





*"Armory" - the museum's first floor as it has looked since the 1970s, Kantonales Hochbauamt Solothurn (photo: gs)*



*The heart of the museum's collection: 400 suits of armour Museum Altes Zeughaus, Solothurn (photo: nh)*

One of the oldest museum exhibitions in Switzerland is also located on the second floor (Tagsatzung von Stans 1481). The figures were set up in 1845 and commemorate the moment when the Canton of Solothurn joined the League of the Confederation in 1481. This is also a form of myth typically cultivated by history books in the 19th century.

Finally, the third floor exhibits uniforms: One room features clothing of Swiss in foreign service from the 16th to the 20th centuries; another room uniforms and headgear worn by the Federal Army since 1875. This room has remained unchanged since the 70s and primarily acts as a place of remembrance for veterans of the Swiss military.



*One of the oldest museum exhibitions in Switzerland, established in 1845: “Tagsatzung von Stans 1481”  
Museum Altes Zeughaus, Solothurn (photo: nh)*

The main attractions of the museum are its objects and their staging. There are few texts to read and little context is provided. And yet, the Museum Altes Zeughaus still has 20,000 to 25,000 visitors annually, with nearly no advertising. Furthermore, it elicits emotions as well as enthusiasm among young and old: The guest book is full of compliments. For example, a young boy recently hit the mark when he wrote “this place is like nowhere else”. He probably meant that the Museum Altes Zeughaus was not what he imagined a museum was supposed to be like.

The Museum Altes Zeughaus is indeed something special, and especially since it appears like time somehow stands still. It is literally a museum in a museum.

However, there is little question that the Museum Altes Zeughaus really needs a “face lift”, both in terms of the museum’s interior as well as exterior. Under the current conditions it is hardly possible to manage the museum in a sound manner. Just to mention a few of the current problems: the water pipelines are only installed on the ground floor, the building only has two bathrooms for both visitors and employees, there is no elevator, the offices are located on the 5th floor, the environmental conditions are anything but stable and the static structure of the building no longer complies with current law etc.

## PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS

In terms of current developments in the national and international museum scene, it is to some extent difficult to fully understand how the museum continues to fascinate visitors in its current state. The Canton Solothurn, as the owner of the museum, has been aware for some time that operations cannot be maintained in their current form over the long term. As a result, a strategy paper was approved in 2008. The strategy calls for the thematic integration of the three larger cantonal museums to tell the history of the Canton Solothurn, divided as it were among the three

institutions. The Museum Altes Zeughaus focuses on the period of the Ancien Régime and specifically on the topic of “war and peace”. Not surprisingly, this proposal, reasonable in terms of contemporary developments in the museum world, polarized opinion in Solothurn and caused emotions to run high. Local inhabitants, “weapon fans” as well as representatives of the association for the promotion of the museum feared the destruction of “their armory” and that the weapons collection would be lost. They launched an effort to collect signatures both at home and abroad to save the Museum Altes Zeughaus and even succeeded in getting the backing of the local press.

It was at this time (2009) that I was appointed by the Director of the Office for Culture and Sport to head the museum. The government underscored its support of the strategic plans by selecting a woman to head a museum in a scene long dominated by men, but created new waves in doing so. The start did not go exactly as expected: I stood in the crossfire of various interest groups and quickly noticed that the mobilized opposition would not stop placing obstacles in my path if we failed to win their trust. It was now up to the museum staff to reposition the institution in a manner that enabled the participating groups to once again find common ground.

Therefore, we drafted a museum concept as part of a small team. The concept took the museum’s tradition as its starting point and elaborated the rough outlines provided by the strategy paper in more detail. We were confronted in this process with issues similar to the agenda items at this conference: How can we do justice to the unity of the museum and its collection without continuing to use the weapons as simple, aesthetic ornaments on the walls? How can we display the richness of the collection without glorifying the brave confederates and rehashing national myths? How can we demonstrate what weapons are capable of without displaying blood and violence in a striking manner? How can we succeed at maintaining the old, proven materials while also remaining contemporary?

We ultimately concluded that it could work if the museum became a place for dialogue and reflection. The weapons would be exhibited, but staged in a manner that encourages visitors to reflect. Today, you can walk through the museum without confronting violence or war. The idea was to move in a new direction for the permanent exhibition.

The goal set forth in the museum concept is worded as follows: As a cultural-historical museum focusing on military history, the Museum Altes Zeughaus provides a broad public with a place for dialogue and reflection on the topic of conflicts and their solutions. At its core is the recurring issue of how people deal with conflicts (armed conflict, diplomacy, subjugation, and non-violent protest) and what the various types of conflicts have meant for the participants of different periods.

We also added three conditions to these rather abstract goals that the museum must continue to fulfill:

- Maintain the unity of museum building and content: The building was originally constructed as an arsenal and continues to this day to store weapons and military items.
- Exhibition of the collection of armor: The collection of 400 suits of armor is unique in Switzerland and should be exhibited to the greatest possible extent.
- Contextual focus on the Ancien Régime: The French Ambassador resided in Solothurn from 1530 to 1792, the building was constructed during this period and Solothurn was a leading player in the mercenary trade with France. The oldest pieces in the collection date from this period.

We have made every effort to reconcile the various interest groups. I should note, however, that at this point we are still working on a very theoretical plan. There can be no doubt that completely new issues will arise once implementation begins.

## IMPLEMENTATION: ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION AND DESIGN COMMISSION

The “Neuausrichtung Museum Altes Zeughaus” project proceeded from paper toward implementation at the beginning of the year 2011. On the one hand, the Cantonal Construction Office solicited bids for the redevelopment and renovation of the building while we conducted a commission to study the design of the new permanent exhibition on behalf of the Office for Culture and Sport. This three-phased study commission has finished its work in August 2011: Five offices were invited to participate in the bidding and element LLC from Basel was awarded the contract in the end.

I would now like to briefly present the exhibition concept using some visualization as proposed by element. Although the initial draft will not be implemented one-to-one, it should nevertheless provide a good impression of how we plan to implement the difficult conditions set forth in the museum’s concept.

## THE NEW CONCEPT

The planned exhibition includes a prologue and is divided into three parts:

- Prologue: “Confrontation zone”
- Exhibition, section I: Reflections on weapons, conflicts and consequences
- Exhibition, section II: Historic part focusing on mercenaries (1530-1792), with Solothurn as the starting point
- Exhibition, section III: Zeughaus timeline on the historical development of weapons and military technology

## Prologue: “Confrontation Zone”

Visitors are drawn in by weapons, sounds and spatial productions at various points within the entrance hall. They are confronted with the topics of threat, violence, power, rule, responsibility and self-control.

Through all the exhibition units, clearly labeled objects are available for visitors to touch and, where possible, take in hand. Visitors should recognize that the object represents power and, at the same time, experience the responsibility of holding a weapon in their hand. In addition, various interactive offerings are spread throughout the room.

## Exhibition, Section I: Reflection on Weapons, Conflicts and Consequences

In this section, visitors learn about topics such as weapons, war, peace, conflict, diplomacy, freedom, power etc. This section should clearly indicate that weapons and their users are neither demonized nor glorified per se, but rather have a wide variety of meanings. The focus of Exhibition, section I is an individual confrontation on the part of visitors with the aforementioned topics. The staging relies on a few, well-selected objects, which are intended to elicit emotions. Visitors interested in history can tap into the background information by topic or object and broaden their understanding. Visitors can come face-to-face with the following four topic areas in individual “booths”: War and representation, war and art, war and diplomacy, war and suffering. You can walk into the four booths, which are individually designed and include a variety of interactive stations.



*Visualization for the new exhibition, section I: weapons, conflicts and consequences  
element LLC, Basel*

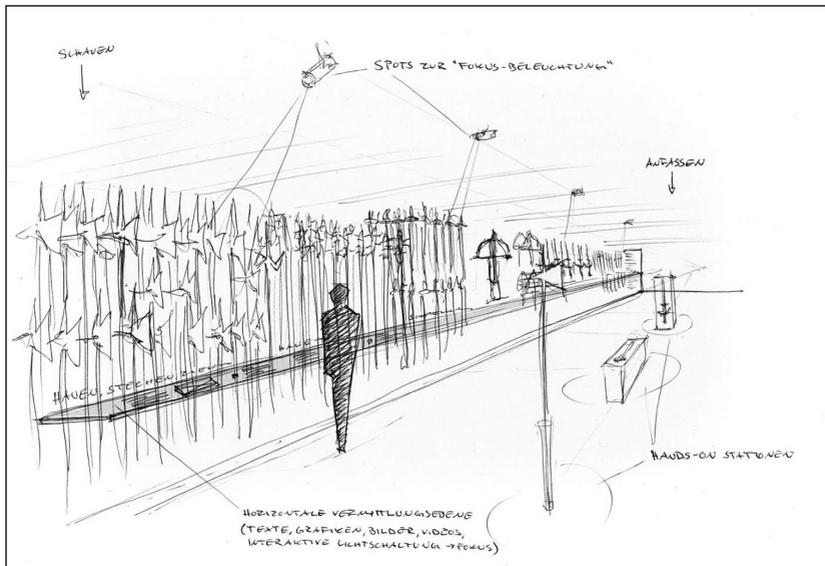
## Exhibition, Section II: Historical Focus on Mercenaries (1530-1792)

This section provides visitors with the experience of a “historical world”: They are led into the period of the Ancien Régime with its courtly, aristocratic structures and get a sense of the importance of the mercenary business for the society of the city-state of Solothurn. The exhibition highlights the cross-regional and international networks of the “good” society of Solothurn, explains how the mercenary family business operated, delves into the economic aspects and illustrates the destiny of the young men who were forced to go to war for little money. The focus in this section is on learning historical context.

The armor collection is the clear focus of the large installation specific to the room. The courtly world of the head mercenary is illustrated through a loose presentation that then transitions into a non-individualized mass of mercenaries.

## Exhibition, Section III: Timeline of Weapons and martial Technology

This section is a timeline of weapons and martial technology in accordance with the staging of the Zeughaus, i.e. running along the walls through all the floors. This section gives visitors a sense of the sheer volume of materials in the museum’s collection. Excellent pieces will be presented in special displays. The timeline also provides context on the historical development of technology and links it to social developments.



Sketch for the planned exhibition, section III: “Zeughaus timeline”  
element LLC, Basel

## CONCLUSION

With this concept we attempted to maintain the unity of the museum and the collection as well as the traditional military focus of the institution. The three sections in the exhibition are intended to encourage visitors to reflect (in the section on reflection), emphasize a topical focus in the historical section and, with the help of the timeline, not only display objects from the collection, but also provide information on their use.

We have a military-historical collection that we intend to display in the future as well without overdoing the aesthetics and glorifying Swiss battles as it has been done in the past. We want to encourage visitors to think about conflicts, violence and warfare's general problem through direct "confrontations" with weapons. We hope that visitors will be forced to reflect upon themselves and their attitudes.

# A Pedagogical and Educational Approach to the Two World Wars at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels

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CHRISTINE VAN EVERBROECK, SANDRINE PLACE, SANDRA VERHULST

As an introduction, I would like to quote several parts of a letter received from an angry mum several years ago. The woman was cross about an advertisement we had placed in a local newspaper in order to promote our “family trail”, one of our annual events, which on that particular occasion focused on the extensive First World War collections.

*“Dear Madam/Sir,*

*I feel compelled to write to you about an ad your museum ran in several newspapers.*

*You are indeed a military museum, but do you really feel it necessary to glorify war? Surviving in the trenches and having fun with the entire family: weren't you shocked, even a little bit, while preparing the catchphrase for this ad?*

*I find this ad not only shocking, but also lacking in respect towards those who had to live through the First World War, who had to serve in the trenches, who had to face the gas, and who fought for their country. Haven't you ever felt ashamed by presenting these events as a game? Moreover, I am horrified by the fact that you turn war into a game in the eyes of children. Do you ever tell them about the physical pain one endures when a bullet perforates a body? Do you describe to them the horror of being torn apart by a bomb? “Having fun with the entire family”: do you show them images of wounded, bloody, amputated, or dead parents?*

*[...] Are you proud of contributing, if only ever so slightly, to the trivialisation of the violence we witness every day? Are you at peace with your conscience when turning war into a game, as if it were merely virtual reality? Have you forgotten everything? Even if you never experienced war personally (neither did I, for that matter), have you erased the entire 20th century from your memory?*

*Today, we live in peace in Western Europe. Are you aware of the fact that this is pure LUXURY? Anyway, I showed your deplorable ad to a number of families in the neighbourhood and they all said they would never ever play this horrid and horrible game with their children. Even if you are at peace with your conscience, I do not congratulate you.”*

A letter like this obviously leaves one feeling somewhat upset. The ad that angered the mother shows two children, a boy and a girl, riding on a shell and holding a camera and a journalist’s notebook. The drawing is, of course, inspired by the famous image of Baron von Münchhausen sitting on a cannonball. The activity this ad was promoting was called ‘The little journalist during the Great War’ and it consisted of a family trail leading the children and their adult companions through the First World War section.

Nothing horrid or horrible so far. Had the upset mother, who sent us the letter, actually taken the time and effort to come down to the museum and see how the activity was planned, she probably would have realised that the game wasn’t at all about the glorification of war, nor was it presenting war as a game or trivialising violence. The children, who were put in the position of wartime reporters, got to follow a trail, which led them not only to learn about life in the trenches, but also to empathise with the soldiers who found themselves in this situation. They did so by completing, with the help of their adult companions, a series of playful challenges appealing to different skills and focusing on the various aspects of the First World War in general as well as on the impact on the individual soldiers in the trenches and the civilians in the occupied part of the country.

This ‘incident’, however, has taught us an important lesson, namely, that when planning similar activities in a military museum, it is not only of the utmost importance to reflect carefully on the content of your educational offer, but also, and maybe even more so, on the way you communicate it.

The reason the mum might have overreacted a little and sent us the letter on impulse, without actually coming down to the museum and checking out the activity for herself, has everything to do with the general public’s bias towards our museum. One of the main problems we face on a daily basis is the negative connotation of the word ARMY in people’s minds. It’s no coincidence that many visitors call us the WAR museum and consider us to be a belligerent, bloodthirsty and sexist institution, most certainly not suitable for their children or, in the best of cases, only appropriate for their sons, when they are old enough to play war games.

All of this, of course, leads us to the more general issue of whether war BELONGS in a museum. Regardless of whether we like it or not, war is a substantial part of our cultural heritage, and cultural heritage is, in its turn, what we could describe as the core business of museums. Therefore, I personally do not think that we should ask ourselves IF war has its rightful place in a museum, but rather HOW it should be

represented, or, in our case, as we are in direct contact with the public, how the subject should be rendered to our visitors. This is often a very delicate matter.

As education officers, we develop a large number of tools and programmes for different target groups. During this lecture, though, we would like to focus on the activities that revolve around the First and Second World War and are aimed at six to eighteen-year-olds, who visit our museum in a family or a school context. Here, the first question that springs to mind is the extent to which it is legitimate to present a topic like war in a 'fun' way, and if so, where should we draw the line?

When devising activities for children as well as young adults, we try to use the richness of the museums' collections to the fullest. For people who have never visited the museum: seeing as we provide an overview of Western European military history from the 7th century up to the present day, we cover a wide range of subjects, extending from medieval jousting tournaments to the history of aviation and from 19th century Russian silverwork to works of art by Belgian painters from the First World War. Besides objects that are considered to be typically military, like tanks, uniforms or decorations, we also exhibit personal belongings of the soldiers, pictures and diaries, toys, sculptures, paintings and posters, hunting equipment, stuffed animals, and so on. We gladly draw on all of these when coming up with new activities for families and school classes.

Does this mean that we try to avoid the sensitive topic of war? Certainly not. Even if we do not, as the person writing the letter suggests, offer the audience a description of the horror of being torn apart by a bomb, or show them images of wounded, bloody, amputated or dead parents, we definitely talk about war by trying to place it in its historical context and by focusing on the lives of the humans, soldiers as well as civilians, who were involved in it. We feel it is important to try and provide an impartial view, neither propagating nor condemning war, thereby allowing the children to make up their own minds.

The Royal Military Museum's Educational Service saw the light of day more than 20 years ago and, of course, it still plays an essential role within the museum, as it is indeed in direct contact with the public. Right from the start, the service set out to "translate" the collections, i.e. to make them accessible and comprehensible to all audiences.

Over the course of time and strengthened by our accumulated experience, we have multiplied our approaches, techniques and themes in order to reach as many visitors as possible. Talking about war and its atrocities (violence, destruction and death) is certainly not easy, because the subject makes people uneasy or even disturbs and upsets them. We only have to look at certain reactions when talking about our work environment or at journalists from all kinds of media who visit us in preparation for an article about our activities. One question invariably pops up: "How can you come up with a playful activity about a theme as serious and culturally and historically loaded as war?"

In order to reach all audiences and all age groups, we use a large gamut of communication tools and we try to align ourselves with all motivations and sensibilities. We not only offer a year round programme of guided tours tailored to meet specific requests (the person in charge of the group can choose either a general tour or a visit focusing on a specific collection or a subject specially prepared for the occasion), but also thematic, supervised activities for children aged 6 to 12, workshops for teenagers, audio tours for both adults and children, playful books complementing temporary exhibitions or educational materials providing additional information. We also organize camps during the summer holidays, artistic workshops for adults in spring and autumn, a brand new game circuit each autumn break with an encore during the spring break and temporary activities linked to a special event (evening opening of all the museums in Brussels, theme days etc.). We also participate in several training programmes for both primary and high school teachers. These sessions aim at promoting our institution by exploiting the diversity of our collections. For the two world wars, for instance, we show teachers how to use the pieces of our collections to illustrate their lessons. The training sessions can be quite general in theme (for instance, broaching the subject of the First or the Second World War), but they may also focus on more specific aspects (by studying conflicts through propaganda, art at the front or oral testimonies).

Over the years, we have realized that when presenting our collections, we have to focus on the human and personal aspects in order to obtain the best results. “Universal” themes, such as music, art, communication, food, colour or animals, enable us to bring up the delicate subject of war, without running the risk of being accused of promoting war.

I will now give some examples of war-related themes, first geared towards children, then towards adults and, finally, towards individual visitors.

For our youngest visitors (children 8 to 14), a programme of supervised activities called *Once upon a Time in the Great War* enables us to introduce the First World War by means of 5 small games. In the first, we use a giant puzzle based on a map of Europe in 1914 to explain the different alliances or the neutral countries in a very visual way. Two sets of puzzle blocks based on period pictures from our documentation centre illustrate everyday life at the front (mealtimes, leisure, laundry, equipment upkeep etc.). We then talk about camouflage and the technologies invented during the war. For this particular topic, we use a drawing of a museum gallery in which 7 new weapons are hidden. Next, the children receive three period helmets; they can handle them and put them on in order to determine which piece of equipment – the Belgian helmet, the British Brodie or the German Stahlhelm – is the most effective one for the troops. We conclude the programme with a short quiz in which the children have to guess the items painter Fernand Allard L’Olivier selected for each entry of his war alphabet. The letters lead to a brief explanation, which completes the historical information provided up till then. This programme always takes place in the very heart of the First World War gallery in order to establish direct and



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constant contact with the collection. After each game, the group assembles in front of a particular object, for closer observation and commentary.

Now, for our second example. Last autumn we designed a new activity for adults. *Dust your Vision of the Military Museum* is a cycle of four mornings during which participants can express their artistic talents through our collections. After a brief 45-minute guided tour, participants are invited to create one or more art works under the guidance of an artist. Each session puts our participants in touch with a different collection and a different artistic technique (charcoal in the Arms and Armour gallery, watercolours in the First World War gallery, a collage of propaganda bills in the Interwar and Second World War galleries and pastels in the gallery about 19th century Belgium). Once the cycle is completed, the freshly created works of art are put on display at the museum for one month. Several adults, whom we had the pleasure of welcoming during the sessions in 2010 and 2011, told us they really saw the museum in a new light thanks to these workshops (some of them even admitted that without the “pretext” of the artistic approach, they would have never considered visiting a WAR museum!). Observing the objects, looking for their artistic value, placing them in their historical context, being able to pose all the questions they would have never dreamed of asking when accompanied by a larger group: all these methods provide a personalized and human approach to the conflicts.

Whenever possible, we try to establish direct contact between the visitor and the collection pieces, since that is the best way of forming a personal opinion. How better explain, for instance, the role and the effectiveness of helmets used by the various nations during the First World War than by offering the possibility of handling or wearing all of these helmets? How better evoke the living conditions in the trenches of the Yser Front than in the very heart of the reconstructed trench in the gallery about the 1914-18 conflict? Still, we are careful to keep visitors away from

the weapons, so we do not inadvertently pressure them into “playing at war”. Unfortunately, there is a price to pay for this hands-on approach. In spite of our efforts in terms of a direct contact approach (for instance, we put crates with a selection of objects on permanent display in the 1914-18 gallery), acts of vandalism or theft have forced us to limit this hands-on method to guided tours and supervised group activities.

All of our educational service activities aim at highlighting the collections, but without falling into the treacherous trap I would like to conclude with. The Military Museum in Brussels depends directly on the Ministry of Defence for financing. This close link leads quite a few people to believe that the museum is some kind of recruitment office for the Belgian Army. We have to be quite vigilant here and constantly stress our scientific status, our quest for objectivity and neutrality and our critical spirit. We have to concentrate on one single goal: the transmission of historical facts without ever falling into subjective glorification or sounding like a promotional campaign.

We have already spoken about ways in which to present the First World War, but the Second World War, with its range of atrocities, is perhaps even more delicate a subject to raise. And this leads us to wonder how exactly are military museum supposed to evoke this conflict.

Are military museums to promote a pacifist message? Are museums supposed to preserve the past in order to teach younger generations how to avoid the disasters of that past?



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Military museums are constantly trying to inform, to testify, to put all elements at the disposal of the public, but, at the same time, they would like visitors to draw their own, personal, conclusions.

It is not always easy to remain perfectly unbiased, to give a totally objective account of events or objects that, even today, retain a dramatic resonance. When talking about collaboration with the enemy or Belgian Resistance during the Second World War, one is inevitably confronted with present day sensibilities. Most of the resistance fighters have now passed away, but their sons and daughters are adamant about defending their memories and would be very happy to turn the museum into a memorial honouring each and every one of them.

In the same way, collaboration is perceived differently in the various parts of Belgium and the debate about amnesty for people, who some see as idealists and others as traitors whose punishment is to be maintained, still rages more than 60 years after the facts. In this context, showing collaborators' uniforms is a delicate topic, as it can truly shock part of our audience and rekindle arguments.

Another example illustrates the same point. In the spring of 2009, the museum's newsletter announced the acquisition of Hermann Goering's white summer Luftwaffe service cap. Some readers were outraged and they deplored that the money spent on buying this artefact would have been better spent on acquiring souvenirs linked to "the victims, the Resistance fighters, and the heroes of victory". In his reply, the museum's general manager stressed the importance of being open and frank about even the darkest pages of history, but also promised to place the electrifying collection piece in "its inhumane context".

That is exactly why the information provided in the didactic panels, the guide books and the audio guides has to be carefully balanced and suited to present day realities. Presenting the Germans, who invaded and occupied Belgium twice in the course of the 20th century, as enemies is totally devoid of sense today. For the younger generations, Germany is an ally within the European Union.

In the case of the Second World War, it is difficult to limit explanations to the "daily" aspects of war and to forget about the more sensitive political aspects. That is why we offer more than traditional guided tours about the interwar period and the Second World War. Indeed, students can participate in a workshop about propaganda, based on political bills from times of war and times of peace. Through these bills, we try to convey the mechanisms applied in propaganda (the shock of images, the emotional weight of pictures, the simplification of messages, the stigmatisation of "the other" etc.) by exposing its dangers and by insisting on the permanence of propaganda, even nowadays, even in a democracy.

Teaching about the Second World War has now, indeed, become a political issue. Today, in Belgium, all educational programmes and all of society stress the need for memorial duties and civic spirit. Politicians see to it that the younger generations do not forget about the crimes of genocide, the crimes against humanity and the resistance against these crimes.

Therefore, are military museums supposed to make their mark as actors in the transmission of memory?

In order to attract teachers and to obtain the approval of school administrations for field trips, the pedagogical offer is almost compelled to work by means of government decrees and through the framework of civic spirit education. The Military Museum therefore joined an association comprising the Breendonk Memorial (a converted fort transformed into a transition camp for political prisoners during the Second World War), the Dossin Barracks (where Jews were grouped together before deportation and which is now the Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance) and the Territoires de la Mémoire (which uses the history of the Second World War to combat extreme right groups and tendencies). This association goes by the name of History and Civic Spirit and wishes to introduce pupils and students to the context of the Second World War and its repercussions in terms of political and racial persecutions, violations of human rights and the development of propaganda.

Luckily, the museum's collections go well beyond the strict framework of memorial duties. The extent and the variety of the pieces on display allow for a diversified approach, with room for political, economic, social, moral and military facts and figures.

However, the Military Museum's Educational Service not only wishes to turn the museum into an educational platform, but also into a place for enjoyment and curiosity.