

From Technical Showroom to Full-fledged Museum: The German Tank Museum Munster

RALF RATHS

1. ORIGIN OF THE GERMAN TANK MUSEUM MUNSTER

Munster was a garrison from 1893 until 1945 and is regarded by many as the birthplace of the tank corps of the Wehrmacht. Then, from 1956 onwards, the city became one of the most important training sites in West Germany, as the two main schools for combat troops were established there – the school for the tank corps and the school for mechanized infantry. Thus, Munster was the centre for modern tank warfare in West Germany and, at the same time, became the focus of the evolving memory of the Wehrmacht tank corps. Therefore, objects from the World War began to trickle into Munster – uniforms and decorations at first, donated by veterans who wanted to see their tradition honoured. During the 1960s, the NATO partners returned Wehrmacht tanks and other vehicles. These two collections were unofficial at the time, but were expanded by enthusiasts nonetheless. Especially Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) vehicles were made part of the collection now, since this army was old enough to have the first obsolete vehicles itself. In 1972, the collection was recognized officially by the Ministry of Defence and from now on served as a study collection for soldiers that were training in Munster.

But military and civilian society are closely intertwined in West German garrisons, which led to growing public interest over the years as more and more civilians asked for permission to see the study collection. The effort soon proved too much to handle. Therefore, the Municipality of Munster and the Bundeswehr agreed to join forces to transform the collection into a public museum. The chosen structure for this project in 1983 has not changed since that time and is important for everything that will be discussed later on.

The German Tank Museum was created as a double structure. The study collection was moved into the museum as an entity, and still exists as such inside the museum. All the tanks, guns and trucks still mainly belong to the Bundeswehr. Furthermore, the study collection still has its mission to educate the soldiers that train in Munster. The Municipality of Munster, on the other hand, organises the whole operation of the public museum proper: personnel, building maintenance and the like. As a museum it has to appeal to the broader public. Basically, the institution consists of two separate organisations that are interlocked and indivisible, but, at the same time, often with aims ranging from slightly varied to radically different. Nevertheless, both sides need each other: If the Bundeswehr should decide to simply pull the vehicles of the study collection out of the museum, it would be practically empty. If the Municipality of Munster should decide to shut down the Museum, the study collection would be homeless. This situation remains unchanged until today and each side has to respect the specific needs of the other side to change anything in the museum. Each and every decision has to be a compromise to some degree.

2. REFUSAL AND RELUCTANCE (1983 TO 2008)

The concept of war as a culturally shaped, social activity was completely non-existent in the first years of the Tank Museum. The museum started as a collection of big halls that were kept so sterile that the dominating atmosphere was that of a warehouse. This cold, technical atmosphere was reinforced by the presentation of the central objects. All tanks were completely restored; no trace of their fate in war was left visible. The vehicles were also placed in neat rows, separated from visitors by coloured ropes, with signposts providing merely technical data. It ultimately was a show room for tanks; nothing more.

Why was this presentation chosen? There were simply no historians or museum experts on either the military or the civilian side. Due to a lack of expertise in creating a multifaceted concept it was basically all the founders could come up with at the time. However, this raises a very interesting question: WHY was no such expert involved? At this point, both the civilians and soldiers involved in the museum openly denied that a Tank Museum needed any concept at all. Their reasoning was a mixture of political and cultural reasons: During yet another height of the Cold War, the military and many local politicians, who often had been professional soldiers before, were very suspicious of critical views of the military and war in general and of the Wehrmacht and the World War specifically. A critical view of war and military per se was problematic, since the German Army was essential for both – the nation in the Cold War and Munster as a community shaped by the military and ex-soldiers. The problem regarding the Wehrmacht was even more serious. At that point, the Wehrmacht was still considered as a more or less innocent army, while the Waffen-SS was widely regarded as the exclusive group of villains. Since veterans

of the Wehrmacht were still numerous in the 1980s and formed a significant part of the visitors, it seemed easier not to ask too much. Left-wing political aims, pacifist motivations, academic nonsense, whistle-blowing – whatever it was called during the public debate, it was clear what was meant: A critical approach could potentially damage the reputation of the German Armies past or present. The first draft of a concept for the museum was written in 1985, mainly by the commanding officer of the study collection. It had primarily been written in order to acquire subsidies from the state of Lower Saxony¹. Therefore, the draft concentrated almost exclusively on technical history and aimed to portray the tank as “one of the decisive war devices of the 20th century”.² Decorations and uniforms served to show “fighting will, bravery and the willingness to bring sacrifices”.³ The Ministry for Science and Education regarded the paper as insufficient⁴ and a second draft was submitted, this time written primarily by the Municipality of Munster’s chief of administration. This concept was accepted by the ministry and was passed by the city council in early 1986. Although of civilian origin, it still basically followed the premise of the first paper: even though political and economic history was to be taken into consideration, in practice a purely technical presentation was chosen; obviously considered the most harmless form of exhibition. The horrors of past and future war were kept out of the museum because it was politically and socially convenient, and this was achieved by actively using the technical fascination of the objects to cloud visitors’ viewpoints of the objects. Thus, war was hidden behind the war machines. This approach could remain unchallenged for a long time because the civilian employees of the museum were all retired soldiers. Therefore, they by and large had the same mindset and values as the military side. The local political opposition fought many years for a more scientific and critical concept, and for the inclusion of other topics like death, misery, militarism, war economy etc.⁵ However, the political scene of Munster was traditionally dominated by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which brought many soldiers and ex-soldiers into the city council and administration.

A principal problem of the museum supported the long lasting refusal of a critical approach: The aura of the objects is the main asset of every museum.⁶ But the

1 | Niederschrift Sitzung von Vorstand und Beirat des Vereins der Freunde und Förderer des Panzermuseum Munster, 5 September 1985, p. 3.

2 | Entwurf: Die Museumsdidaktische Konzeption des PANZERMUSEUMS MUNSTER, 8 August 1985, p. 5.

3 | Ibid, p. 3.

4 | Schreiben von Stadtdirektor Peters, 21 January 1986.

5 | Museumsdidaktisches Konzept für das Panzermuseum Munster - Vorschlag der SPD-Fraktion, 3 October 1986.

6 | Dietmar Preißler (2005): »Museumsobjekt und kulturelles Gedächtnis, Anspruch und Wirklichkeit beim Aufbau einer zeithistorischen Sammlung«, in: Museumskunde 70 (1), pp. 47-53, p. 52.



Exhibition of mixed Wehrmacht Vehicles, early 1990s.

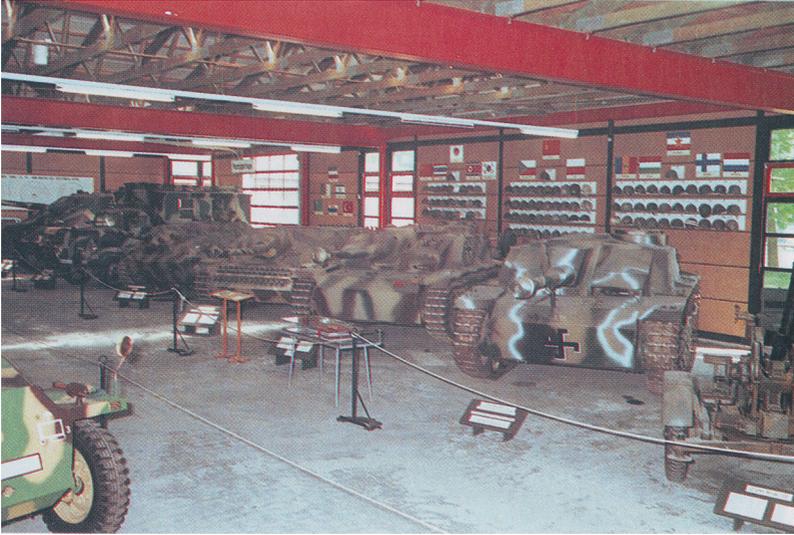
© German Tank Museum

technical aura of the objects in the tank museum is so dominating that people tend to be overwhelmed by it. The technical character of the objects often fills the mind of visitors and employees alike, leaving no mental space to come up with questions regarding the historical contexts. It then seems either inconceivable or at least unnecessary to have more than a purely technical point of view. So in the early years, a critical reflection of the objects, including war and violence, was seen by the operators as both unnecessary and potentially harmful. The situation was worsened by the fact that the chosen double structure was not defined very well in the contract: In 1988, it was finally decided who was to be responsible for conceptual work between the military, the administration of Munster and the city council.⁷ Only during this year, five years after the opening, was a modus operandi established to include all groups. It's not surprising that no progress was made during this phase.

In the 1990s, things began to gradually change. Pressure was slowly building from several sides. For starters, German museums had begun to professionalise their work, making the shortcomings of the Tank Museum more obvious. Due to this process, the number of visitors increased and although the old magic of technical overwhelming mostly worked, critical questions became more frequent. Additionally, the political and cultural climate in reunited Germany was changing. The public paid attention to new debates, like the furious debate concerning the Wehrmacht exhibition, which sparked new interest in modern military history.⁸

7 | Anfrage des Ratscherrn Dr. Frhr. v. Rosen zur Sitzung des Kulturausschusses, 18 February 1988.

8 | Christian Hartmann (2004): *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte*, Hamburg: C.H. Beck.



Exhibition of Wehrmacht Tank Destroyers, mid-1990s
© German Tank Museum



Exhibition of Wehrmacht Tanks, mid-1990s
© German Tank Museum

So the Tank Museum took a leap and decided to really include political and economic aspects as part of a new concept, which was written by an external historian. In this concept, historical contexts became a kind of framework for the tanks. But the realization was still very conservative and sterile, covering mostly operational history on an abstract level and classical political history, shaped by the deeds of “great men”. War, if represented at all, at least had to be clean and well-organised. War in all its facets had yet to reach the peaceful halls of the Tank Museum. The view from below was not adopted, humans were absent in the presentation, and with them the history of blood, guts, misery and despair remained invisible.⁹

Furthermore, even this new approach was only made very reluctantly. The concept, and even the museum’s catalogue, explicitly stated that broad military history had no place in the Tank Museum, as this was considered the exclusive domain of the Military Museum in Dresden.¹⁰ Everything political had to be directly connected to the tanks themselves and even then some topics were avoided. The Waffen-SS, for example, was deliberately ignored on behalf of the Bundeswehr. Since the SS is not part of the tradition of the modern German Army, addressing it was considered too challenging for the Tank Museum, and, therefore, the topic was handed over to Dresden, despite the Waffen-SS fielding a significant portion of the German tank corps in 1944. Once again, the blinders were on – historical contexts only served to lead the visitor to the technical object, not the other way round. They were more or less an alibi. The development of the concept dragged on for the whole decade; the first draft was submitted in 1990, and the final version was accepted in 1999.¹¹ Obviously, the majority of decision-makers during that decade had no enthusiasm for real reform. This was made abundantly clear in 1992, when a protocol stated that no particular haste was necessary, since public funds weren’t accessible for the museum anyway.¹²

In the last decade, pressure continued to build as the number of visitors steadily increased. Since the Municipality of Munster traditionally relied on the Bundeswehr as an economic factor, the ongoing reforms in the army since 1990 forced the town to consider alternatives, should the army ever leave. The Tank Museum was now seen as the main draw for tourists in the region. But for that purpose, quality had to be ensured. A first step was taken when the old concepts were completely dismissed and a new approach was taken in 2004.¹³ The new concept required the real

9 | Manfred Henkel: Didaktisches Konzept für den Ausbau und die Gestaltung des Panzermuseum in Munster, 4 March 1996.

10 | Museumskatalog (1999), p. 20.

11 | Niederschrift über Sitzung von Vorstand und Beirat des Vereins der Freunde und Förderer des Panzermuseum Munster, 17. March 1999, p. 4.

12 | Niederschrift über Sitzung von Vorstand und Beirat des Vereins der Freunde und Förderer des Panzermuseum Munster, 25 June 1992, p. 6.

13 | Konzept für den Ausbau und die Gestaltung, 14 October 2004.

inclusion of multiple and critical perspectives.¹⁴ To expand this theoretical approach scientifically and to ensure its later realisation, a position was created for a historian in the museum.

3. REFORM (2008 TO 2011)

While the intentions were good, there are certain issues that the German Tank Museum must resolve to fulfil this mission. First of all, the Tank Museum is not a military or a war museum. It has to somehow manage to preserve its unique character as THE German TANK Museum. The museum is simply not able to drastically reduce the number of tanks shown in the exhibition. They can be reduced slightly, but the tanks will always have to remain the core of the exhibition. The Tank Museum will have to stay a specialised museum. But this always comes at the cost of keeping the aforementioned problem alive: The technical aura of the objects will continue to dominate visitors' minds, no matter how many additional aspects are added. This situation is worsened by a second factor: Tanks, like other military vehicles and weaponry, are often focuses of serious object fetishism. The object's connotation of destructive capacity and powerful machinery, intensified in many cases by war anecdotes and contemporary propaganda, results in a full-blown admiration for tank models.¹⁵ In this respect, tanks take on mythical qualities, often expressed a) through excessive use of superlatives when it comes to describe the vehicles and b) by uttering statements that can only be described as omnipotence fantasies.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, most visitors feel compelled to explicitly stress the fact that their admiration is purely technical. They do realise that an admiration for the historically intended use of the vehicle, that is, to maim and kill, would be socially unacceptable.¹⁷ Therefore, they wittingly or unwittingly try to distance themselves from such potentially anti-social behaviour. In this strange mix of fascination for technology and violence, tanks are not perceived as historical objects in a museum. They are merely witnesses for the myth of the respective tank model. This does not just apply to tanks that actually were used in war, by the way. The East German and West German tanks of the Cold War are also shrouded in myth. Still, the most fascinating period for our visitors is indeed the Second World War, which leads to a fourth problem: Although

14 | Gutachterliche Stellungnahme zum Konzept für den Ausbau und die Gestaltung des Deutschen Panzermuseums Munster in der Fassung vom 10. Oktober 2004, March 2005.

15 | Eva Zwach (1999): *Deutsche und englische Militärmuseen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Eine kulturgeschichtliche Analyse des gesellschaftlichen Umgangs mit Krieg, Münster: LIT, p. 310.

16 | Peter Jahn (2003): »Gemeinsam an den Schrecken erinnern: Das deutsch-russische Museum Berlin Karlshorst«, in: *Museumskunde* 68 (1), pp. 30–36, p. 32.

17 | E. Zwach: *Deutsche und englische Militärmuseen im 20. Jahrhundert*, p. 308.

the objects of this era only make up about 25% of the vehicles in the whole museum, they draw the majority of visitors' interest. This stems from a widespread fascination with the Wehrmacht as a successful, very modern, very technical army, which is pretty much completely wrong.¹⁸ However, the myth remains widespread and often also borders on fetishism. The tanks appear to be the physical witnesses to this idea. Tanks are especially important for those Wehrmacht fans. Historical research has made it more difficult from year to year to admire the Wehrmacht. The fact that this army was one of the main contributors to the national socialist genocide is very inconvenient for many fans.¹⁹ However, the tank corps of the Wehrmacht still seems potentially admirable to them, their reasoning being that this armoured spearhead never really had the time to commit war crimes during the war. Therefore, the tank corps can still be admired in a purely military way. This false reasoning,²⁰ combined with the technical aura and the magic of war anecdotes, explains the undiminished fascination that this relatively small part of the museum is able to evoke. Thus, in the long run, the Tank Museum has to keep its tanks, but, on the other hand, it has to completely change visitors' views of those tanks, while deconstructing dozens of myths surrounding them.

This has to be done against the visitors' wishes, by the way. A recent internal survey found that 79% of visitors think the museum is "critical enough about war and violence", although from the museum's point of view only a few minor steps have been taken in that direction in the last two years. 16% believe the museum is "not yet critical enough" and only 4% think that the museum is "far from critical enough", as practically all professionals do, including the Tank Museum's historian. So the visitors would be more than happy to keep their view on tanks. There are four reasons for that:

First of all, due to the technical aura, visitors are generally not able to think of anything other than a technical perspective. To come up with these perspectives and make them interesting is the job of the museum, so there can be no blame here. The second reason is: Whatever new perspectives are used to look at tanks, they will never contribute to the convenient myths that brought the visitors to the museum in the first place. The entertainingly competitive stories about the best tank in the world, about the fastest model or the thickest armour won't be as entertaining any more once every aspect has been examined and differentiated. Thirdly, new perspectives are usually intellectually challenging. A cool story about the best gun in the world is

18 | Karl-Heinz Frieser (2005): *Blitzkrieg-Legende. Der Westfeldzug 1940*, München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, p. 64.; R.L. DiNardo, (2006): *Germany's Panzer Arm in WWII*, Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Co, p. 29.

19 | Sharon Macdonald (2007): »Schwierige Geschichte – umstrittene Ausstellungen«, in: *Museumskunde* 72 (1), pp. 75–84, p. 79.

20 | Christian Hartmann (2010): *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, pp. 492–494.

one thing; it is quite another to look at the cultural, social and economic influences that made the engineers design the gun in the way it was. The fourth reason has to do with inconvenience as well, but is a primarily German problem regarding the Second World War. There is a widespread feeling that historians, schools and media concentrate too much on the Holocaust and war crimes when dealing with the Second World War. It's a feeling of being overfed with guilt, so to speak. As mentioned before, the tanks seem to be disconnected from that topic somehow.²¹ Therefore, whenever a museum starts to critically examine the historical contexts of the tank during this period, sooner or later inconvenient aspects like the war economy, forced labour and Auschwitz will come up, and this then again activates a reflex of denial. Simply put: To look at a tank from different points of view, to think about it rationally rather than just approach it emotionally and to deal with inconvenient aspects of its history means that the tank isn't that much fun anymore.

Thus, the new concept of the German Tank Museum is a real spoilsport. It specifically aims at the deconstruction of convenient myths. Tanks as technical objects are seen as starting points for broader historical contexts. These contexts still include the old perspectives of the museum: operational history and political history still have their place in the Tank Museum. But now economic history, cultural history and social history are added, the latter ones with a strong focus on the perspective from below, sometimes bordering on micro-history. That way the tanks play a dual role: They serve as a springboard for visitors to delve into areas of history they didn't expect in this museum. At the same time, they serve as anchor points and as a thread for visitors to follow, which are necessary to help them find their way through these new areas of history.²²

This approach works for both contexts: war and peace. The Museum covers roughly 100 years of German history, including 10 years of World Wars and roughly one and a half decades of German out-of-area operations. But the 25% on wartime are and will continue to remain the more exciting phases for visitors. Whereas war was once a combination of tales of heroism, operational art on maps and numbers and data of tanks, it is now presented in the Tank Museum as a complex mosaic of politics, economy, cultural and social influences. In this way, visitors are encouraged to think about the enormous complexity of war.

One important piece of this mosaic is the human experience. The museum's old technical and sterile approach tended to make visitors forget that the machines on display were built by human beings, were filled with human beings and were used against (or at least intended to be used against) human beings. This problem was further worsened by the fact that the objects in question were specifically designed to

21 | E. Zwach: *Deutsche und englische Militärmuseen im 20. Jahrhundert*, p. 315.

22 | Hans-Ulrich Thamer (2006): »Krieg im Museum, Konzepte und Präsentationsformen von Militär und Gewalt in historischen Ausstellungen«, in: *Zeitschrift für Geschichtsdidaktik*, Jahresband, pp. 33–43, p. 41.

be CLOSED structures; to shut out the exterior by all means. So human beings were more or less absent in the exhibition, making the integration of the human experience in, around and in front of tanks during war a central task for the Tank Museum.

One very positive side benefit of this new approach is that a common figure for thinking about tanks in war is deconstructed in the process: The data duel. Whenever visitors think about wars including tank battles, they tend to compare the technical data of one tank model with another. Tank warfare is boiled down to a comparison of gun size, armour thickness and engine power. A real tank battle, of course, is an infinitely more complex affair, with literally hundreds of different aspects to be taken into consideration. Therefore, by making it clear that the data duel is a much too simplified point of view, visitors are sometimes made to question what tank war and (more importantly) war as a whole actually is.²³

Peace periods are also conveyed explicitly as times of war preparation. Visitors tend to underestimate and trivialize the military history of the Cold War. Based on Eurocentrism, they often see the Cold War as a period of peace and stability. This problem is often exacerbated by the fact that a large number of visitors were part of either the East or West German armies of the Cold War. Therefore, the perception of the war machines is a completely nostalgic one. These visitors don't see war machines, they see memorabilia from their youth, connected with funny stories they like to share with their friends and family. Such an approach naturally clouds their perception of the Cold War tanks as fighting machines.

The Tank Museum, therefore, stresses the Cold War as a period of constant potential war on the one hand, clearly describing the shape this war would have taken. And secondly, the museum reminds visitors of the proxy wars fought during that period. Thus, it not only brings war back into the Cold War, it also adds an aspect of international history, indispensable for this period, even if the museum officially focuses on German military history.²⁴

Apart from all the aforementioned problems and challenges, a tank museum has special advantages, too. First of all, the museum can capitalise on the immense fascination for lethal machinery. The big objects are magnets for visitors and put many of them in a very good and relaxed mood when they enter the museum. It's the museum's job to use this mood to open visitors' minds for new experiences. The question of the Shoah is once again a good example of that mechanism: generally, fans of the Wehrmacht will, at most, only reluctantly visit memorials like Bergen-Belsen, which is only a short drive away from Munster. Even if they were to enter the site, there is a good chance that they would be anything but open-minded. The tank museum, on the other hand, has them entering the museum in a positive and receptive mood. If the museum is then able to clarify the connection between tanks, tank produc-

23 | Azar Gat (2008): *War in Human Civilization*, New York: Oxford University Press.

24 | John A. Lynn (2003): *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, Cambridge: Basic Books, ch. XVIII.

tion, slave labour and the Shoah in a convincing and interesting way and thus without triggering reflexes of denial, these visitors can gain a new understanding of that topic, which they would not have otherwise. In a similar way, new scientific insights can also reach people who would normally not be accessible for scientific progress.²⁵ This leads to a second advantage of the Tank Museum: It lures many people into a museum who would normally never enter a museum. In their view, they are not really visiting a museum, but a technical collection. The Tank Museum, therefore, has the unique opportunity to open these peoples' minds for museums as a whole. Since visitors are presented with many more perspectives on their beloved vehicles than they expected and are (hopefully) entertained while learning new things, they may be more open for the general concept of museum afterwards. The third big advantage of a tank museum is that it can try out all the aforementioned steps without fear of failing. Even if visitors are not convinced by the new perspectives, even if they despise all the new texts and pictures between the tanks, they will still continue to visit the museum. The fetishism, which is an obstacle in educating visitors, ironically has an advantage in terms of the marketing side of the museum business: It is a very strong bonding agent.

4. HOW TO BRING WAR INTO A MUSEUM OF WAR MACHINES – AN EXAMPLE

Since early 2009, the Tank Museum has been working on implementing the aforementioned perspectives and concepts. However, in the case of the permanent exhibition, this has only taken the form of guided tours and multimedia guides so far. It takes an enormous amount of effort to rearrange the exhibition, which is absolutely necessary if the aims mentioned above are to be achieved. Therefore, the physical form of the exhibition is currently more or less as it was until 2008. If visitors are not guided by a human or a multimedia guide, it's pretty easy to still enjoy a purely technical showroom. The arrangement of the tanks in the halls makes it practically impossible to reasonably add information panels such as biographies and documents to the exhibition. A new arrangement of the entire exhibition is planned for 2015/16. After that, every visitor will be forced to think in a multifaceted manner. And only then will the Tank Museum be able to finally implement the most important dimension of war: the human dimension.

At least in a small area of the museum, the reform has begun already: The Tank Museum has a room called the Hall of Collections. There was never a collection strategy for this part, so it has basically become a store room for all the small things. Uniforms, decorations, equipment, manuals, military toys, weapons, and flags: ev-

25 | Sharon Macdonald (2207): *Schwierige Geschichte – umstrittene Ausstellungen*, pp. 75–84, p. 78.



The Hall of Collections 2011
© German Tank Museum

everything has simply been brought together in this room. The room itself has no real internal structure and, therefore, there is no orientation for visitors. The displays are too crowded and explanations are reduced to the raw data of each object; no historical contexts are provided. The style is a very traditional one, which in several cases is highly questionable. The aesthetics of the objects are used without critical reflection. Therefore, decorations are laid out nicely on what seems to be blue velvet, because that is the way decorations are supposed to be shown. Weapons are presented in neat rows, clean and silent behind glass, with their technical data right at hand. Uniforms are put on happily smiling mannequins, appearing as they were tailored to be: Elegant, impressive, and manly. All in all, this room has the flair of a military shrine. There are hundreds of relics that demand admiration and nothing more or less.

As of December 2011, a radical restructuring is taking place: The number of objects has been drastically reduced to create space for the remaining objects. Many of the removed objects will be made accessible in open depots once the museum has expanded.²⁶ The remaining objects are rearranged in clearly distinguishable, yet connected areas, each one with a clear topic:

- An area named “Cloth” showing uniforms
- An area named “Gold” showing decorations
- An area named “Wood” showing military toys
- An area named “Iron” showing weapons

26 | Jörn Christiansen (2007): »Transparenz im Museum - Beispiel Schaumagazin«, in: *Museumskunde* 72 (2), pp. 45–51, p. 45.

The Hall of Collection will consequently be named Elements of War from 2012 onwards. Within the four areas, objects are part of a homogeneous, yet modular narrative with a consistent underlying main perspective:

- Social history for the area “Cloth”
- Cultural history for the area “Gold”
- Everyday history for the area “Wood”
- Modern technical history for the area “Iron”

The hall will be brighter, more spacious and have a modern design, with a broad offering of knowledge. Additionally, several educational devices will be integrated to enable the experience of learning with all senses. Each area has a specific mission far too complex to describe in more detail here. But how exactly does this approach bring war into the museum? War will be present as a topic within each of the four areas.

The most drastic change will happen in the area of weapons. Up to now, guns and ammunitions were shown as clean, technical objects. For the first time in the history of the museum, the new exhibition aims to show what these things actually do. (Ironically, when the topic of the effects of weapons was first brought up in the planning committee, nearly everybody thought of holes in armour plates and destroyed tanks. The technical dominance of the objects actually reached that far, even in the heads of the museum employees.) The concept explicitly calls for images of real battle injuries, of dead, wounded and maimed soldiers and civilians. These photos will be disturbing to many. Therefore, visitors will have to actively decide on whether they wish to see those pictures; we do not bank on simple shock effects. Shocking people can lead to a defensive attitude and thwart the learning process.²⁷ But if visitors choose to look at the pictures, we want them to be forced to think about the real nature of the objects around them; about their purpose and about their concrete history. War as an organized process of mass-killing will (hopefully) become evident to visitors through these pictures and objects. Although there are some concerns about how graphic displays of violence can sabotage learning,²⁸ the Tank Museum has decided that this step is necessary. This is certainly a big step in reorganising this area and images of this nature will surely lead to fierce debates, since they annoy those who just want to admire cool weapons.

In the case of uniforms, war will be represented through a specific choice of war-time uniforms that remain on display. Right now, formal military uniforms, primarily from officers, dominate the exhibition. This situation was largely due to the fact

27 | Christiane Beil (2003): »Musealisierte Gewalt. Einige Gedanken über Präsentationsweisen von Krieg und Gewalt in Ausstellungen«, in: *Museumskunde* 68 (1), pp. 7–17, p. 9.

28 | Wulf Köpke (2003): »Herzblut muss fließen, Krieg und Gewalt als Kulturereignis in einem Völkerkundemuseum«, in: *Museumskunde*, 68 (1), pp. 48–52, p. 49–50.



*Part of the Small Arms
Collection in the Hall of
Collections, 2011
© German Tank Museum*

that these kinds of uniforms have a statistically higher chance of surviving the war and post-war period. This situation was worsened by the fact that the formal uniforms are, of course, technically more beautiful pieces; therefore, they were added to the collection far more often than the shabby uniforms of simple soldiers. Thus, the exhibition is now dominated by clothing that had nothing to do with the actual war. Therefore, the new display will specifically concentrate on uniforms of the rank and file. These shabby uniforms are the clothes that were worn by the masses during the bloody work of war and, therefore, are objects of far more historic importance. These uniforms will be the focus of this area and will be discussed in their role as dressed to kill. Furthermore, we aim to add biographies whenever enough information about the wearer of a uniform is available. This way the uniforms will hopefully remind visitors of the fact that the fabric was once filled with flesh – flesh acting in war, that is.

The “Gold” area will focus on the two-faced social mechanism that decorations play in the military, and especially in war: Encouragement and coercion. This approach aims to rid visitors’ minds of the idea that these decorations are merely benign. It will hopefully make them think about the fact that they are instruments of social engineering and, therefore, are a part of the instruments that keep war going. The “Wood” area will stress how toys were an instrument to familiarise children and adolescents with the military early on and, therefore, served as a tool to secure a



*Part of the Uniform
Collection in the Hall of
Collections, 2011
© German Tank Museum*

steady stream of easily malleable recruits for potential future battlefields. So beginning in this area, war and violence will find their place in the Tank Museum.

5. CONCLUSION

The process has only just begun. The Tank Museum is seriously undermanned, so the reform will take considerably longer than in a museum with adequate personnel. But it is interesting to see that even the first steps are evoking strong and decidedly varied reactions. The new approach is heavily criticised from different sides – from civilians, from the military, and from the museum’s booster club.

Yet, at the same time, there is a wave of encouragement from other parts of the exact same groups. The reactions to the new guided tours, for example, range from outrage over this “newfangled blather” to enthusiastic praise for “the inspiring insights”. Obviously, the integration of war violence into the Tank Museum will be a dynamic process. It will be painful for some and satisfying for others. But this fact in itself is encouraging. The question of how to represent war in the Tank Museum is relevant enough to stir a public debate; however low the number of participants may be at the moment.

The Tank Museum can therefore fulfil its mission as a museum: To be a forum for historical culture.²⁹ No matter how heated the debate gets and no matter how many visitors may be lost, we can be sure that the integration of a multifaceted view on war and violence in the Tank Museum is the right way.

29 | H.-U. Thamer: Krieg im Museum, pp. 33–43, p.37.