

# The Bomb and the City: Presentations of War in German City Museums

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The aim of the following paper is to offer some insight into the design of permanent exhibitions of local history dealing with the Second World War. Over the last few years, I have had the opportunity to visit and document over 40 history exhibitions as part of a research project concerning “The Presentation of the Years 1933–45 in German Historical Museums”. It is far from the case that all the exhibitions focused solely on the Second World War. With a growing amount of material, I was able to create a canon from a wide variety of different exhibitions. Specific exhibits belonged to this canon, but so did specific subjects of the museum’s narrative and constantly reoccurring subject matter.

Among the objects, there are the “Volksempfänger” radio receiver, insignia and medals of Nazi organizations, bombs and gas masks as well as converted, improvised tools of the post-war period. Subjects that appear in the exhibitions, besides Hitler and other politicians, are Wehrmacht soldiers, Hitler Youths, the so-called “Trümmerfrauen”, and ethnic German refugees from Eastern Europe. Connected with these are topics such as the suffering of the civilian population and their spirit of resistance against the Nazis, the “dark chapter” of German history, or the practical ingenuity of the Germans in times of hardship.

The research, which was supervised by the literary scholar Prof. Aleida Assmann (Constance) and the historian Prof. Rosmarie Beier-de Haan (Berlin), is driven by questions concerning remembrance and memory research as well as the politics of history. For that reason, in the following analysis of the exhibitions, the focus shall be on the interpretive space emerging from the presentation.

As is the case when examining texts or films, the exhibition shall be understood to be a medium which can be interpreted with regard to its many layers of information and connotation. Its statements emerge from the interplay of objects, images, light and color, text, sounds, and spatial *mise en scènes*. Usually, the individual object in an exhibition is ascribed the role of serving as a material condensation of the topic. Depending upon the manner of presentation, one single statement from all the various ones is emphasized while others are hidden. Additionally, the objects

displayed can and are intended to provoke emotions on the part of visitors. Within the contexts of this conference and its central question, “Does War Belong in Museums?”, the following shall focus on a single object from the canon: the bomb. Many local history museums in Germany possess an undetonated bomb from the Second World War, which they present to visitors in their permanent exhibitions in various contexts and settings.

Not least in connection with the success of Jörg Friedrich’s book “The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945” (2002)<sup>1</sup>, and the anniversaries of the bombings of various German cities, and the media presence of children of the war and German refugees, the topic of “aerial war” has been controversially discussed in the public discourse, revolving around issues such as historical responsibility, guilt and exoneration.<sup>2</sup> Intensified by the “Year of Commemoration 2005”, 60 years after the end of the war, German history museums, on the occasion of local anniversaries of aerial bombardment by the Allies, prepared special exhibitions on the topic, for example, in Duisburg, Dresden, Osnabrück, and Freiburg. The object of “the bomb” thus acquired a new symbolic charge.

The bomb is usually displayed in sections dealing with the topics of the Second World War, aerial defense, and destruction by aerial bombardment. Those are topics that obviously have the greatest importance for the history of a city. For the urban population of the time, this period is obviously a formative part of their lives, and the bomb’s place in the museum’s narrative is that of a “pars pro toto” for a specific scene in the city’s history.

## THREE FORMS OF PRESENTATION

It was found that there were various, typologically comprehensible, stylistic means of exhibiting the bombs. In the museum literature, these forms of presentation are sometimes grouped into three categories, which can also be applied to the example of the bomb. These are documentation, *mise en scène* and ensemble. In order to provide an idea of the different variations, an outline of each shall be given including examples and a few pictures for the purposes of illustration.

### 1. Documentation

The first style would be the classic, chronological documentation. At first glance, this would appear to be a sober method of presentation, focused on the facts, with textual and pictorial material, for example on simple wall partitions, in which authentic objects are presented on platforms or in glass display cases. This form of presentation

1 | Jörg Friedrich (2002): *Der Brand*, Munich: Propyläen Verlag.

2 | Lothar Kettenacker (2003) (ed.): *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940–1945*, Berlin: Rowohlt.

has a tendency to be scant and de-sensitized. It makes its arguments with words, pictures, and quotations rather than with “atmosphere”. The fundamental critique of this form made by museologists is that history is not made perceptible to the visitors’ senses. In the City Museum of Halle (Saale), the heavy exhibit “bomb” is displayed on a very low platform. Behind it, on a simple wall partition, are photos of well-known destroyed buildings and the label “American explosive bomb, 250 pounds.”



*Figure 1: Museum Halle (Saale), “American explosive bomb, 250 pounds”*

A similar, altar-like presentation of a bomb is found in the City Museum Weimar (Bertuchhaus). There, the bomb is also displayed according to the same, seemingly redundant principle: on a small pedestal in front of a black wall partition. In this case, however, the textual material on the partition pertains to the final stand-or-die order of the Nazi leadership.

Incidentally, when it comes to the topic of the Nazis, the dominant color arrangement in German history exhibitions is black, red, and white. This generates a matter-of-fact seriousness, which amplifies that which is often referred to as “the dark chapter of German history.”

The technical, sober descriptive text explains that the bomb is a “250 pound GP bomb.” The English abbreviation “GP = general purpose bomb” is translated into German, and the specialist firm from which the museum obtained the bomb is named.

In the permanent exhibition of the Focke Museum in Bremen, the bomb is presented sitting alone on a simple pedestal. The label reads: “One of forty-one-

thousand-six-hundred-and-twenty-nine.” The audio guide plays the sound of air raid sirens for five minutes.

How do these narratives of the “bomb war” in these three presentations now differ in terms of the documentary category?

The grand object in each case stands alone, emphasized in the foreground, exhibited with a certain ceremoniousness. A special meaning is apparently attributed to it. However, more decisive is the context. In connection with the “exhibited sound” in Bremen, the presentation can have the effect of stirring up emotion. If visitors can make a mental connection between the bomb and the piercing alarm, they can empathize with the situation characterized by menace, danger, and the fear of death in which the “population of Bremen” found itself during the war. The labeling of the object, by noting the number of bombs dropped in words rather than figures, intensifies this impression of the bombs’ inescapable mass and enormous aggression. In Halle, the presentation of the bomb is followed by the next section of the exhibition, marked by a large banner with the inscription “Halle baut auf” (“Halle Builds”). The narrative of the museum thus makes a seamless transition from war to reconstruction, an important element not only in the founding myth of the GDR. Only the Weimar exhibition, by presenting the stand-or-die order issued by the Nazi leadership, makes a connection between German policies and Allied warfare. It makes an argument for the unreasonableness of the party leadership, who plunged “the people”, that is to say the “Weimarer”, into misery, since this attitude led to the prolonged bombardment of the city. This argumentation is problematic to the extent that it seeks to locate responsibility with “the Nazis”, while at the same time suppressing the fighting spirit of the “Volksgemeinschaft”.

## 2. Mise en scène

Correspondingly, the second form of presentation, *mise en scène*, seeks access by means of a stronger emotionalization. Rooms are elaborately designed in a scenographic manner with a diverse use of media such as colorful materials, true-to-life figurines, lighting, film pictures, sound, etc. The aim here is to offer visitors the possibility to emotionally immerse themselves in the events and to “experience” them. In this form of presentation, the event character of the exhibition has priority over the pure conveyance of facts. As a result of their aesthetic character or their “sensuous quality of impression”, as Korff and Roth say, the authentic objects are ascribed “a stimulative value beyond the value of the object which makes them suitable in a particular way for historical experiences”.<sup>3</sup> In the exhibitions from which the following examples are taken, the object is recontextualized, that is to say, it is staged in

**3** | Gottfried Korff/Martin Roth (1990): »Einleitung«, in: Gottfried Korff/Martin Roth, (eds.): *Das historische Museum. Labor, Schaubühne, Identitätsfabrik*, Frankfurt a.M./ New York: Campus, pp. 9–37.

its supposed former context of use. The statements thus produced, gradually distinguish themselves from one another.

Relatively frequently, the bomb is staged directly after its impact, for example, in the City Museum of Münster.



Figure 2: City Museum of Münster, relief with a depiction of children

Here, the bomb lies between two sections of walls from famous buildings, which are named. It is not mere coincidence that a relief with a depiction of children is chosen here. Children, as per se innocent, strengthen the impression of the vulnerability and the victim status of the city in general.

The mise en scène is similar in Rostock. We are presented here with a gas mask, an air safety helmet, and the grate of an air raid shelter. “Psst!” is part of a propaganda poster that warns: “Psst! Der Feind hört mit!” (“Psst! The enemy is listening!”)

The mise en scènes constantly attempt to create an impression of authenticity, to create a scenery as it must have existed right after the attack: the (undetonated) bomb lies amid ruins, broken construction beams, or as is the case, for example, in the Cologne City Museum, between the ashen remains of walls and broken insignia of Nazi rule such as the imperial eagle, swastika, etc. This presentation of objects aims to create an emotional effect and to set a cognitive process in motion by means of a spatial and bodily experience.

As Dr. Gorch Pieken has shown in his work, the Dresden Military History Museum also works with this spatial and bodily experience, as it is very strong in the architecture of Daniel Libeskind. The emotional effect is reinforced through



Figure 3: Museum Kröpeliner Tor Rostock, “Psst! The enemy is listening!”

performative installations, in which the bombing raid can be re-experienced in a reconstructed air raid shelter with wailing sirens and shaking walls, for example, in the special exhibition “Bombs on Duisburg – The Air War and City, 1940–1960” or in the hands-on exhibition “The Story of Berlin”. The Imperial War Museum in London follows this manner of *mise en scène* in its well-known spectacular walk-in presentation of the “Blitz”.

The focus of the *mise en scène* of the bomb “during” the bomb attacks is laid upon the history of violence, human victims and material destruction. But a distinction must also be made here concerning the meaning ascribed to the object through other presented objects and texts. The scenes of ruin and the photo series of other museums, to some extent, refer to buildings as “victims” and implicitly attribute responsibility either to “the Nazis” or the Allies. Implicit because at this point the political preconditions, namely the war and planned genocide begun and executed by the Germans, remain neglected in these narratives. By means of this, the door is left open for the interpretation that the Allied bombing was not a reaction to something, but rather was an act of pure aggression. Here, there is a recognizable emphatic reference to the discourse of victimhood that exists outside of museums.

### 3. Ensemble

A third formal category is that of the ensemble, in which both artistic means of design and substantive fragmentation are employed. A consciously arranged, often collage-like combination of objects opens up a space for making associations. In the

best case scenario, this can lead visitors to create new mental associations within already familiar material and offer food for thought. In the worst case scenario, it leaves visitors alone with the crudest and most traditional interpretive patterns. In the case of the history of the Second World War, a conflict arises from the necessity for the institution of the museum to take a concrete position and the usual notion of “responsible visitors”, who are capable of thinking for themselves and thus achieving historical insight. Some well-intended elaborate designs can thus end up being too demanding in terms of content.

As the last section of this paper intends to show, the Bielefeld Historical Museum deals with the causes and conditions of the Allied bombing and an attempt is made to depict the destruction in a sophisticated way. The presentation there constitutes a hybrid category, in which substantive arguments are made, but the presentation is designed in an artistic and fragmented way.



*Figure 4: Bielefeld Historical Museum, Bomb over Model of Ruins*

The bomb hangs threateningly, as if in the moment of being dropped, over a crooked model of the ruins of Bielefeld installed in the room. This model was created in the 1980s. There are similar models in a number of city history museums, for example, in Nuremberg, Hamburg, Münster, and Frankfurt am Main. Some of them emerged right after the war, with the goal of documenting the damage wrought by the war and as an aid in the discussion concerning the ways and means of reconstruction.

In the foreground, additional color photographs are exhibited, which were taken during or shortly after the attacks. The bomb is contextualized under the rubric of “arms production” and accompanied by metal working machines and corresponding

text. Under the headline, “The Bombing of Bielefeld”, visitors learn that one of the goals of the air attacks, the destruction of the arms industry, was only partially achieved. The Americans and British particularly wanted to disrupt the course of production in the arms factories. But usually, according to the text, the air attacks inflicted minimal damage.

The ensemble, which both dramatizes and alienates, is also deployed by the curators of the Museum for Hamburg History. In the introductory text, “Under the Rule of the Nazis”, one finds among other passages the following:

“Since 1939, the citizens of Hamburg have been affected by the Second World War in a number of ways: men died as Wehrmacht soldiers, the supply situation in the city deteriorated increasingly, but above all else the inhabitants suffered from the numerous bomb attacks.”

The dominant object in the section dealing with the nocturnal “firestorm” of 1943 is an impressive, large bomb lying on the ground on a very low pedestal. The



Figure 5: Museum for Hamburg History, “Firestorm”

“firestorm” is additionally symbolized by the design of the room with blue light and yellow and red accents.

Leaning next to the bomb, in a corner, is the emergency exit window of a British airplane, and the display text commenting “Was the crew able to save itself?”. Now does this question express concern for the Allied “liberators” or for the fate of the “enemy”?



Figure 6: City Museum of Siegburg, “Cultural window-shopping”

Usually, in presentations of city history, the suffering of the German civilian population, or more exactly, the “Volksgemeinschaft”, is always placed front and center. Changes of perspective of this kind are rare. Jewish victims are, if at all, usually named in separate sections, as if both histories did not overlap.

The last example to be considered here concerns the City Museum of Siegburg, in which the bomb is presented in a kind of “display window”, along with a “home air raid first aid kit”, the helmet of an air raid warden, a silver barrier tape (used to disrupt enemy radar) and in the background a vertical aerial shot of the bombed city. Here, visitors are confronted with an ensemble without accompanying text or commentary. The sociologist Heiner Treinen’s concept of “cultural window-shopping”<sup>4</sup>, which is often similar to a museum visit and in which the hoped-for educational effect is limited, imposes itself here. Similar to the Hamburg presentation, the bomb has a dominant presence, but the spectrum of possible interpretations is intentionally left wide open.

The reference to the topic of air defense and war via the arrangement of the objects is visible, but the broad field of meaning of life in war is only accessible to some of the visitors, namely the older ones. Without commentary, the objects on display cannot be understood, because they do not stem from the visitors’ living experience.

4 | Heiner Treinen, (1988): »Was sucht der Besucher im Museum?«, in: Gottfried Fliedl (ed.): *Museum als soziales Gedächtnis? Kritische Beiträge zu Museumswissenschaft und Museumspädagogik*, Klagenfurt, pp. 24–41.

The confrontation with the “foreign” or “alien”, one of the greatest potentials of the museum, which operates with material artifacts, is squandered here with regard to learning history and knowledge of historical connections.

The “experience” of the museum visit is reduced to a purely aesthetic one. Left without a statement and emphatic positioning on the part of the curators, the wordless presentation of the bomb in front of the aerial view of the destroyed city can congeal into an accusation leveled at the Allies.

Something emerges which the research group around Harald Welzer, currently involved in research on intra-family communication, would describe as “empty speech.” What Welzer makes clear is that it is precisely this “empty speech” which characterizes inter-generational dialogue about the “Third Reich.” He very plausibly works out how principal players (mostly the perpetrators) remain without contours. Historical events are described only in outline, so that it remains unclear what the actual point is and the events appear almost harmless. “Empty speech” consists in the indeterminate nature of the historical process, which is dealt with in an associative and indirect way. Thus, listeners are left to fill in the empty spaces with their own assumptions, in order to assign meaning to what the speakers say.<sup>5</sup>

## SUMMARY

As we have seen, the way in which the bomb is presented and contextualized, as an object in the thematic field of the bombing of German cities, spans the spectrum of meaning from “witness of the authentic moment” to a symbolically inflated piece of evidence for accusing the Allies.

This paper has attempted to show that either the bomb, despite all supposed sobriety, is elevated to the status of a sacred object in order to emphasize the suffering of the victims, in this case, primarily members of the “Volksgemeinschaft”, or the bomb is presented in such a way that visitors are introduced to the historical situation in as wide-reaching a way as possible. Here, the suffering of German victims is also placed in the foreground. The illusion that history can be “experienced” in retrospect stubbornly remains.

A third, rarer variant attempts to shed light on the historical connections from multiple perspectives and make them understandable to visitors. This is effectively supported by an unusual design breaking with conventional expectations.

Without wishing to speculate on the conscious or subconscious dispositions of the exhibition curators, many elements can be recognized, which illustrate how complicated it is to maintain the balancing act between the claim of museums to

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**5** | Harald Welzer/Sabine Moller/Karoline Tschuggnall (2002): “Opa war kein Nazi”. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis, Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, p. 158.

convey knowledge about history in an enlightened manner while nonetheless, in light of the “negative history”, offering positive possibilities for identification. Although a politically correct style of speech has made inroads into most museums, for example, in the way that various groups that fell victim to the Nazis are named, the main effort seems to be directed at generating a distanced, distancing “pacified” narrative, which is not uncommonly apologetic as well.

Thus, it can be said that war belongs in museums, above all, in city history exhibitions and in all sincerity. Although there is still much research to be done in this area, numerous conversations overheard between older visitors lead us to believe that the level of identification with local history and emotional involvement are very high. Visitors seek and find parts of their own life histories in the museum. They often use the exhibition as an occasion to pass on family history facing the displays. In Duisburg, in connection with the tours through the war exhibition, a regular coffee table discussion was set up in order to “intercept” the emotionally stirred-up visitors and to offer them a casual opportunity for conversation.

To concur with Aleida Assmann, war belongs in museums if for no other reason than the fact that it is part of the collective memory of cities and a generation-spanning part of many biographies. Assmann cautions against marginalizing this part of the traumatic history. Fear and mourning also need their space, otherwise inner resistance to dealing with the topic of war will be an expectable and understandable reaction.

*Translated by Alex Locascio*

