

# Politics of Memory and History in the Museum – The New “Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War” in Minsk/Belarus<sup>1</sup>

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KRISTIANE JANEKE

## Introduction

It may seem strange to hope for some inspirations for the discussion of war and museum from, of all places, the politically and culturally isolated Belarus. However, in my opinion, casting a glance at Belarus can be quite instructive as the costly and complex rebuilding of the “Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War”<sup>2</sup> is taking place at present.<sup>3</sup> It is amazing how, as a matter of course, the question whether war belongs in a museum is given an affirmative answer here.

The reasons for that lie partly in the historical experience and partly in the political aims of the government regarding history. The presentation of the war in the museum as a tool for historical policy is of great relevance to post-Soviet Belarus, though partly for other reasons than before 1991, and, furthermore, with new political and cultural potential.

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**1** | I would like to thank Elisabeth Karsten for her translation from German, <http://www.elisabeth-karsten.de>

**2** | <http://www.warmuseum.by>

**3** | Report (2010/2011): Up-to-date news about the concept and the building progress of the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic war. Retrieved 1 November 2011, from <http://www.minchanka.by/rasskazy/museum.html>, <http://news.tut.by/167278.html>, [http://www.realty.ej.by/project/2010/05/04/v\\_minske\\_nachali\\_stroitelstvo\\_novogo\\_zdaniya\\_muzey.html](http://www.realty.ej.by/project/2010/05/04/v_minske_nachali_stroitelstvo_novogo_zdaniya_muzey.html), <http://www.nest.by/content/utverzhdzen-arkhitekturnyi-proekt-zdaniya-muzeya-velikoi-otechestvennoi-voiny-v-minske>, <http://www.comparty.by/gazeta/2010/04/o-novom-muzee-velikoi-otechestvennoi-voiny>, <http://belapan.com/archive/2010/10/22/420860/>.



Figure 1: General view of the new museum building  
 © <http://news.tut.by/kaleidoscope/168287.html> (12.10.2012).



Figure 2: The information board at the construction site showing how the museum complex will be integrated into the landscape © Kristiane Janek

This article will elaborate on this thesis in three steps: A brief overview dealing with the experience of war, the official policy of history and the increasingly diverse memoryscape in Belarus (Figure 1) is followed by a selective comparison of the old and the new concept of the exhibition (Figure 2). There, the question shall be raised whether and to which degree the new exhibition concept<sup>4</sup> will offer an updated

**4** | Konceptcija (2008) ekspozicii Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, confirmed 30 March 2010, Minsk (unpublished), partly published in: <http://www.warmuseum.by/news/events/~group=1~year=2009~page=2~id=420>, retrieved 1 November 2011.



Figure 3: The planned evening fireworks display is reminiscent of the historic fireworks display on the Red Square in Moscow on 9 May 1945.  
© <http://realt.onliner.by/2011/10/04/muz>  
(12 October 2012)

interpretation of the war, which mirrors the increasing divergences of collective and individual memory and how this is reflected in the presentation and education. Finally, the possibilities of compensating the persistently narrow political margin specific to the museum are worked out (Figure 3). The whole paper is based on the overall thesis that recalling the core tasks of a museum can contribute to creating free space which emerges from the specific functions and possibilities of a museum as an informal place of learning and education.

## I. CULTURE OF MEMORY IN BELARUS

The official name of the museum, The History of the Great Patriotic War, leads directly to the core of the problem. In Soviet historiography, The Great Patriotic War” refers to the years of 1941 to 1945, which are mostly regarded independently and are not seen in the general context of the Second World War. Considering it was based on the general narrative of the entire Soviet Union, this focus is understandable for the old exhibition. However, adherence to this historical view raises questions for a new concept of the exhibition concerning national identity and reference points of history in a now independent Belarus.

On 17 September 1939 Soviet troops occupied the Eastern Polish territories. This action was in line with the secret agreement of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.<sup>5</sup> This brought all the territories containing a Belarusian population under Soviet influence. Between the wars, the Western part belonged to Poland<sup>6</sup> and the Eastern part to the *Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic* (BSSR), which in turn had belonged to

5 | David R. Marples (2001): »Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrussland (1917-1945)«, in: Dietrich Beyrau/Rainer Lindner (eds.): Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 135–152.

6 | Werner Benecke (2001): »Kresy. Die weißrussischen Territorien in der Polnischen Republik (1921–1939)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 153–165.

the USSR since 1922.<sup>7</sup> This BSSR, which had been enlarged by previously Polish territories, was attacked by the Wehrmacht on 22 June 1941.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, Belarusian territories were characterized by a heterogeneous population of Belarusian, Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian descent as well as by a variety of languages and religions. Consequently, the enemy was not confronted by a united Belarusian people or nation because the population was by no means homogeneous.<sup>9</sup> The differing developments of the various areas in the 1920s was still formative for the region, generating a wide range of expectations, hopes and fears towards the German Reich as well as towards the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> The country itself became the scene of sustained fighting between regular armed forces and other national and sometimes criminal groups.<sup>11</sup> In the course of the war, it is estimated that Belarus lost up to a third of its population,<sup>12</sup> although there are no exact numbers.<sup>13</sup> So far, research has generally assumed the death of 2.2 million people. In addition to soldiers killed in action, the loss of population consisted of prisoners of war who died, civilian casualties and forced labourers as well as the victims of the

**7** | D. R. Marples (2001): »Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrussland« (1917-1945), in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 135-152.

**8** | Ibid. and Bernhard Chiari (1998): Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944, Düsseldorf: Droste.

**9** | Bernhard Chiari (2001): »Die Kriegsgesellschaft. Weißrussland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939-1944)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 408-425; Bernhard Chiari (2002): »Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege«, in: Bruno Thoß/Hans-Erich Volkmann (eds.): Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich. Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland, Paderborn/München/Wien/Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, pp. 615-631.

**10** | B. Chiari (2002): »Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege«, in: B. Thoß/H.-E. Volkmann: Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg, pp. 615-631; B. Chiari: (1998): Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944, Düsseldorf: Droste; D. R. Marples: »Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrussland (1917-1945)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 135-152.

**11** | B. Chiari (1998): Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944, Düsseldorf: Droste, p. 151.

**12** | Bernhard Chiari/Robert Maier (2004): »Weißrussland. Volkskrieg und Heldenstädte: Zum Mythos des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges in Weißrussland«, in: Monika Flacke (ed.): Mythen der Nationen. 1945 – Arena der Erinnerungen, Berlin: Philipp von Zabern, Vol. 2, pp. 737-756.

**13** | Mikola Iwanou (2001): »Terror, Deportation, Genozid: Demographische Veränderungen in Weißrussland im 20. Jahrhundert«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 426-436.

Holocaust together with refugees, evacuated people, the repressed of the USSR and the people repatriated to Poland.<sup>14</sup>

Of the Jewish population (980,000 people before the war, which was 9.3 % of the 10.5 million inhabitants of the BSSR), only 120,000–150,000 survived as members of the Soviet Partisan movement, as soldiers of the Red Army or because they were evacuated. Altogether, 650,000 Belarusian Jews died. About 400,000 died on Belarusian soil, most of them in the Maly Trostenec extermination camp.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the decimation of the population, towns and villages were systematically destroyed.

After 1945, this complex war experience was summarily included in official Soviet memory. The central point of reference was the Great Patriotic War, in other words, the military history between 1941 and 1945, from the attack of the German Reich on the Soviet Union up to the conquest of Berlin, presented as the heroic defence of the Red Army against the enemy. In this view, there was room neither for their own victims, Jews, prisoners of war and forced labourers nor for individual experiences of war, not to mention a critical review of Stalinism. Moreover, since Moscow defined the war as a general Soviet achievement, there was no room left for national or personal memories.

This vacuum is now filled by Lukashenko's historical policy.<sup>16</sup> Lacking other uniting traditions, the Great Patriotic War has now been used as a founding myth for the Republic of Belarus to create and strengthen a collective national identity.<sup>17</sup> This has been accompanied by emphasising the specific Belarusian contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany, thus demonstrating one's own power as a display of independence and strength in the face of Russia.<sup>18</sup> The local partisans have become the symbol for the national fight of liberation which culminated in the liberation of Minsk on 3 July 1944 – now the National holiday of Belarus.<sup>19</sup> But what exactly the specific Belarusian contribution was is difficult to determine. At any rate, there is, in this seemingly nationalized version of memory, no room left for the complex

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**14** | *ibid.*

**15** | B. Chiari/R. Maier (2004): »Weißrussland. Volkskrieg und Heldenstädte: Zum Mythos des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges in Weißrussland«, in: M. Flacke: *Mythen der Nationen*, p. 749.

**16** | Olga Kurilo/Gerd-Ulrich Herrmann (eds.) (2008): *Täter, Opfer, Helden. Der Zweite Weltkrieg in der weißrussischen und deutschen Erinnerung*, Berlin: Metropol.

**17** | B. Chiari/R. Maier (2004): »Weißrussland. Volkskrieg und Heldenstädte: Zum Mythos des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges in Weißrussland«, in: M. Flacke: *Mythen der Nationen*, pp. 737–756 and Astrid Sahm (2010): »Der Zweite Weltkrieg als Gründungsmythos. Wandel der Erinnerungskultur in Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 5, pp. 43–54.

**18** | A. Sahm (2010): »Der Zweite Weltkrieg als Gründungsmythos. Wandel der Erinnerungskultur in Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 5, p. 46.

**19** | B. Chiari (2001): »Die Kriegsgesellschaft. Weißrussland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939–1944)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands*, p. 410.

pre-war history or other aspects of national identity. Once again, the myth of a war of the people is preserved, a war in which the Belarusians faced the enemy as a monolithic block aiming, together with the people of the Soviet Union, at the liberation of Europe.<sup>20</sup>

This official historical policy is at variance with the memories of society.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon is unique among the post-Soviet countries. After the collapse of the USSR, the other countries revived national memories with the aim of uniting society, on the one hand, and setting a contrast to the Soviet interpretation of history, on the other. Although Lukashenko is also aiming at national unity, his historical policy is not really suited for that. On the contrary, many Belarusians cannot identify with this official interpretation. They rather chose other points of reference for their national identity, like the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the *Belarusian People's Republic* (1918/19)<sup>22</sup> or (negative) points of reference such as the reactor accident in Chernobyl, as well as, after the discovery of the mass grave in Kurapaty near Minsk in 1988,<sup>23</sup> the terror of Stalin. All this has to be considered in connection with regional and local history and a clear commitment to the Belarusian language. This unofficial view of history coincides with the ideas of the political opposition which contributes to its marginalisation.

This memory of society does not at all exclude the memory of the war.<sup>24</sup> The fact that almost every family in Belarus lost members in the course of war, occupation and annihilation weighs heavily.<sup>25</sup> This is deeply rooted in the communicative memory and the individual memory and complements the official patterns of remembrance. That in turn is connected to the enormously high number of victims in the Belarusian territories, comparatively much higher than anywhere else in Europe, as a result of World War I (1914–18) and the Civil War (1917–21), followed by the Polish-Soviet war (1919–29), the repressions, the collectivization and industrialisation by the Soviet Union in the 20s and 30s, and finally the tragic culmination of

**20** | B. Chiari/R. Maier (2004): »Weißrussland. Volkskrieg und Heldenstädte: Zum Mythos des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges in Weißrussland«, in: M. Flacke: *Mythen der Nationen*, p. 738.

**21** | Imke Hansen (2008): »Die politische Planung der Erinnerung. Geschichtskonstruktionen in Belarus zwischen Konflikt und Konsens«, in: *Osteuropa* 6, pp. 187–196; Elena Temper (2008): »Konflikte um Kurapaty. Geteilte Erinnerung im postsowjetischen Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 6, pp. 253–266.

**22** | D. R. Marples (2001): »Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrussland (1917–1945)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands*, pp. 136–138.

**23** | E. Temper (2008): »Konflikte um Kurapaty. Geteilte Erinnerung im postsowjetischen Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 6, p. 257f.

**24** | Astrid Sahn (2008): »Im Banne des Krieges. Gedenkstätten und Erinnerungskultur in Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 6, p. 245.

**25** | O. Kurilo/H.-U. Herrmann (2008): *Täter, Opfer, Helden*, Berlin: Metropol.

World War II,<sup>26</sup> which began for the region in 1939 with the occupation by the USSR or the Reunification of Belarus as it is described officially.<sup>27</sup> This term, the Reunification of Belarus, is also used in the in the new concept of the museum. However, it is also true that due to a lack of public debates and free research hardly anyone in Belarus is aware of the complexity of their own national history. Following the Soviet tradition, certain groups of victims have been excluded from memory. It is only now that a certain sensitivity is emerging.<sup>28</sup>

## II. THE CONCEPT OF THE MUSEUM

So how is the museum positioned against this background? Since, until now, the State History Museum has not had a contemporary permanent exhibition, the museum of the Great Patriotic War has played the leading role in the historical master narrative. "The planned structure of the museum grounds must reflect its importance as an element of the social and cultural system"<sup>29</sup> The museum already had a clear mission when it was founded during the German occupation: the collection and preservation of material about the war and the occupation with the purpose of motivating the people to fight against the enemy. The first exhibition was opened in Moscow in November 1942 and another one was opened in Minsk in 1944.<sup>30</sup> Today's building has housed the museum since 1967 with a total of 16 rooms at various times, beginning in the 60s until the last rearrangement in 2005. Despite many revisions, the exhibition has mirrored the Soviet view of the war against Germany up until now.

The ongoing cooperation between the museum team and me proves that there is a wish for a new beginning. Furthermore, the new exhibition has been allocated a remarkably high budget by Belarusian standards. Whether it will be possible to view the war in future not only as a Soviet or Belarusian battle of defence, but rather

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**26** | M. Iwanou (2001): »Terror, Deportation, Genozid: Demographische Veränderungen in Weißrussland im 20. Jahrhundert«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 426–436.

**27** | D. R. Marples (2001): »Die Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik Weißrussland (1917–1945)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, pp. 146–149.

**28** | A. Sahn (2008): »Im Banne des Krieges. Gedenkstätten und Erinnerungskultur in Belarus«, in: Osteuropa 6, p. 235.

**29** | Konceptcija (2008) ekspozicii Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, confirmed 30 March 2010, Minsk (unpublished), partly published in: <http://www.warmuseum.by/news/events/~group=1~year=2009~page=2~id=420>, retrieved 1 November 2011.

**30** | Voronkova, I. Ju. (2001): »Sozdanie i stanovlenie Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojny«, Minsk.

as a site of European memory remains to be seen. A first answer to this question is offered by the new concept. This shall serve as the basis for a comparison between the current (old) exhibition and the plans for the new museum, which is illustrated by three topics: the content, the architecture and design and, finally, the education and communication.

## 1. Themes of the Exhibition

The current exhibition reflects the above-mentioned content of Soviet historiography. This narrative revolves around the victory, the stylization of Red Army soldiers as heroes and the partisan myth. Within this narrative there is no room for the presentation of the enemy and its motives, for the organisation and structure of the German policy of extermination, for the Holocaust, for the fate of the prisoners of war and the forced labourers, for collaboration, for Belarusian, Polish and Lithuanian national movements, for the “*Armia Krajowa*”<sup>31</sup> and for the terror of Stalin. After 1991, some of these topics were included in the exhibition, but until now there has been no nuanced and comprehensive presentation of these issues.

These subjects are to be presented in the new exhibition. I would like to select four examples to compare the respective presentations: the prologue, which covers the time before 22 June 1941 (a), the German policies of occupation and extermination (b), the partisan movement (c) and, finally, the memory of war (d).

Let me mention right away that the current presentation does not meet international museum standards. Often, there are no introductory and explanatory texts; exhibits are not consistently described and dated; copies are not always identified as such; information on origins is completely lacking; and quite frequently exhibits from an earlier or later period are used in a slipshod manner to illustrate an event. In addition, there is the undifferentiated use of photographs and documents which either cannot be assigned or are, in some cases, even wrongly assigned. Consequently, it is virtually impossible for the single visitor to obtain a differentiated view on their own, which thus reveals that the exhibition is designed to be experienced as part of a guided tour.

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**31** | Sigizmund P. Borodin (2003): »Die weißrussische Geschichtsschreibung und Publizistik und die Heimatarmee in den nordöstlichen Gebieten der Republik Polen 1939 bis 1945«, in: Bernhard Chiari (ed.): *Die polnische Heimatarmee. Geschichte und Mythos der Armia Krajowa seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, pp. 599–616; Ivan P. Kren (2003): »Der Einsatz der Armija Krajowa auf dem Territorium Weißrusslands aus weißrussischer Sicht. Versuch einer Ortsbestimmung«, in: B. Chiari: *Die polnische Heimatarmee*, pp. 585–597.

## a) Prologue

In historical or military-historical museums, it had been common practice until 1991 to begin the presentation of the war abruptly with June 22, 1941. The background of the German attack, the events prior to the war as well as the ideological reasons for the war in the East remained unclear. In many museums, this has remained unchanged. It is only since 1999 that visitors in Minsk, before entering the exhibition proper, have been informed about the emergence of the Nazi movement, the developments in Germany after 1933 and the actual course of the war on the Western Front from 1939 to 1941. This is followed by a description of the defensive preparations in view of the threat of war.

The precarious balancing act, which is also to be found in the new concept, can already be seen here. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on national events and developments in Belarus or BSSR and, on the other hand, an attempt to avoid a description of Belarusian national groups within the Soviet Union. This is very obvious in the elements of the exhibition pertaining to the Hitler-Stalin Pact. This agreement and the secret supplementary protocol are prominently displayed together with a map showing the planned division of Poland. However, in the current exhibition, this is followed by a description of the conquest of Eastern Poland on 17 September 1939, or what the exhibit calls the liberation of Eastern Poland. No information on the situation of the BSSR and Eastern Poland prior to 1939 is provided. Because this complex situation described above<sup>32</sup> is not explained, a situation, in which the invasion of the Soviet troops was perceived both as a liberation as well as an occupation, makes it impossible to give a differentiated description of the national movement for the rest of the exhibition.

In the new exhibition, an entire room is dedicated to the Beginning of World War II and one element of it strictly focuses on “The Reunification of Western Belarus with BSSR”.<sup>33</sup> The fact that this is no longer called liberation shows an, albeit careful, change from an attitude specifically directed against Poland to a perspective which is more guided by a national definition of the events. Regarding the Baltic States, however, even the new concept continues to speak of a “peaceful unification” in summer 1940.<sup>34</sup>

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**32** | B. Chiari (2001): »Die Kriegsgesellschaft. Weißrussland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939-1944)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands, p. 410ff.

**33** | Struktura (2011): Rasširennaja tematičeskaja struktura postojannoj ěkspozicii Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, Minsk (unpublished, p. 3)

**34** | Scenarij (2009) ěkspozicii Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, 27 August 2009, Minsk (unpublished), p. 2.

## b) German policy of extermination and occupation

Up to the mid-1990s, this field was exclusively used as a backdrop for the presentation of the victory, which shone all the brighter in contrast to the German atrocities. It mainly referred to fascistic atrocities, which were visualized by photographs, the remains of concentration camps and barbed wire scenes. To this day the exhibition relies on the sheer quantity of material without going into more detail on specific aspects. The presentation relies on individual exhibits, which in themselves could be a key to the narrative, but are not used as such. The example of collaboration gives a general idea of how the exhibition deals with its subjects. On the level of the exhibits, the theme is presented in a certain amount of detail, but there is no introductory and comprehensive text and the (inconsistent) descriptions of the objects do not provide sufficient information to allow visitors to orient themselves without prior knowledge. On the level of content, there is no differentiated presentation of pre-war history which might show that the population reacted to the war and the resulting circumstances in very different ways in terms of collaboration.<sup>35</sup> On the museological level, there is a lack of visitor orientation, which should take the different backgrounds of the visitors into consideration in the process of selecting and presenting the material.

The presentation of other topics confirms this observation. For example, the documentation of the policy of extermination deals predominantly with themes specific to Belarus, such as burned villages, the ghettos and the various concentration camps within the territory of the BSSR.<sup>36</sup> All of this is prominently displayed in the current exhibition through original objects and a diorama. However, the documents and exhibits do not clearly show that the extermination was not only directed against the civilian population, but also and mainly against the Jews. To this day the Holocaust is a neglected topic in Belarus, although it is not taboo.<sup>37</sup> The failure to recognize and deal with anti-Semitic tendencies within Belarusian society before, during and after the war is still an obstacle to revision. For example, there is no mention of the fact that the victims of the concentration camp in Maly Trostenec, according to the latest research, between 60,000 and 200,000 people, were not only

**35** | B. Chiari (1998): *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944*, Düsseldorf: Droste; B. Chiari (2001): »Die Kriegsgesellschaft. Weißrussland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939-1944)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands*, pp.408-425; B. Chiari (2002): »Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege«, in: B. Thoß/H.-E. Volkmann: *Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg*, pp. 615-631.

**36** | B. Chiari (2002): »Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege«, in: B. Thoß/H.-E. Volkmann: *Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg*, pp.615-631.

**37** | A. Sahn (2010): »Der Zweite Weltkrieg als Gründungsmythos. Wandel der Erinnerungskultur in Belarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 5, p. 50f; A. Sahn (2008): »Im Banne des Krieges. Gedenkstätten und Erinnerungskultur inBelarus«, in: *Osteuropa* 6, p. 242.

prisoners of war, partisans, underground fighters, inhabitants of Minsk and nearby cities, but mostly Belarusian and deported foreign Jews.<sup>38</sup> The uncertainty concerning the exact number of victims<sup>39</sup> is never mentioned either here or elsewhere in the exhibition.

Another, typically Soviet, way of exhibiting is the presentation of the fate of individuals. In almost every case, biographies are referred to, but they are not broken down into individual stories, but are used as a whole or as an anonymous presentation to provide a source of identification for visitors. The choice of people ranges from officers and references to their exemplary deeds to simple soldiers as far as they sacrificed themselves in battle as well as ordinary people who are described as typical fates so that visitors of the exhibition may identify with them.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the new exhibition also allocates a special room to the occupation. In accordance with the concept, it is isolated on the edge of the tour, so visitors are not necessarily exposed to that gruesome part of history, particularly since the intention of the room is to convey suffering and horror, grief and fear. The selection of topics is by far more differentiated than in the current exhibition and includes documentation of the occupational structure, the destruction of cities and villages, an overview of the various camps, the genocide of the Jews, the deportment for forced labour as well as collaboration. The central exhibit is, just as it is now, a diorama. The once officially approved content is to be supplemented by up-to-date information and presented with the latest projection technology.

### c) Partisan Movement

The exhibition area on the partisan movement is by far the largest space in the current exhibition. This is due in part to the aforementioned history of the foundation of the museum.<sup>41</sup> At the time, members of the Partisan movement were asked to collect objects for the museum, and museum staff members also collected exhibits from the combat zones. In part, the reason for the enormous exhibition space, which currently includes a room on the ground floor, three large rooms on the first

**38** | B. Chiari (2001): »Die Kriegsgesellschaft. Weißrussland im Zweiten Weltkrieg (1939–1944)«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands*, pp. 422–424.

**39** | O. Kurilo/H.-U. Herrmann (2008): *Täter, Opfer, Helden*, p. 139–148; M. Iwanou (2001): »Terror, Deportation, Genozid: Demographische Veränderungen in Weißrussland im 20. Jahrhundert«, in: D. Beyrau/R. Lindner: *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrusslands*, pp. 426–436.

**40** | B. Chiari/R. Maier (2004): »Weißrussland. Volkskrieg und Heldenstädte: Zum Mythos des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges in Weißrussland«, in M. Flacke: *Mythen der Nationen*, p. 741f.

**41** | Voronkova, I. Ju. (2001): »Sozdanie i stanovlenie Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii Velikoj Otečestvennoy vojny«, Minsk.

floor as well as additional temporary exhibitions, lies in the Soviet version of history. In keeping with this way of thinking, the permanent exhibition also constructs an indivisible unity between the population and the partisans as well as an indivisible structure of the partisan movement itself.

The strongly fragmented structure of society in the region and the historical influences behind it, the changing political allegiances and the various occupations as well as the resulting individual survival strategies and their subjective experiences of the war<sup>42</sup> are not reflected in this presentation. Rather, the old myth of the partisan movement and even a certain romance of the forest are nurtured.

Again, many portraits are consistent with the pattern mentioned above. This area of the exhibition particularly reflects the unbroken power of the veteran union, which makes it difficult to change anything about the rooms and their contents. In many places, flowers are put in front of pictures or personal objects that turn the exhibition into a mixture of ideologically molded documentation and personal memory.

In the new exhibition, the partisan movement is also supposed to be represented prominently. In contrast to the occupation topic, the approach will be much more conservative and adhere to the old focal points. As in the old exhibition, the picture of the idealised world of the partisans will be kept alive.

#### d) Memory of War

In the current exhibition, remembrance and memory are not presented as a single subject. There is no discussion of their relevance today and no questions of the role and function the war might have in present day Belarus, what makes it a current topic and which attitudes regarding war in general prevail in society today. Considering the history of the foundation of the museum, the museum itself is the central exhibit for the memory of the war. This is reflected in the inscription on the current building, which can be read from afar: "The heroic deed of the people is eternal", in the architecture of the new building, in the creation of a memoryscape and, in both cases, in the interior design. As mentioned before, the current exhibition is a mixture between documentation and memory in its selection and exclusion of themes and in the massively biographical approach to its memorial function.

The new concept is to include a section on the topic of memory and remembrance.<sup>43</sup> It is supposed to be integrated into the room dedicated to Belarus in the first years after liberation; but the time frame is limited to 1944-50. A connection to the present day is still not considered. However, the exhibition intends to limit itself

**42** | B. Chiari (2002): »Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege«, in: B. Thoß/H.-E. Volkmann: Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg, p. 623.

**43** | Scenarij (2009) ekspozicii Belorusskogo Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja istorii velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, 27.8.2009, Minsk (unpublished), p. 14.

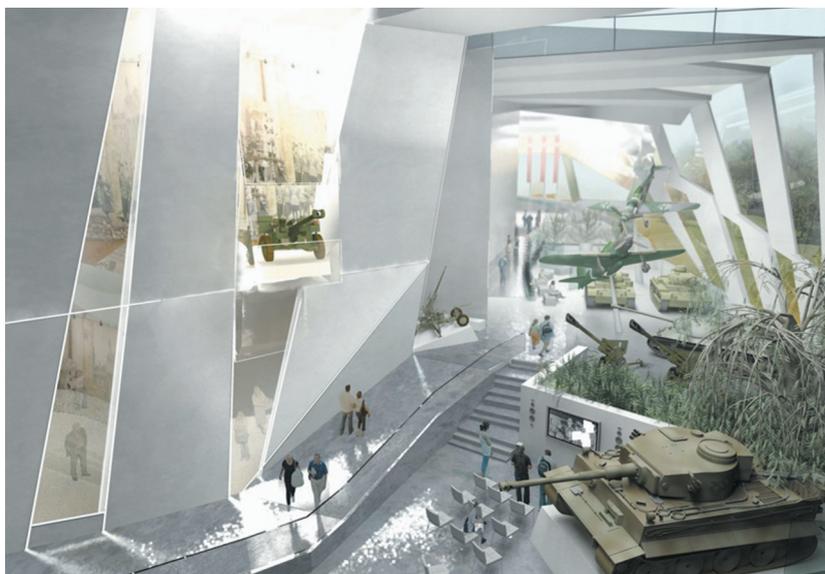


Figure 4: A view of the exhibition.

© <http://realt.onliner.by/2012/03/17/muz-4> (12 October 2012)

to a mere documentary function and to minimize personal remembrance. But it will be impossible to take it out of the museum altogether, for the architecture alone provides remembrance a prominent position. Together with the exterior grounds and the large assembly spaces inside, this will form the Hall of Victory, which, besides depicting the defeat of the Third Reich and the conquest of Berlin by the Red Army, will focus on the victory parade on the Red Square in Moscow as well as symbols of victory like seized weapons, flags and National Socialist symbols of sovereignty. The idea is to convey impressions of joy and victory, as well as of grief and suffering. For visitors, however, a sense of joy shall dominate, presented by sounds and pictures of the 9 May fireworks, marching band music and photographs of happy homecomings of soldiers. This hall and the exterior grounds clearly reveal the influence of Moscow's Museum of the Great Patriotic War and thus the continuation of the Soviet/Russian interpretation of history.

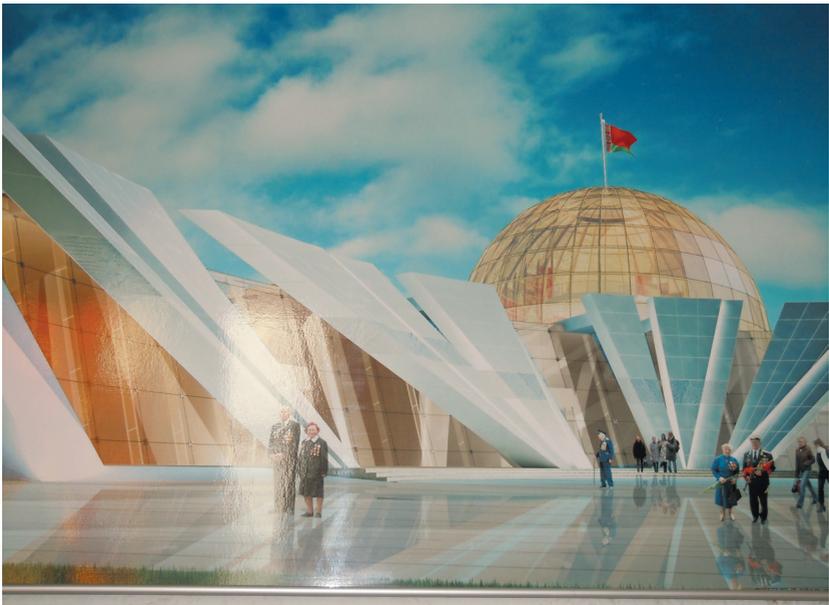
## 2. Architecture and Design

That a critical revision of the exhibition is not politically desired is also reflected in the plan for the new building. Financed by the City of Minsk by order of the government, it uses Moscow's Museum of Great Patriotic War as a model and thus puts itself into the context of the Russian-Soviet master narrative. The architect, Viktor V.

Kramarenko, who has already received several awards and has built the main station, the National Library and the Minsk Hero City obelisk in the immediate vicinity of the museum, has been commissioned to build the museum. The museum itself was not involved in selecting the design.

The central reference point of the planned building is the celebration of the Victory of 9 May 1945 on the Red Square in Moscow. This event is reflected in the architecture too: the façade of the building will be made of large concrete panels, which radiate at an angle around the central obelisk. The names of all heroes of the Soviet Union (about 12,000 names) will be engraved here. In the evening, a laser show will be reminiscent of the historical fireworks. The four blocks of the building represent the four years of war (1941–44) and the four army groups which liberated the BSSR. A glass dome will rise up behind them, and the Hall of Victory will be located below the dome. Outside, 170 water jets will represent the 170 liberated villages. The entire campus, situated in the Park of Victory, will use – architecture, like in Moscow, to emotionally overwhelm visitors.

This use of design is continued in the interior and in the exhibition. The four blocks on the ground level will be connected by the Path of War, which will present weapons and heavy equipment with the specific intention of eliciting admiration for the technological achievements of the Soviet Union and to thus affirm the trust put into their victory. The exhibition on three levels will fit into the symbolic



*Figure 5: The names of the heroes of the Soviet Union shall be engraved on the ray-like structures (about 12,000 names)*

© <http://news.tut.by/kaleidoscope/168287.html> (12 October 2012)

architecture. According to the new concept, it is supposed to have an antimilitaristic orientation. How this is to be realised, however, is still unclear, since the work with the Polish [sic!] designer has only just begun. The main guideline of the museum is to approach visitors emotionally. The rooms are designed to represent different topics such as joy, pride, pain, grief and fear. With the help of mostly naturalistic scenes and dioramas, visitors shall gain an impression of the experiences of the inhabitants of Belarus during the war. In any case, the new exhibition will profit from a unified design, in contrast to the current exhibition, which was influenced by five different designers in its ten year period of constant rearrangement from 1995–2005.

Whether the plans for the building and its interior design can be realized as intended is questionable as a result of the economic crisis of spring 2011. The continuous devaluation of the Belarusian rouble has made the budget shrink. Taking this into consideration, the use of the net profit of the Subbotnik (Work Saturday) in April 2011 for the building of the museum or calls for donations on national television are a mixture of fundraising and a way of generating identification with the project.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Means of Education and engaging Visitors

In terms of information transfer, the exhibition follows the old patterns to this day. Guides equipped with a wooden pointer give groups of children, teenagers and adults monologues, often lasting several hours. A slight variation on this is working with children directly in front of an exhibit. In the case of military historical museums, this is often supplemented by personal reports of war veterans.

Consistent and clearly presented exhibition texts to help visitors orient themselves are nowhere to be found. Attempts at new ways of educating visitors are, so far, only to be found in the design, for instance, in a special exhibition on the partisans (2011). In this specific case, the exhibition relies upon the highly naturalistic and accurate copy of an actual partisan's hut in the woods, complete with the noise of approaching airplanes and the sound of gunfire to let visitors experience the authentic feeling of being part of it.

This form of communication is to be continued in the new museum, but there will be a stronger focus on addressing individual visitors. Clearly structured texts shall enable visitors to orient themselves without the help of an official guide. The current mixture of texts in Russian, Belarusian and sometimes both languages is to be consistently replaced by texts in several languages. Furthermore, visitors will be

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**44** | Subbotnik (2011): Report of the Belarusian television of the use of the money from the Subbotnik in April 2011. Retrieved 1 November 2011, from [http://ont.by/news/our\\_news/0065985](http://ont.by/news/our_news/0065985).

provided with audio guides as well as with audio, film and terminal workstations. So-called information booths will provide further information on the exhibition as well as the possibility of interactive participation in the form of a guestbook, where visitors can enter their personal thoughts and memories of the war. This approach is consistent with the design, which aims to provide visitors with the opportunity to explore the exhibition on their own, assisted by guiding systems, emphasises on certain areas and relaxation zones. Present plans include a public storeroom within the exhibition as well as making the collection available electronically. Should these plans materialise, it could be something unique to Belarus and would also become an important source of historical research.

A look at the new concept, however, reveals that even the broadened spectrum of ways of transfer still follows the old pattern of educational work: interaction is still mainly considered as a means to emotionally address visitors through design, supplemented by offers to experience the historical situation in these productions, as, for example, in the planned external exhibition on the living conditions of the partisans. Dioramas are to convey the illusion of space into which visitors can immerse themselves. Flight and tank simulators are to be available for training. Interactive maps shall enable visitors to orient themselves in the historical space, but so far only concerning the lines of military fronts. Finally, the plan of a projected dialogue between a veteran of the partisans and a boy, which is to focus on the world of the partisans, their weapons and forms of battle, shows that the potential of such possibilities of participation has not been exhausted yet.

### III. PERSPECTIVES

Thus, the question becomes what about the war in Belarusian museums? Which perspectives does the new concept of the leading museum offer for historical policy and the collective memory of the country or rather, how can the museum contribute to the development of a differentiated culture of memory?

As the overview has shown, the curators are severely limited. But to enhance the historical revision nonetheless the recalling of the core tasks of a museum can create free spaces which are derived from the museum as a place for informal and extracurricular learning and education. The collection may have a decisive impact in achieving this. As the collection is reinterpreted according to the broadened range of questions, new acquisitions and supplementing research may allow an emphasis on hitherto neglected aspects. Furthermore, the treatment of the space through architecture and design offers the visitor the possibility of approaching the content of the exhibition on their own terms. Finally, a critical process of reflection is initiated by the differentiated ways of engaging the visitor. As the policy of collecting, design and education combine the apparently still required political continuity with new

forms of dialogue and interaction, the museum can yet become a place of critical discussion of history and of future-oriented learning and thus approach a common European culture of memory of the Second World War.

This intention is reflected in the many ideas of the new concept, whose potential the museum can exhaust in practice without touching the core of the approved version of the concept. As the exhibition becomes more strongly directed towards individual visitors, it not only meets international museum standards, but also opens new spaces of experience in dealing with one's own history and memory. As the museum allows electronic access to the collection as well as to the archive, it not only offers visitors the possibility of an in-depth exploration of the exhibited theme, but also establishes a basis of scientific sources for further research and critical analysis. As the museum offers further information and service to visitors before and at the time of their visit, it fulfils already existing expectations concerning the visit of any exhibition, but also offers non-visitors and potential future visitors a chance to explore the history and the memory of the war independently. By offering multi-lingual information and imparting of the exhibition, the museum positions itself in a globalized world and, at the same time, becomes interesting for tourists and foreign museum experts, who in turn become dialogue partners for native visitors and museum colleagues. As dioramas are a vehicle to immerse visitors into history, it is part of a varied, and, for many Western visitors, surprising and fascinating design. At the same time, the use of visually overwhelming dioramas and panoramas, with their claim of objective interpretation, offers the possibility to critically reflect on their suggestive power and the possibility of conscious manipulation of visitors. As visitors have the interactive possibility to follow the development of military fronts, they are also enabled to reflect on the national and linguistic borders that the war simply ignored.

This enumeration of possibilities of conveying content, which are specific to the museum, could be continued. It is to be hoped that the expressed aim of the new concept that intends to maintain the museum as an island of mental purity shall not prevail, but instead that the courage to discuss will gain the upper hand. This would also have to include a broader documentation of the Great Patriotic War in the context of the experience of violence in the 20th century as well as its relevance for the present day. It would be this broadening of the subject, and not its restriction, that would contribute to legitimizing national identity and to using the memory of the war for the present.

Against the backdrop of the present situation in Belarus, the chances for this broadening of spectrum do not look good. However, a different picture begins to appear if one considers the very active and critical scene of museums here. Drawing on the museum's specific tasks and possibilities for combining continuity, dialogue and interaction, the museum could become a place for the critical analysis of history and future-oriented learning at a time when the last witnesses of the war are dying and fewer and fewer young people are actually interested in the war.

It would thus be desirable if the rest of Europe, in spite of the initially mentioned isolation of the country, intensified its cooperation with the Belarusian museums and thus contributed to their process of opening up.