

# Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions

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In 2011, the Universalmuseum Joanneum, Austria's oldest and second largest museum complex, celebrated its 200th anniversary. In preparation of this special event, we decided to dedicate each month of the year 2011 to one of our museums. Thus the focus in September 2011 was on the Landeszeughaus, the Styrian Armoury, considered to be the world's largest historic armoury and one of the most important monuments of Styrian history.

Built by the Styrian Diet between 1642 and 1645, the building was the most important armoury in the south-east of the Habsburg Empire and played a crucial role in the defence of the Austrian frontier provinces of Styria, Carinthia and Carniola against the threat of attack from Ottoman armies and Hungarian anti-Habsburg rebels.

When under the reign of Maria Theresa (1740-1780) the Austrian military administration was reformed and centralized in Vienna, the empress resolved to give up all armouries in the Austrian provinces and in 1749 she proposed to the estates that they relinquish all usable weapons to the war ministry and sell all obsolete arms as scrap metal. The Styrian Diet objected and argued that in addition to its material value, the armoury had symbolic importance, for it was dear to them as a memorial to the history of their country and to the valour of their forefathers. Maria Theresa, not wanting to offend the Styrians unnecessarily and respecting their tradition of defending the frontiers, allowed them to keep the armoury.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1880, the armoury has been open to the public and in 1892 became part of the Styrian State Museum Joanneum, now the Universalmuseum Joanneum. Seeing as the Landeszeughaus itself is a unique historical monument with its historic building and its collection of about 32,000 objects and due to the fact that there is no

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1 | See Peter Krenn (1991): »The Landeszeughaus Graz and its Place in History«, in: Peter Krenn/Walter J. Karcheski Jr. (ed.): *Imperial Austria. Treasures of Art, Arms and Armor from the State of Styria*, Houston: Museum of Fine Arts Houston, p. 20.

space there for temporary exhibitions, we agreed on two special projects for the 200 year anniversary of the Joanneum:

The first project is an art project in public space dealing with the question of Graz as a “bulwark” against the East. An international jury chose the project “The Unknown Knight” by the Turkish artist Nasan Tur.<sup>2</sup>

And, as a second project, we invited the Museum Academy of the Universalmuseum Joanneum as well as ICOMAM, the International Council of Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History to organize a joint international conference on the fundamental question posed in the title of the conference: “Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions”.

More or less every museum is at one time or another confronted with displaying topics of war and violence. And, in most cases, the presentations of war and violence oscillate between, on the one hand, the fascination of terror and its instruments, and on the other hand the didactic urge to explain violence and, by analyzing it, make it easier to come to terms with or prevent.

When dealing with topics of war and violence, museum professionals have to consider questions such as: What objectives and means are involved when they present war in museums? How can they avoid trivializing or aestheticizing war? How can they avoid, for example, in the case of the Landeszeughaus, transforming violence, injury, death and trauma into main tourist attractions? What images of consternation, shock and horror do they generate? What can they make accessible in terms of understanding the dialectic of friend and foe? Do they frighten off, warn, ponder, shock, emotionally manipulate, compare, historicize and/or promote learning?

The call for papers for this conference was more than successful, receiving more than 80 proposals for papers from colleagues from all over the world, which made it difficult to choose only 17 for reasons of time. Therefore, we would like to apologize to all colleagues whose papers could not be accepted.

The conference started with a most inspiring key-note by the Yale historian Jay Winter, who, on the one hand, gave an overview on the history of war and military museums since the First World War and, on the other hand, stressed one of the main dilemmas of war and military museums, namely that especially those dedicated to the history of the 20th century have to serve as museums as well as memorials at the same time. Winter pointed out that war dominates museum space in representing history, but that all war museums fail to represent war and that they are never politically neutral as the conference showed later on. On the contrary, one has to ask who owns the memory of war. For Winter, war museums are important steps on the map of remembrance, which should avoid the fetishisation and glorification of war. This can be achieved by offering a series of alternative ways of approaching the terror of the battlefield and by changing the gender balance of representations of populations at war. For Jay Winter war museums are sites of contestation and interrogation,

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2 | For more details, see the paper of Werner Fenz in this volume.

which should also link their visitors with the numerous sites of memory that the violence of the two world wars and later conflicts have produced around us.

“If War Does Belong to Museums: How?” was the question to which the following speakers responded. Peter Armstrong, director of the Royal Armouries in Leeds, focused on the question of whether a national museum like the Royal Armouries can act as an agent of social change and make a positive impact on individual lives. He highlighted the museum’s program of using its collection to work within the communities, especially since the UK’s law banning the use of hand guns and the carrying of knives.

Barton C. Hacker gave an overview of the development of the military collections within the Smithsonian Institution and the US and stressed that the military museum exhibitions have undergone a major shift from the 1980s onwards as they began to draw on military social history with its stress on the common soldier, the experience of war and the place of the armed forces in society.

Focusing on the topic of “Displaying War”, Gorch Pieken from the newly opened Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden gave a virtual tour through the largest military history museum and its new extension by the American architect Daniel Libeskind, which tries to break new ground. Full of contrasts and with a Libeskind architectural extension, which is an object in its own right, the museum tries to combine a chronological as well as a thematic approach, using interventions by renowned contemporary artists as well as personal memories and biographies. The multiperspectivity of the permanent exhibition with its branching out into social history and cultural history offers many ways to interpret German military history while focusing on the human being and the anthropological side of violence. On a similar but smaller scale, Ralf Raths from the German Tank Museum in Munster described the dilemma he has been facing. Since 2008 he has been trying to transform a traditional museum that specializes in huge pieces of military equipment and is situated in a town dominated by its military complexes into a more critical contextualization to counteract the strong technical aura and the fetishisation of the objects. The new concept aims to deconstruct convenient myths. It sees the objects as opportunities to not only expand the scope of the historical context, but also to focus on the human experience, a process which has sparked heated debates and criticism from various sides. Christian Ortner from the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum Vienna offered an insight into the changes of the history and the structure of his institution.

Under the title “The Beauty of War and the Attractivity of Violence” more examples of current museum work were provided by Carol Nater from the Museum Altes Zeughaus in Solothurn, who presented the concept for the new permanent exhibition. This was followed by three colleagues from the educational service of the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels, who in their programs try to explain mainly to children and adolescents that war is not a game. They try to make children ponder and reflect by drawing their attention to the

realities and impacts of war. Per Björn Redkal from the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo presented a temporary exhibition project about weapons as aesthetic objects and the beauty of war, combining fascination, beauty, war and ambiguity. This session ended with Susanne Hageman from Berlin who did a survey of 40 German city museums and how they deal with the Second World War and the destruction of German cities through air raids. The different approaches were illustrated by a “canonical” object: the bomb.

How the trauma of war and violence can be part of the object was illustrated by Robert M. Ehrenreich, whose institution, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is unique in that it is one of the few institutions that focus primarily on non-combatants. Through the use of artefacts that were prized and protected by Jews fleeing the annihilation, the museum tries to effectively transmit the experiences of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. Alexandra Bounia from Cyprus has done a case study on how five war-related museums in the divided South and North Cyprus communities and countries use the perceived objectivity of museums and photography as a means to construct strong narratives within museums to form and reinforce official historical narratives, explain violence as a necessary form of sacrifice and construct a sense of national identity and pride. While the photographs and the events depicted are similar, the messages change according to the accompanying text, the context, the museum’s central narrative and visitors’ preconceptions. Werner Fenz, former head of the Institute of Art in Public Space in Styria, presented three different projects in Styria, in which contemporary artists had to deal with topics like the Holocaust, the National Socialist regime and Graz as a “bulwark” against the south-east. Similar to Alexandra Bounia’s paper on museums in Cyprus, three more examples in the final session “Military History, War Museums and National Identity” showed how war-related museums, especially in countries where the conflict is still fresh and unresolved, can and are being used and misused to create and influence national identity and how museums, like armies, are instruments and means of politics. Kristiane Janeke presented the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk/Belarus. This large-scale museum project, planned for 2013, shows the important role the liberation from the National-Socialist occupation as well as the resistance movement play as the founding myth for a new national identity. The final paper by Patrizia Kern showed the outstanding importance of the Turkish War of Independence within the national imaginary, as well as the role of the military within Turkey’s society and its cultural politics, taking the Atatürk and War of Independence Museum in Ankara, established in 2002, as a case study.

Summing up, the conference provided a vivid picture of the dilemma of war and military museums to present the unrepresentable, to exist within the ambiguity of being museums as well as memorials and the necessity of overcoming their national perspectives. Despite lively discussions, the conference, like a good exhibition, left visitors with more questions than answers.