it is only a part of a bigger section about all European uprisings, together with the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943 and the combats in Paris, Slovakia and Prague. Five uprisings follow one another in an informative presentation displayed on the black screen while the visitor enters the room and, then, in a moving montage of photos and archival videos with quotations from the testimonies in a dark, mysterious projection hall. Nonetheless, the Warsaw Uprising is such an important *lieu de mémoire* in the Polish memory culture that it could not be left non-distinguished; a large glass-case with objects from the fighting Warsaw attracts attention thereto, making the visitor acknowledge its importance. Yet, even with all this, the Warsaw Uprising is made a part of a bigger series, an element of a wider historical context, rather than a unique tragedy of Poland.

The meaning and implications of the juxtapositions described are complex. Firstly, the stories combined are not rivals competing for recognition, attention or commemoration. Hence, they do not represent what Michael Rothberg called a model of "antagonistic" or "competitive" memory (Rothberg 2009). To a certain extent they can be seen as Rothbergian "multidirectional memories" which negotiate, refer to and support each other. Nevertheless, equation rather than comparison may result from that; juxtaposed memories are contextualised, but can also be prevented from revealing different experiences (and traumas) which risk to be unified.

## Conclusion

The Museum of the Second World War is often referred to, appreciatively or not, as an anti-war museum, concentrating on its dreadful image. While in the Warsaw Rising Museum war is equally tragic, there is a crucial difference. In the latter the terrible tragedy is a heroic one: it is founded on the extreme merits of those who sacrificed themselves hopelessly, with no chance to achieve their dreams. In the MSWW the war is evil and refers to the horrible, violent change of common everyday life. Also, while in the WRM war was a tragic, but noble past, in the MSWW it involves the present and the future (originally clearly visible in the already mentioned video footage in the final part of the exhibition; the example shows that the modifications introduced to the exhibition may reduce the intensity of the narrative described).

To sum up, in the context of the Polish museum boom, the MSWW must be seen as a particularly complicated memory device. It exploits previous museum patterns (as its mechanisms are partly shared with the predecessors) whilst proposing shifts or revisions, and formulating a certain counter-project of remembering within the Polish memory culture. This perspective, although still based on suffering as the core element of the war story, shows it as a common, trans-national, cruel, violent and useless tragedy of ordinary people. The comparison between the oldest and the newest of the contemporary Polish museums, drawn taking into account the conditions of their activities, shows both the potential of the museum boom and its dependence; dependence on memory patterns and on power relations.

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