

# Contents and Space: New Concept and New Building of the Militärhistorisches Museum of the Bundeswehr

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The Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) in the north of Dresden is the largest museum in the city and the largest military history museum in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The museum looks back on more than 110 turbulent years of history. Since 1897, the main building of the arsenal in the center of Dresden's Albertstadt has housed in succession the Royal Arsenal Collection (Königliche Arsenal-Sammlung) and the Royal Saxon Army Museum (das Königlich-Sächsisches Armeemuseum), after 1923/24 the Saxon Army Museum, after 1938 the Army Museum of the Wehrmacht (Heeresmuseum, after 1942 the Armeemuseum) and after 1972 the Army Museum of the GDR (Armeemuseum). Seven months prior to German reunification, the museum was renamed Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden. In accordance with the directive on the Concept for Museums in the Bundeswehr issued by the Defense Minister on 14 June 1994, the Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden was assigned the role of a leading museum in the Bundeswehr network of museums and collections.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the military history museums and their predecessors begins with the armories and their trophy collections which later became halls of fame and army museums with a distinct national character. They were places designed for displaying military-technical achievements accompanied by pictures of people dying brave deaths in glorious wars and patriotic stories of salvation. There was no room for critical reflection on the chosen perspective. Today, military history museums are – at best – places for individual learning and forums for public debate about the military and military history, enabling visitors to also engage in competent and controversial discussion about current politico-military developments against a historical background.

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1 | Cf. 100 Jahre Museum im Dresdner Arsenal (1897–1997). An anniversary document (1997), Dresden: Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden.



*Military History Museum of the Bundeswehr, Dresden, exterior facade*  
 © MHM, Ingrid Meier

The Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr sees itself primarily as a historical museum, and not as a museum devoted to the history of technology. Its purpose is to provide information about our history, to prompt people to ask questions and to offer a variety of answers – as a museum without pathos, which endeavors to combine reflection on history and critical debate. It should encourage thinking more than attempt to endow meaning.

Focused on this objective, the Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr is trying to break new ground both in terms of what it contains as well as how it is constructed.

In 2001, a concept group of academics and museum specialists developed the general exhibition concept for redesigning the permanent exhibition. American architect Daniel Libeskind was commissioned to fundamentally reconstruct the old building – a three-wing complex of the Semper school of the 1870s – and add a new one in 2002. The wedge-shaped, asymmetric new building he has designed penetrates the massive old building with its classical layout. A transparent front of metal lamellas overlies the historical structure. The new architecture is a cut into the building which not just changes its external shape, but also fundamentally transforms the internal structure. “The new structure is internally and externally in contrast to the existing structure regarding both form and character.”<sup>2</sup> The new building complements the horizontally aligned wings of the arsenal that are arranged in a rigid pillar grid with cross-storey vertical halls, thus providing room for large and bulky heavy

2 | Daniel Libeskind (2003): *Beyond the Arsenal*, Brochure, n.d., p. 6.

exhibits. Here, space follows function. And at the same time, there are codings regarding the contents, which make the building itself the first and largest item of the exhibition. The wedge becomes an instrument of force severing the arsenal, a thorn, a symbol of war and pain, the counterpoint of the arsenal which does not accept war, but questions it. The important issue in the planning process for the new building was not to create some kind of office building, where only the number of square meters matters, but instead it was crucial for the architecture to become a symbol of our troubled past.

The framework concept establishes that not only the architectural form of the building shall be redefined, but that it is also necessary to develop a new concept for the permanent exhibition, focused on the issues of modern military history. Following the basic definition of military history coined by Rainer Wohlfeil in the late 1960s, "this discipline of historical science is an inquiry into armed force as an instrument and means of politics and concerned with the problem of leadership in war and peace. It considers war not just a pure military matter, but puts it in the context of general history [...]. Moreover, military history continues to examine the military not just as an institution, but as a factor of economic, social and general public life. Not least it is concerned with armed force as a political force. Analogous to the objective of general historical science – to study man and his sphere – military history focuses on the soldier in all his spheres of life."<sup>3</sup>

The multiperspectivity of the permanent exhibition with its branching out into social history and cultural history offers many ways to interpret German military history. The new exhibition focuses on the human being, the anthropological side of violence. If we want to gain a better understanding of the potential for war in our world to be able to question and overcome it, we have to approach the reasons and nature of that *share of violence* which has always been part of ourselves and all other people in all known social orders. Understood in this way, war is just one form of violence, albeit one that is particularly concise and easily comprehensible in terms of empiricism. The military is just the famous tip of the iceberg whose center of gravity is far below the water line in the field of anthropology and the cultural history of man.

A suitable place for a historical-critical cause study and search for traces that reaches a large audience, not only of experts, but also of interested laypersons, families and schools, is the museum. The Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr breaks new ground not only with regard to the topics it covers, but also with regard to the level at which it conveys knowledge, and strikes out in new directions in terms of museum presentations. Visitors are offered two main approaches to military history, each clearly separated from the other in terms of both space and method. On the one hand, there is the traditional chronological tour, the journey in time organized according to dates in the wings of the historical arsenal building and, on the

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3 | Quoted in: »Konzeption für das Militärlhistorische Museum« (14 December 2001), p. 2.



4th floor of the theme tour. In the background, the observation platform and the tip of the wedge

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other hand, there is the thematic cross-section, the theme tour in the new building designed by Daniel Libeskind.

## THE THEME TOUR

At the intersection of the old and new buildings, where Libeskind's wedge severs the arsenal, light travels down a 28-meter shaft, penetrating well into the foyer of the old building. The new building contains a total of six such shafts, which Daniel Libeskind calls *vertical showcases*. On their way through the vertical showcase to the elevators in the new building, visitors pass a video installation called *Love and Hate* by the Scottish artist Charles Sandison. Charles Sandison projects the words Love and Hate hundreds of times on the walls. An endless loop without beginning or end, Love and Hate in a battle, where sometimes Love has the upper hand and sometimes Hate. Visitors become an integral part of the exhibition and the words Love and Hate are projected on them.

Taking the elevator, visitors can reach the fourth floor of Libeskind's wedge. Here, 28 meters above the ground, visitors enter a light-flooded room, which offers them a terrific view of probably the most beautiful object of the museum: the Old City of Dresden. A panoramic pane up to the vertex of the wedge provides an unobstructed view of the Hausmann Tower, the City Hall Tower, and the Church of Our Lady. In its geometrical form, the wedge corresponds to the area of Dresden that

was destroyed by the bomb raids in February 1945. Yet it not only recalls the history of this city, but also the destruction of other European cities in a war that emanated from German soil. Pavement stones from various European cities that show traces of bomb raids or artillery fire are embedded in the floor. There are six square meters of pavement from Dresden's Trinitatisplatz Square that was penetrated by four incendiary bombs, and from Wielun, the first town to be destroyed by German bombs in the Second World War on 1 September 1939, there are pavement stones that cracked under the weight of collapsing houses.

Close to the pavement slabs of Dresden, two biographies document the story of a boy who lost his entire family on 13 February 1945 and the fate of Henny Brenner, a writer who was one of around 200 Jews still living in Dresden in the last year of the war. Just hours before the Allied bombardment of the city, Brenner received news that she was to be taken to a concentration camp. The bombing therefore saved her life.

Visitors reach the second area of the exhibition in Libeskind's wedge via a staircase fixed to one side of a 28-meter high vertical showcase. This showroom on the third floor is completely dedicated to the topic of War and Remembrance. On the theme tour, it is not chronology that defines the direction of the presentation; instead, the exhibits are put into larger contexts of meaning, experience and function. This part of the museum is dedicated to the co-presentation and comparison of similar, identical and related phenomena, processes and memories, which are not limited to only one period.<sup>4</sup>

Each of the three arms of the wedge contains three massive roller shelves with covered fronts like those used in archives. Projections from three high-performance projectors are shown on the outside walls of the movable shelves and the room walls. The projections include three video exhibits from three female American artists, who have completely different approaches to the theme of violence and war. In the work by Martha Colburns, visitors are confronted with fundamental anthropological questions. In this exhibit, the hunting instinct is depicted as the primary driving force in human history. At the end of the exhibit, the hunter becomes the hunted. The artist interviewed soldiers with post traumatic shock syndrome. The flashbacks and jumps in her work are typical symptoms of the illness. This kind of modern art communicates well with people, who may not usually relate to modern art. A second video piece is by Nancy Davenport, in which the main character is shown on the construction side of the new building. In this video piece, violence appears in slapstick and comic. This is based on the roadrunner cartoons of the 1950s. The coyote is always a victim of his own violence. This piece also incorporates the German saying: "wer anderen eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein" (He who sets a trap for others gets caught in it himself).

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4 | Cf. »Konzeption für das Militärgeschichtliche Museum« (14 December 14 2001), p. 9.



*Stairs from the 3rd to the 2nd floor with the Politics and Violence exhibition area of the theme tour*

© MHM, David Brandt

Each human being is full of memories. But it is not only individuals who form a memory; communities do so as well. Commemorations, monuments, myths and rituals as well as the conjuration of *prominent* figures, items or historical events – all those material and spiritual places of remembrance form the close and complicated network that is the collective memory of a nation. Which places, events and people become central reference points in the collective memory and how does their significance change in the course of history up to the present? Where does remembrance begin and where does it fail because forgetfulness, for whatever reason, proves to be stronger?

Roller shelves are used to maintain technical order in archives. They are depot systems in which documents and items of the past are stored and kept. In this room, they are not only a piece of equipment; they also refer to the museum as an institution, one which derives its legitimacy from its aspiration of being the memory of mankind.

Each roller shelf contains 16 showcases with two always facing each other. Arranging exhibits face to face is a means of showing opposite views on a topic or contrasting different perspectives. It is also possible to present a theme in one showcase and to cover it in more depth in another or to present different aspects of the same topic in chronological order in both showcases.

The second floor will be dedicated to the topics of Military and Society and Politics and Force. Politics and force are not opposed to each other, but, on the contrary, require one another. The acquisition of power leads to the exercise of rule and the

military becomes the instrument of power and the organ of the executive. Symbols of power emphasize the sovereignty of the powerful. The topic of Politics and Force is primarily presented in paintings. The individual paintings are placed in the room in such a way as to create a kind of walk-in setting. This part of the exhibition is related to theater. The exhibits in this area are not just set up; they are staged and present the pictorial language of power and images of impotence. The extensive presentation covers the entire floor and touches on the other major topic on this floor, Military and Society, in terms of space and content.

The relations between the military and civilian worlds are manifold. The title Military and Society covers a wide range of topics, which offer a particularly vivid description of the close link between the two spheres. Models of military organization and military mentalities were used in the past as models for organizing other social areas, for example, large industrial enterprises or the school system.

The sub-topic of Military and Language not only deals with an inherent means of history and military history used to describe images of oneself and the enemy, to generate hatred, to express suffering and enthusiasm, to characterize the military, superiors, military service and fellow soldiers, but also the most direct medium used to issue orders and commands. Each army, each field of military experience, each war creates its own terminology. People integrate military terms into common parlance in order to *civilize* them or they use words in the present day that were picked up in a war situation, such as the German word *Gassenhauer*, which today means a popular song. Originally, *Gassenhauer* referred to a *landsknecht* (lansquenet), who used his sword to cut a path through the enemy's forces.

Another aspect of the Military and Language topic is the invention of embossed printing or Braille. It received a major impetus from the development of a military script that could be read at night – an invention by French artillery officer Charles Barbier.

The sub-topic of Military and Fashion begins with the *Heerpauke* (trunk hose), continues with the “Rheingrafenhose” (petticoat breeches) and the ornamental trimmings of the dolman, which come from bone ornaments, and goes all the way up to the sailor suit. It includes the invention of wrist watches and sunglasses during the First World War and today's Haute Couture. The origin of modern clothing is the military uniform. Many fashion classics have their origins in the military, like the T-shirt, trench coat, flight jacket and safari fashion. The wide distribution of fashionable clothing is based on the principle of standardized uniform production. In the 18th century, uniform tailors ushered in the pre-stage of the modern clothing industry by specifying four basic sizes, which enabled them to prepare their patterns for sewing. Today's industry basically relies on four sizes, namely S, M, L and XL, for developing a rational system for the mass production of clothing.

From time immemorial, what was originally military music, that is, signal music and military marches, has influenced the relevant musical culture of a period. To point out these connections is the purpose of another topic entitled Military and

Music. Songs, signals and marches have always accompanied military service. For centuries, military music in all its forms has accentuated the glory and misery of the military like no other medium, even more directly than the spoken and written word. Signals structured everyday service; they called soldiers to attack and withdraw; the music of bandsmen directed operations; and military music spurred troops on, chanting to their marching in step, helping them to suppress fear, raising their self-confidence, mocking the enemy, accentuating triumphs and accompanying defeats and mourning.

A fourth sub-section of the Military and Society topic is entitled War and Play. This area cuts through one of the six vertical showcases in the new building, which act as prismatic, cross-storey bracing cores for transferring the load of the reinforced concrete building. Exhibits are suspended in space, like the chairs of a merry-go-round from the 1950s, which are shaped like small miniature biplanes with miniature weapons – a predecessor of modern ego shooters from today's war in children's rooms. The 15-meter deep vertical showcase is bridged by a catwalk. A table showcase near the handrail contains exhibits showing the evolutionary history of war toys. At the end of the catwalk showcase, there is only one exhibit, a doll's house that was built in 1944 and belonged to an English girl. The girl lived in London and made her doll's house fit for war by blackening the windows, using gasmasks as beds for her children dolls and setting up a so-called Anderson shelter in the garden. By then at the latest, the real war had reached the child's room. The catwalk extends into another room of the museum where a V2 rocket from World War II is on display.



*War and Play exhibition area with merry-go-round chairs and historic staircase to the left of the soldiers in file*

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The three arms of the wedge on the first floor cover three topics: Formation of Bodies, Animals and the Military and Suffering from War. For centuries, the uniformed military body was the ideal of the ruling class. The principle of obedience of orders, the disciplined functioning of the individual within the whole body, was interpreted as a reflection of a prince's reign and God's divine order. Troop movements followed an almost artistic choreography whose original purpose was to improve the way in which war was fought. Today, the synchronized movements of troops on parade have a primarily symbolic meaning. They are supposed to demonstrate military discipline and governmental power. Through formation, civilians become soldiers. Drill and physical training enable them to fit into the military order and to be capable of performing military tasks. The forming of the body is accompanied by the forming of the mind. A 30-meter long table showcase that even cuts through a vertical showcase contains a line of exhibits starting from the induction order to complete military formation to the disbandment of the military body due to defeat and death. Running parallel to the table showcase, a Bavarian division of the First World War, comprising 13,000 perfect plastic soldiers and vehicles, is set up along one of the outer walls.

The second major subject on this floor is dedicated to the Military and Animals. Animals assist people in performing military tasks. Their names serve as designations and characterizations of military-technical products and are used as codenames in connection with secret operation plans, battle positions, bunkers and underground defense installations. The external appearance of animals is a model for camouflage painting of weapons, vehicles and equipment. They are commodity suppliers for the production of weapons, parts of weapons and uniforms and their ornamentation. Animals have been known to be used in military service since ancient times. Animals such as bears, elephants, donkeys, poisonous snakes, dogs, camels, oxen and horses have been used.

This area basically contains a kind of *catwalk* with 18 mounted specimens on display. These include an elephant, a dromedary from the former German colony of German-Southwest Africa, a mule that served in a Bundeswehr mountain infantry unit, and a lion, which was a symbol of power for the Egyptian pharaohs, who took lions into battle. At first glance, this collection of animals gives viewers the impression of a menagerie of unspoiled nature, a Noah's Ark of peaceful coexistence, but it does not bear a second one. Upon closer inspection, visitors discover that all the animals have a war attribute or injury. The horse is wearing a gas mask from the First World War; the sheep only has three legs because it was driven through minefields during the Falklands War; and a package of explosives is attached to the dog from the Second World War and was set to explode the moment the dog crawled under an enemy tank. The second impression reminds us more of a painting by Otto Dix, of the naked horror of war. A video display shows historical shots from a Wehrmacht laboratory during the Second World War. The shots show an experiment in which the effect of toxic gas is tested on a cat. The mortal agony of the animal gives us a



*V2 rocket in the Military and Technology exhibition area of the theme tour  
© MHM, David Brandt*

slight idea of the agonizing deaths human beings suffer. Eventually the results of the laboratory tests are implemented into the war of people – when it comes to physiological experiments, the laboratory is not called a theater of war for no reason.

The largest exhibit in the room is bigger than an elephant and it is not an animal, although it is named after one. A military helicopter with the French name *Alouette* (in English lark) is presented in a 12-meter deep vertical showcase. In the end, man

has copied nature and perfected it for his purposes in an attempt to conquer nature in its entirety.

In the third and central topic of the theme tour on the first floor, Suffering from War, human specimens are exhibited – an unusual step, even for a military history museum. While visitors think exhibits of that kind from the Napoleonic Wars are rather odd, but do not question their being exhibits, this kind of internal freedom no longer exists if such objects have a closer connection to the present. The world of the Napoleonic era seems to be very far away in contrast to, say, the Vietnam War and even more to the armed conflicts of the 1990s.

The permanent exhibition, for instance, displays so-called Waterloo teeth. These are teeth of young soldiers who died in the Napoleonic Wars. They were skillfully fitted into ivory plates and used as dentures for well-to-do people before suitable porcelain teeth were invented in 1840. Another exhibit of this kind originates from the First World War. It is the retained missile in the backbone of a soldier, who lived for another 47 years with this injury. This exhibit is displayed with other evidence of injury and death, of physical and moral suffering.

In handling specimens of human origin, it is a matter of course to maintain their human dignity. In addition, we have to especially consider the recommendations of the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States regarding the handling of specimens from the Nazi period.<sup>5</sup>

Particularly heavy exhibits will be on display on the ground floor, where the theme tour has the largest exhibition space, almost 1,200 sqm, and the greatest floor load. The close link between the military and civilian use of technical developments is explained to visitors in a wing entitled the Military and Technology. *Dual use*, the usability or use of technology for military and civilian purposes, is often the result of the conscious research objective of considering the potential military use of developments in the sponsoring of civilian research. On the other hand, there are a large number of military developments that have also been used for civilian purposes. The length of that relationship, although not without breaks, is particularly worth mentioning for the variety of opportunities for development and the close integration of the two areas in almost all fields of knowledge. It reveals the basic ambivalence of technology.

The exhibition tour starts with the *egg timer* which ticks in any time fuse, then continues with the bicycle, the military use of which was considered when it was

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5 | “The dignity of the human being must be kept in all activities regarding the preparation, keeping and presentation of specimens. The specimens must be treated with respect.”, quoted in: »Empfehlungen zum Umgang mit Präparaten aus menschlichem Gewebe in Sammlungen, Museen und öffentlichen Räumen« (2005), in: Der Präparator 51, p. 97. Cf. »Ständige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Verwendung medizinischer Präparate von Leichen von NS-Opfern.«, in: NS 112. AK. 25/26 January 1989.

first patented and tested in 1851 during the New Zealand War, and submarines, represented by the oldest preserved submersible in the world, and ends with rocket technology, which has been used for civilian and military purposes.

The topic of the Military and Technology also covers the close connection between the world of science and the military in the development of stimulants and intoxicants, the German armed forces during the Second World War serving as an example. In the period between April and July 1940, 32 million Pervitin tablets were given to Wehrmacht soldiers, the drug having been referred to as a *stimulant* to play down its risks. Today, Pervitin is better known as *ecstasy* and is widespread, above all in discos and the techno scene. Used straight, pressed in dextrose or mixed in chocolate, Pervitin suppresses fatigue and hunger, euphorizes and *refreshes*, replaces doubt and despair with aggressive, imperative confidence – until the reserves of the body are spent. Bomber pilots who remained in the air for 17 hours, submarine crews and child soldiers who after school manned the flak at night – they all used the *wonder drug*. To find the right dose for the *endsieg*, terrible experiments were conducted on concentration camp prisoners. After the end of the Second World War and the *Third Reich*, there was a pharmacological continuity – across all political borders: The NVA stored Pervitin for use in case of an emergency until it was disbanded in 1989, as did the Bundeswehr, at least up until the 1970s.

The topic of Protection and Destruction in the second wing of the ground floor deals with the competition between fire and stone, protective and destructive weapons throughout the centuries. Viewers should be confronted with the knowledge that there is no reliable protection from the destructive effect of weapons. This is particularly illustrated by a hail of bullets in the form of a ballistic curve which extends across several floors of the new building and is aimed at shelters and visitors on the ground floor of the theme tour. Exactly at this point, the artist Ingo Günther has simulated the most radical form of destruction, an atomic bomb explosion, using a strobe light, which temporarily etches visitors' shadows to a phosphoric wall for a few seconds – similar to the impressions from Hiroshima.

## CHRONOLOGY

Visitors to the museum find that the Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr is a two-in-one museum – and that they are guided in opposite directions. The theme tour in the new building goes from top to bottom and the chronological tour in the wings of the old buildings goes from bottom to top.

The second and largest exhibition area of the Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr, the Chronological Tour, presents the relationship between the military and society in Germany against the background of general history through the various periods starting from the late Middle Ages up to the present. Historical exhibitions thrive on the succession of events and the language of things. Certain main



*The Hiroshima. Thank You Instrument artistic intervention by Ingo Günther*  
© MHM, David Brandt

questions must be posed for chronology to become a mode of organization. Key questions pervade all the wings of the chronology area like loose, but coordinated threads supplementing each other, offering visitors the chance to take a fresh look at old items and topics. Although the main path is described by government actions and wars, the exhibition succeeds in overcoming the contrast between everyday history and political history without claiming to provide binding interpretations.

The chronological tour starts on the ground floor of the western wing of the old building with the period from the late Middle Ages to 1914. The exhibition is arranged on different levels and offers different depths of information. Three distinct elements or types of rooms, which are clearly different in terms of their architecture, make it easier for visitors to orient themselves on the chronological tour. A central path leads visitors through the periods in various sections. On a second level, the narrative is more extensive and the exhibits are smaller than on the main path. A third level is intended for in-depth rooms – places in which the visitors can pause, ask questions and find more subtle, detailed and additional information. According to Roland Barthes, the spatial concept represents an “architecture of information”<sup>6</sup> in contrast to the mere succession and addition of exhibits. One primary exhibit introduces each wing devoted to a period.

**6** | Roland Barthes (1988): *Das semiologische Abenteuer*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, p. 183.

The chronological tour starts in the western wing on the ground floor with the exhibition on the *Late Middle Ages to 1914*. This hall is subdivided into the periods of 1300–1500, 1500–1806, and 1806–1914.

The first cabinet in this wing is dedicated to the topic of Force in the Middle Ages. Visitors pass the mercenary and *landsknecht* (lansquenet) systems as well as the Peasants' War and reach the early modern times. The aim is that even hurried visitors, who do not enter each room, leave out the in-depth information and basically do not stray from the wide external tour around the chronological tour, are able to experience the characteristic features of a period. Three to four major topics in each wing of the old building are covered in the form of so-called talking pictures, which are directly connected to the external tour. They allow visitors to make an abbreviated tour through the periods and are arranged in impressive mnemonic devices, which ensure that visitors will remember them for a long time.

In contrast, the in-depth rooms are intended for visitors who want to take a close look at a particular period or who want to explore a topic in more detail. The first wing of the old building contains in-depth rooms on the following topics:

- Military Technology and Tactics from the 16th to the 19th Centuries
- The Economy of War from the 17th to the 19th Centuries
- The Military and Society: Structural Changes within the Military Society

The in-depth rooms are often further subdivided to allow different topics to be addressed. The in-depth room devoted to the Military and Society, for instance, includes the following areas:

- The development of standing armies and the stabilization of an international soldier market
- The enlightened soldier
- Everyday military life in a garrison
- The unity of civilian and military architecture and engineering.

The tour guides visitors through the Napoleonic Wars, the Revolution of 1848 and the Wars of German Unification to the Wilhelminian society of the pre-war era. This wing includes several highlights, for example, the oldest preserved female uniform in a German museum, which Prussian Queen Luise had made for her appointment as honorary colonel of the Prussian Dragon Regiment No 5 in 1806, or a uniform worn by a 21-year-old soldier in the Battle of Vellinghausen during the Seven Years' War. In the battle, the soldier lost his left arm to a French cannonball. Another highlight is a petition signed by around 250 soldiers from Rastatt in March 1848. The signing of a petition was very risky at the time. After the revolution failed, many of these soldiers were arrested and imprisoned for many years. The soldiers of the democratic



Entrance to the Napoleonic Wars cabinet  
© MHM, David Brandt

movement were not just soldiers, but also citizens. After the defeat of the democratic movement, these citizen-soldiers were forgotten. The last exhibit in this wing is the open gates of the *Reichsmarineamt* (German Naval Office). The former imperial *Reichsmarineamt* on the *Landwehrkanal* was the equivalent of a naval ministry and was the place where *Großadmiral* Tirpitz, acting on orders from Emperor Wilhelm II, began to systematically transform the formerly rather modest imperial navy into an instrument with which Germany could pursue its quest for world power in 1897. The main entrance doors of the building (which today houses the Federal Ministry of Defense in Berlin) opposite the *Landwehrkanal* have been replaced for security reasons. Adorned with maritime symbols, the doors emblemize the Empire's entrance into global politics, a step which eventually resulted in world war and defeats.

The core of the exhibition is surrounded by a continuous bench that offers visitors the chance to rest at any point of the exhibition. At the same time, this bench is used for electronic media in the form of interactive terminals offering a wide variety of additional information on the exhibition.

By lift or through the historical staircase, visitors reach the exhibition area devoted to the World War Era of 1914 to 1945. Recent historical research regards the period between 1914 and 1945 as a second 'Thirty Years' War, a renewed removal of constraints with regard to violence. A comparison of the forms, perceptions and effects of warfare in both World Wars is intended to draw visitors' attention to both the continuity as well as the differences and breaks between them.



*Central path through the 1914-1945 chronological wing with the main showcase on the First World War*  
 © MHM, David Brandt

Technologization and industrialization in the First World War changed the image of the soldier. “An entire generation is brutalized” (Hannah Arendt) in the trench warfare and the continuous barrage on the Western Front. The course of the war on that front is depicted just as comprehensively as that of the so-called Forgotten War in the East and in the colonies as well as of the air and naval wars. The United States’ entry into the war and the failure of the German spring offensives of 1918 were the beginning of the end of the fighting. The in-depth rooms show the different faces of war, including topics such as death and injury, captivity and propaganda, war behind the front, the war economy, the employment of women, military technology and tactics. The in-depth showcases on the First World War extend over more than 30 meters. Across from them are the in-depth topics of the Second World War, which allow visitors to make a direct comparison. This elongated room with its parallel rows of showcases can be entered from either period. Visitors enter the history of events and politics of the Second World War through the first post-war period of 1918. In the Weimar Republic, people had ensconced themselves in peace for a short time, but this period was only a reprieve in which concepts were developed on how it would be possible to still win the First World War. The National Socialists’ policy of finding a way to revise the Treaty of Versailles, if necessary by risking an armed conflict, met with support among many classes of society. The policy of revision changed smoothly into an unrestricted policy of conquest. With the attack on Poland on 1 September 1939, the German Reich triggered the Second World War.

While the First World War had been a war between nations and peoples, the Second World War, under Nazi rule, was a war based on racial ideology. The Wehrmacht reached its moral low in the war with its indirect and direct participation in the genocide of the Jewish population.

From 1939 on, Hitler spoke openly of their *extermination*. Already deprived of their rights and under pressure to emigrate, Jewish citizens became the target of arbitrary murder campaigns, which gradually became systematic. After the launch of Operation Barbarossa, special murder squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) of the SS conducted pogroms against Jewish people on Soviet soil, just as they had done in Poland. They started by shooting mainly men, but they began killing women and children in autumn 1941. The Wehrmacht assisted them in this. After it had been decided to wipe out the Jewish population entirely, the organizational procedures for this were discussed at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Under the codename *Operation Reinhard*, the SS set up death camps containing gas chambers and crematoria in Poland, in which millions of Jewish people were murdered and burned. Those who were fit were initially forced to work in the armaments industry (*extermination through labor*). By the end of 1942 the *Einsatzgruppen* had murdered between one and two million Jewish inhabitants in the areas behind the front. A total of around six million European Jews fell victim to the genocide by the end of the war.

The opposite wing of the first floor houses the period from 1945 to the present. Visitors are led through the immediate post-war period into the bipolar world of the Cold War and the years when both German armies – the Bundeswehr and the National People's Army – were set up. A good deal of space is devoted to the history of the Bundeswehr. The subjects covered in the in-depth rooms are not only the new model of the citizen in uniform and the concept of *Innere Führung* (military leadership and civic education), but also the difficult process of establishing traditions and everyday life in barracks. The political chronicle covers the period from the heyday of the Cold War through the 1960s, when the readiness for détente and arms limitations increased, until the 1980s, when the Cold War reached another peak after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the NATO dual track decision. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two German states marked the beginning of the history of the new Bundeswehr.

The structural reforms of the Bundeswehr after 1990 are the answer to the challenges faced by the reunified and sovereign Germany in view of the new security situation that evolved after the end of the Cold War. Since the civil war in the former Yugoslavia and the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court of 1994 on the conditions upon which the Bundeswehr could be employed, the armed forces have increasingly been assigned "out of area" tasks. The first mission the Bundeswehr was ordered to accomplish under war conditions after the end of the Second World War in Kosovo is just as much a topic as the discussion it sparked in society. The employment of German soldiers in humanitarian, crisis management, peace enforcement and stabilization operations, which is meanwhile generally possible all over

the world, has become a tool of German foreign and security policy. The increased dangers for Bundeswehr soldiers are a consequence of this.

The exhibition depicts this changed situation by a Wolf vehicle that has been damaged in an attack in Afghanistan. The Arab text on the German flag of the vehicle is a symbol of the globalization of Bundeswehr operations and its risks. Integrated into multinational structures and committed to upholding the values set out in the United Nations Charter, the Bundeswehr is now, after several structural reforms, in a process of permanent transformation in order to adapt to the continuously changing situation – the reality of mission objectives and operational conditions.

The last exhibition area of the chronological tour is entitled *Challenges of the 21st Century*. It addresses topics like the experience of violence and human rights, security policy after the end of the East-West confrontation, conflicts about resources, pacification wars, but also international jurisdiction and a modern concept of peace, which also includes protecting and preserving the environment. Ladders from the border fence of the Spanish exclaves on African soil, Ceuta and Melilla, are both fragile symbols of hope and symbols of the separation between the south and north, between the poor and rich. At the end of the tour, visitors reencounter techniques reminding them of the Middle Ages, the simple wooden ladder, used by people to overcome the high-tech fortress Europe, often on a desperate flight from poverty and misery.

Traditions, convictions and exercises have formed conventions in museum presentations. Characteristic forms of arranging exhibitions have been developed for each type of museum. The Deutscher Museumsbund (German Museums Association) has assigned military history museums to the technology museum category. A typical feature of this category is the tendency to classify presentations of objects with typological classes and subclasses.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the museum presentation consists of rows of objects organized according to function and size, which sometimes reminds us of multi-level parking garages. Within this structure, there is little space for the whole range of military history.

The permanent exhibition of the new Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr is an attempt to break free of conventional museum presentations by permitting forms of presentations that are rather unusual for collections of military and technical items as well as traditional chronological tours. The habits by which people view museum exhibits are broken right from the beginning because – for example – all the exhibits, even extremely large and heavy items of equipment, are presented on a display belt hovering 50 cm above the floor. Although the showcases are primarily raised to ensure an even temperature in the old building, the display belt also supports the story line of the chronological tour. Even heavy weapons become part of the story and are not reduced to their technical data. Their apparently

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7 | Cf. Jana Scholze (2004): *Medium Ausstellung, Lektüren musealer Gestaltung* in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin: Bielefeld, pp. 12 and 27.

objective treatment as purely technical objects and their presentation to visitors at eye level can prompt visitors to develop a sense of familiarity and closeness with the major exhibits, thereby leading them away from the intended story. The only real way to get in touch with the past is to maintain a critical distance to it. The elevation of the exhibits gives us a sense of distance from the objects, which are presented in a way that reminds us of an autopsy table or an anatomical microscope, allowing us to acquire a better understanding of the materiality or specific characteristics of the items or of the way in which they have been damaged.

Sparsely, but brightly furnished, the rooms devoted to the chronological tour are committed to traditional museum aesthetics. The presentation materials, such as showcase equipment, pedestals and movable walls, are unobtrusive in their appearance so as to highlight the objects and are limited to displaying and protecting the exhibits. Unlike many exhibitions of museums of technology and army museums, the presentation means used here do not play a part in communicating the contents of the exhibition.

The traditional chronological narrative contains the majority of around 10,000 objects, documents and pictures displayed in the interior of the building.

## OUTSIDE AREAS AND A WALK-IN DISPLAY DEPOT

The outside areas are display areas as well. The area next to the western wing is dedicated to the history of the Bundeswehr and the NVA from 1955 to 1990. In addition to armored reconnaissance vehicles, tank destroyers, main battle tanks and armored infantry fighting vehicles are on display.

The area adjacent to the eastern wing of the old building displays the technical equipment the Bundeswehr has used in the out-of-area missions in which it has participated since 1990. Important examples for mission reality are camps, patrols and engineer support for the local civilian populations. Since the end of the bipolar Cold War world, the topic of global military challenges and relief missions supported by German armed forces has become a constant subject of public discussion. Therefore, soldiers on deployment are also a symbol for a new development in recent German military history.

The framework concept of the museum favors a close connection between changing and permanent exhibitions. The Historical Military Museum of the Bundeswehr does not define itself exclusively through its permanent exhibition, but equally through its changing exhibitions. For this reason, the ground floor houses a large hall for changing exhibitions, with excellent conditions for conservation and security.

The walk-in display depot in the listed building on the northern side of the main arsenal building will be opened at a later date; the majority of the large and heavy exhibits will be on display there.

Such a large number of objects of this kind can be displayed neither in the old building nor in the Libeskind wedge. Instead they will be presented in a large scale depot space. It is, so to speak, the large in-depth area for the topic of the Military and Technology and, like a study collection, offers a wide range of demonstration material and possibilities for comparison for those interested in the history of technology. One advantage of the new permanent exhibition is the chance it offers firm expectations both regarding the perspectives adopted towards military history and the presentation of it under question.

The museum would like to open rooms for thought and sees itself as a forum both for dealing with military history, and for discussing the role of war and the military in the past, present and future.