



REPORTS



War Museums and Agonistic Memory

A Report

Within the EU-Horizon-2020-funded project *Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe (UNREST)*,¹ one work package (WP4) analyzed the memorial regimes of museums related to the history of World War I and World War II in Europe. An article by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen (2016) entitled “Agonistic Memory” provided the theoretical framework for the analysis. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s work (2005, 2013), the authors distinguish three memorial regimes: antagonistic, cosmopolitan, and agonistic. Antagonistic memory landscapes, revolving around adversarial contrapositions of friends/foes, heroes/villains, and good/evil, dominated the scene in Europe before World War II and well into the second half of the twentieth century, at a time when memory politics underpinned nationalist governments. In the 1980s, however, also under the influence of European integration, memory politics started to move toward cosmopolitanism (Levy and Sznajder 2002). Since the 1990s, this approach has been extended to Eastern Europe. A cosmopolitan memory discourse promotes empathy with and compassion for the “other” by focusing on the suffering and plight of the victims. However, the more recent rise of populist right-wing movements has seen a revival of antagonistic memory against which the dominant cosmopolitan memory regimes seem helpless. Hence, Cento Bull and Hansen suggest that agonism in memory politics might better be able to counter the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe, as it engages with sociopolitical emotions and passions, and since it revisits the historical processes and struggles that led to people becoming perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.

WP4’s key objectives were to establish the dominant memory regimes in selected war museums in contemporary Europe, and assess the possible inclusion of agonistic representations and practices. Hence, researchers analyzed the representations of war in five war museums and aimed at evaluating the reception of their exhibitions among visitors. In what follows, we present the key results of the research undertaken within WP4. First, we briefly introduce our case studies and discuss the methodology that we employed. We then present some results from our comparative analysis focusing on the key question of which memory regimes are dominant within war museums in contemporary Europe and of how the public interacts with such regimes.



Case Studies and Methodology

In order to test the extent to which the above-mentioned shift toward cosmopolitan memory that began in the 1980s applied to war museums, we selected institutions that opened and/or remade their permanent exhibitions after 1990, were located in different parts of Europe, varied in size and number of visitors, and dealt with World War I and/or World War II. We selected the following museums: the Kobarid Museum/Slovenia (1990), the Historial of the Great War in Péronne/France (1992), Oskar Schindler's Factory in Kraków/Poland (2010), the Military History Museum of the Bundeswehr in Dresden/Germany (2011), and the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst/Germany (1993, new exhibition 2013).

WP4 aimed to provide comprehensive descriptions of the selected museums and exhibitions, as well as of the process and context of their establishment and reception by visitors. A detailed analysis of the permanent exhibitions, informed by Clifford Geertz's (1973) ethnographical method of "thick description," took into account the selection and arrangement of objects, the textual level and design of the exhibitions, as well as their sensual appeal (Scholze 2004, 2010; Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006; Thiemeyer 2010). To ensure the coherence and balance of our comparative study, we also organized field trips to the museums as a whole team. In parallel, we examined the history and origins of each museum through archival and press research in addition to conducting interviews with directors, curators, scientific advisers, and other agents involved in the museum-making process. We identified the museums' main stakeholders, reconstructed the circumstances of their establishment and/or the set-up of new exhibitions, and traced the controversies marking the planning stages and thereafter. We also examined public responses to the exhibitions and how these institutions fit into regional, national, and transnational memory discourses. At each site, researchers conducted 30 to 50 semi-structured interviews with visitors and documented visitor books. Additionally, in two museums we piloted an image-based tablet questionnaire. A number of questions were addressed: How does the public engage with the dominant message and memory regime? To what extent do visitors agree with this message? Do the visitors feel empathy with former enemies and/or other emotions? Do visitors reflect critically on war-making? The full analysis of the material from the visitor studies is still underway. Here, we present some preliminary results.

Comparative Reflections

First of all, a caveat: we realize that we have to be very careful about generalizing from what is a rather narrow sample of war museums. More research is needed in order to confirm or reject the following tentative conclusions.

In all five museums, the cosmopolitan mode of remembering was very strongly present, confirming our initial hypothesis that the memory of war in contemporary Europe has shifted from antagonism to cosmopolitanism (at least in institutions striving for an international audience). As an example, at the Historial the cosmopolitan approach is epitomized by a tendency to universalize the victimhood of both soldiers and civilians. This antiheroic approach and focus on victimhood and suffering are stressed by the fact that uniforms, weapons, and other objects illustrating life at the front are displayed in uncovered shallow pits in the center of each room (Figure 1). The exhibition also pays limited attention to perpetration, which is shown in an abstract and depersonalized way. Likewise, the Kobarid Museum favors a cosmopolitan approach, as it is inspired by the ideas of peace through showing both the suffering engendered by war and the reconciliation between former enemies. This was from the outset at the core of



Figure 1. Displays at the Historial of the Great War in Péronne/
France (photograph courtesy of Marianna Deganutti).

its mission. As one of the founders of the museum, Zdravko Likar (2016b), recalls: “We wanted to show visitors that war brings only horrors, fear and despair . . . how common soldiers suffered during the war. Kings, generals etc. in WWI were guilty.” The antiwar message is visible throughout the exhibition. It starts in the foyer, which displays portraits of soldiers of many nationalities and crosses from military cemeteries (Figure 2) and ends with a room displaying antiwar graffiti in Italian and German along with horrific facial portraits of wounded soldiers. By contrast, references to perpetrators remain largely abstract and depoliticized.

Also the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, with its reconciliatory mission, single historical narrative, and focus on war victims rather than heroes follows a predominantly cosmopolitan mode of storytelling. At the level of the events, it introduces consistently both the German and the Soviet/Russian perspectives on war. However, these different voices are more correlative than controversial. Therefore, multiperspectivity has a closed character leading on to a single historical narrative at the level of interpretation, which is enforced by a strong museum voice. As a sign of international reconciliation, the Museum aims to present “a common Russian-German view on 20th century history.”² Thus, regardless of serious controversies within the Museum’s Academic Advisory Council, and despite suggestions made by some of its members, divergent historical interpretations are not displayed. Like the Historial and the Kobarid Museum, the German-Russian Museum has a clear antiwar message. It focuses on victims, mainly on the Soviet but also on the German side, and also includes a section on the Holocaust. Apart from



Figure 2. Display at the Kobarid Museum/Slovenia (photograph courtesy Zofia Wóycicka).

high-ranking National Socialist and German military officials, the perpetrators remain de-personalized, which goes also for their Soviet counterparts.

The above examples also indicate that the memory of war in contemporary war museums is often linked to attempts to underpin narratives and practices of reconciliation and Europeanization. The mission of all three museums is also diplomatic. The German-Russian museum is a transnational museum with representatives from Russia and Germany on its governing bodies, which fosters diplomatic encounters. And the Historical and Kobarid have both developed an important role in national and European commemorative and reconciliation diplomacy.

Despite an overall cosmopolitan narrative, antagonistic features were most prominent in Oskar Schindler's Factory (Figure 3), a branch of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, where we found an underlying contrast between nationalized (Polish and Jewish) victimhood and (German) perpetratorship. The museum draws a clear distinction between good and evil, whereby the German perpetrators are dehumanized with no other qualities than hatred and cruelty. Given that the museum is housed on the authentic site of Oskar Schindler's factory, this is particularly intriguing, as it might point to a need in Polish memory to resist images of "good Germans" blurring the more traditional antagonistic image of "bad Germans." However, antagonistic representations were also present elsewhere. The Kobarid Museum, for instance, offers a narrative of Slovenian nationalism in the rooms dedicated to national history that undermines its overt messages of peace and reconciliation.

The existence of such antagonistic modes of remembrance should lead future research to pay close attention to them without assuming too readily that they belong to the past. Indeed, additional research across Europe by UNREST researchers found a particularly strong antagonistic



Figure 3. Exhibits at Oskar Schindler's Factory in Kraków/Poland (photograph courtesy of Zofia Wóycicka).

construction of the memory of war in Eastern and Southeastern European—but also in British—war museums. This suggests that there is still an ongoing battle between antagonistic and cosmopolitan narratives in the memory of war in contemporary Europe.

Agonistic features could only be found in one of the five permanent exhibitions that were analyzed in this research: the exhibition at the Military History Museum in Dresden. The concept of the new permanent exhibition placed an emphasis on the human dimension of war and on the crossovers and entanglements between the military and the economy and the military and society in general. This approach is indebted to the cultural history of violence, explicitly stating that the “confrontation with the very diverse forms of exerting and avoiding violence constitutes not only the leading theme of the exhibition design, but is . . . the unmistakable stamp of the entire museum” (Konzeptgruppe/Expertenkommission 2003). The permanent exhibition proposes two different circuits, one chronological, as is typical of military history museums, and one thematic. The existence of two different tours is indicative of the multifaceted multiperspectivity underpinning the museum's overall discourse, but also of the tension between “history and anthropological universalization” (Jaeger 2017: 39). Many of the curatorial interventions are unsettling and disruptive, suggesting that the museum can be interpreted as a space for confrontation. However, although the museum does make steps toward agonism, this potential does not unfold to the full: the “agonistic tendencies” are “flattened out” (Cercel 2018: 28), and the overall frame remains cosmopolitan.

However, we agree with Clelia Pozzi (2013) that museums often feel freer to present agonistic features in temporary exhibitions. As an example, in the winter and spring of 2018 the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst showed the temporary exhibition *Different Wars*,

which problematized the differences in narratives of World War II in Czech, German, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian school textbooks.

Preliminary findings from our visitor studies point to the success of the cosmopolitan narrative in impressing on the visitors the intended meaning of the museum, generating feelings that war produces only victims and suffering. For instance, most visitors interviewed at the Historial acknowledged the cosmopolitan features of the museum discourse positively. A significant number of respondents said that “everybody” was a victim; some were explicit in expressing compassion for soldiers of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. The same goes for Schindler’s Factory, where audience studies confirmed that a majority of the visitors identified with the victims’ perspective, their sacrifice, and their dedication. In addition, visitors’ comments at the Kobarid Museum revealed that the cosmopolitan approach elicited explicit antiwar messages and/or aroused feelings of compassion and revulsion from most of the visitors, independently of their nationality. However, a strong sense of nationhood also emerges, with Slovenes proud of “their” museum (there is a section in the museum dedicated to the national history of Slovenia) and Italians engaging in a national/family pilgrimage to remember “their” fallen.

This clear antiwar message of the case study museums and their focus on victims and suffering, rather than on perpetrators and the mechanisms that led to an escalation of violence, may indeed blind visitors to the fact that war makes a lot of sense to a lot of people in different contexts. It may even produce a sense of helplessness, as the victims are shown as passive and the causes of war are not explained. In fact, results from the visitor studies at the Historial confirm that the perpetrators were more difficult to identify. Several respondents stated that the victims were passive, referring to soldiers being under pressure to sign up or having no choice about following orders. Civilians also were viewed as submissive. Visitors did not identify heroes in the museum. Beyond compassion, they did not express a great range of emotions. In Kobarid as well, interviews revealed that visitors missed historical contextualization and felt that they had not learned much from the museum. They also felt that victims were portrayed as rather passive and that perpetrators were not identified.

Although at Schindler’s Factory the perpetrators were clearly identified as “Germans” or “Nazis,” many visitors thought they were depicted in a one-dimensional, depersonalized and dehumanized way. One of the interviewees said, for example, that the Germans were shown as occupiers: “Bad and evil—such devils.” Also in the case of the German-Russian Museum, many visitors, when questioned about the perpetrators, mentioned only high-ranking Nazi and German military officials and the Soviet political and military leadership. A typical response by one of the visitors was that those depicted as perpetrators were “Hitler, Stalin, and the people who surrounded Hitler, like Göring, Goebbels, etc. Also Stalin’s surrounding [people] like Beria [and] Molotov.” Visitors’ responses also revealed that they did not learn much about the perpetrators (i.e. their identity and motivations) or about the mechanisms of violence. Also at the German Military History Museum, questions about perpetrators were very much responded to in general terms (“the Nazis,” “the Germans,” “the warmongers”). Those who said that they found that the museum presented the motivation(s) of the perpetrators referred to the fact that the exhibition approached Nazism in general. Both at the German-Russian Museum and at the Military History Museum, the great majority of respondents either did not see “heroes,” or clearly acknowledged that the museum did not lionize/glorify anyone, with some referring nonetheless to Stauffenberg and to the resistance against Hitler in the case of the Dresden museum and to the Red Army and the Soviet partisans in the case of the Karlshorst museum.

The cosmopolitan approach is thus not able either to engage antagonism, as it tends to ignore the latter’s construction of the other as enemy, or to provide a more complex and multifaceted understanding of war and perpetratorship. Overall, our studies seem to confirm the need to

move beyond cosmopolitanism in the representations of memories of war, but they also provide some caution, as cosmopolitanism provides powerful counternarratives to antagonistic representations. The question for us, therefore, is the following: when, how, and by which agents can agonistic perspectives be promoted and constructed in (war) museums? We plan to address some of these questions in a new war exhibition organized as part of the UNREST project at the Ruhr Museum in Essen, Germany, in November 2018, which is provocatively entitled *Krieg. Macht. Sinn. (War. Makes/Power. Sense.)*. To evaluate the success of our attempts, we also plan to carry out a visitor study related to this exhibition.

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NOTES

1. See www.unrest.eu for more information on this project. Members of Workpackage 4 of the UNREST research team, apart from the authors of this article, also included: Marianna Deganutti (University of Bath) and Igor Kąkolewski (Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences). Although they were not directly involved in writing the report, their research contributed a lot to the project.
2. *Protocol of the founding meeting of the Association Museum Berlin-Karlshorst e.V.*, 10.05.1994, Archive of the German-Russian Museum Berlin Karlshorst, *Geschichte des Museums* (Dietrich). Akten aus dem Bundesarchiv – Kopien (BA Signatur: ZMSBw, 41511).

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Unexpected Encounters

Museums Nurturing Living and Ageing Well

The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries' Conference at Manchester Museum, 25–26 April 2018

As the world's population ages, how can museums nurture living and aging well? The conference *Unexpected Encounters: Museums Nurturing Living and Ageing Well*, organized by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) from the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, set out to interrogate this question, and invited conference delegates to consider how museums unconsciously make assumptions about older people and perpetuate the dominant societal view of aging as a "problem."

Held at the Manchester Museum on 25 and 26 April 2018, the conference brought together natural heritage curators, museum learning and engagement staff, researchers, and those working in active aging to reflect on these big issues and explore the findings of *Encountering the Unexpected*¹—RCMG's two-year action research project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and run by the Museums Association, that set out to challenge negative stereotypes of aging and find new approaches to engaging older people with natural heritage collections.

Using a mixture of presentations, panel discussions, activities, and workshops, on the first day we shared the findings of the project and how these might inspire radical changes in how museums work with and engage older people to nurture living and aging well. We describe these changes as ways in which museums can offer them opportunities to live in the moment, be actively engaged, have meaning and purpose, and feel connected with their communities and the wider world.

Esme Ward, Director of the Manchester Museum, opened the conference by welcoming delegates to the first age-friendly city region in the United Kingdom, Greater Manchester, acknowledging the important role that culture can play in people’s lives throughout the life course, as well as encouraging delegates to think differently throughout the conference and have their own “encounter with the unexpected.”

Jocelyn Dodd’s presentation followed this opening address, and it challenged the framing of aging through a medicalized model—that is, a model that focuses on bodily and mental decline and teaches us to fear getting old, seeing older people as socially isolated, fixated on the past, friendless, sexless, and ultimately of little use to society (Figure 1). Instead, delegates were asked to think about the diversity of experiences of aging formed from a complex interplay between personal, emotional, social, political, and cultural perceptions of age and aging, and they were introduced to a concept of aging that values this diversity of experiences and needs, one that helps us to respond to the changes brought on by aging in a meaningful way. Presenting the experimental research project, Dodd shared a new framework or set of ideas that had emerged therefrom that supports museums in understanding how they can use their collections in new ways to support living and aging well as well as to challenge the deficient, medicalized framing of older people and aging (Dodd et al. 2018).

A panel discussion with active aging specialist Claire Keatinge; Farrell Curran, the cultural partnership manager of Age UK, Oxfordshire; and the co-director of Equal Arts Alice Thwaite



Figure 1. Jocelyn Dodd at the *Unexpected Encounters Conference* at the Manchester Museum, 2018.
© The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (photography courtesy of Luke Blazejewski).

further examined these issues. Curran shared some of the findings of Age UK's recent research (Age UK 2018), which found that creative and cultural participation is the main contributor to well-being in older people and that visiting museums featured highly in the most participated-in categories of cultural and creative activity, raising new areas of inquiry around the special role museums might play in later life. Keatinge and Thwaite raised the issue that older people's rights are not as widely acknowledged or developed in comparison to those of other groups. They then went on to argue that museums need to think more in terms of a rights agenda when engaging with older people instead of mainly focusing on health and well-being.

Next, Henry McGhie, the head of collections and the curator of zoology at the Manchester Museum and lead project partner of *Encountering the Unexpected*, introduced the concept of "nature connectedness"—a concept that helps us to think about how we understand and experience the natural world in everyday ways through our thoughts, emotions, and feelings—and how this concept can be used by museums as a powerful way to re-engage people with nature through their natural heritage collections. He shared the staggering finding that only 3 percent of the population think in a scientific way, supporting the need for new ways of engaging a broader population of older people with natural heritage in addition to traditional, scientific, and expert-focused approaches. Finally, McGhie asserted that people are active architects of the future, not passive consumers of the present. He spoke of the ways in which museums—by providing people with a platform for their interests and ideas—can stimulate their thoughts and



Figure 2. Sheila Tilmouth sharing her artistic practice at the *Unexpected Encounters Conference* at the Manchester Museum, 2018. © The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (photography courtesy of Luke Blazejewski).

feelings in order to have them connect with the wider world and what matters to them (rather than simply engage with the museum), and be inspired to act on their concerns.

And to conclude the morning sessions, artist Sheila Tilmouth introduced her practice, focusing on her residency and conservation project with the fen raft spider, a semi-aquatic fish-eating spider under threat due to the degradation of its wetland habitat (Figure 2). She shared tales of her intimate encounters with the spider over a number of years, alongside close-up, awe-inspiring imagery, which led to many delegates remarking upon how touched they were by the spider's vulnerability and surprised to find a new connection with a creature so often dismissed or feared. Tilmouth's close relationship with the spider and her way of engaging the public with changes to natural habitats stimulated much thought around how art can be used as part of the process of helping a species to survive.

The afternoon changed pace by offering a series of parallel workshops where delegates could explore and build on the issues and topics theretofore raised by the conference (Figures 3 and 4). They were able to do so through discussions on strategic approaches to engaging a broader population of older people and on why living in the moment is so important to living and aging well; through opportunities to handle and inspire curiosity with natural heritage collections via a nature-connectedness approach; and through hands-on activities with microscopes allowing them to have close encounters with specimens and consider new engagement approaches.

The second day of the conference, which lasted half a day, offered the chance for a smaller number of delegates to return to interrogate issues raised on the first day in more depth. This opportunity was aimed at practitioners who wished to commit to this type of work and bring about change in their respective fields. Led by consultant and facilitator Anne Murch, discussions, activities, and workshops were underpinned by the principles of giving people "time and space to think." They built on the conversations and ideas that had previously emerged, drawing out the learning from the project, looking at how a shift in attitude toward (and a shift in practices) working with older people in museums can be brought about, and exploring what these implications might mean for museums in the future.

Opportunities for reflection and feedback were threaded throughout the conference, where delegates shared their appreciation for a "reframing of what 'older people' are" and spoke of "unexpected insights into natural heritage collections and their potential." Questions were raised about how practitioners might begin to "strategically embed this new mindset" into their practices, what approaches they might take in order to "create new engagement opportunities that both support and challenge older people," and how they "might influence others to bring about change." While some delegates declared an interest in "advocating for a rights agenda," where museums can play an important role in challenging damaging stereotypes of aging and in supporting older people to live and age well.

To conclude the conference, we called for action, asking delegates to think about what roles museums can play in helping to shape a radically different future, where people of all ages are valued as part of a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable society in balance with the natural world.

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Figures 3 and 4. Delegates participating in workshops at the *Unexpected Encounters Conference* at the Manchester Museum, 2018. © The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (photography courtesy of Luke Blazejewski).

■ **NOTE**

1. For more information about the *Encountering the Unexpected* project, please visit the project website: <https://unexpectedencounters.le.ac.uk/>.

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