Exhibiting the War. Approaches to World War II in Museums and Exhibitions

OLA SVEIN STUGU

Traditionally, war exhibitions have functioned as media for officially sanctioned narratives of sacrifice and victory. After World War II new kinds of exhibitions have developed, balancing between moral messages and research-based narratives. What does this development mean for the role of museums in shaping historical consciousness?

Museums are among the most important institutions molding historical consciousness in modern society. Through the ways of selecting and editing which past is worthy of being presented in exhibitions, museums convey values, concepts and thought models not only as orienting tools for the present, but also as guidelines for future action. During later decades historical museums in general have undergone substantial changes within the ways of representing and presenting the past. In accordance with this, approaches to war in museums and exhibitions staged in other institutional settings have also changed. Yet these changes should not only be understood in the light of developments within the museum institution itself but also in accordance with changing focuses in reflections and interpretations of the war. This article aims at exploring and discussing these changes in light of recent theory of memory, identity and uses of history.

In the grand narratives of the great historical museums from the middle of the 19th century and onwards, war, as a rule, was depicted as an integral, sometimes unavoidable part of shaping and securing the state. The national museums were to a large degree public institutions with manifest missions to serve the nation and support hegemonic na-

tional narratives of the time. The greatness of the nation demanded great deeds from its sons (and from time to time even from its daughters), and museum exhibitions were designed to install pride and patriotism in their visitors. War exhibitions, with their narratives of us and them, heroes and villains, bravery and pride, were particularly well suited for this purpose. Exhibitions with a more specific military focus usually contained weapons, uniforms and banners, while exhibited pieces of art illustrated heroism and sacrifices for the good, worthy cause. The enemy was usually one-dimensional, and on several occasions cruelty and a breach of the code of honorable conduct on behalf of the enemy were displayed as a means to boost morale and strengthen identity on one's own side.

The enemy was not necessarily shown as evil or treacherous. If he had fought bravely or behaved chivalrously, he was respected, sometimes even admired, like the position of the confederate commander-in-chief Robert E. Lee within the narratives of the victorious side of the American Civil War. Nevertheless, the distinction between friend and foe was always clear, and the behavior of one's own side was hardly ever questioned.

Following World War I, the experiences of the trenches also made exhibitions focus on the fate of the ordinary soldiers, but whereas the absurdity and cruelty of the slaughter became a central topic in scholarly debate as well as in literary fiction, museums rarely managed to integrate these aspects of war in their exhibitions. This may partly be ascribed to the fact that most museums focused on collecting and preserving artifacts of the war and cared less for the themes of history, which did not manifest itself materially. But it may also be seen as a continuation of the understanding of museums as patriotic institutions with an educational mandate to help produce good, loyal citizens, prepared to bring new sacrifices for their country.

After World War II, the one-dimensional friend and foe narratives are still to be found in quite a few museums. The overall picture, however, has become much more ambiguous and inconsistent. New themes and topics have found their way into exhibitions, even at official national institutions, and most museums no longer consider themselves obliged to prop up national identities and master narratives. This does not mean that the main trend in these institutions has been a turn to challenging the established narratives, but public discussions about the war have unavoidably left deep imprints also within the museum world. War exhibitions no longer restrict themselves to telling narratives of the past, they have also become arenas for discussing abuse of human rights at

large as well as other moral dilemmas. These tendencies are most clearly seen in Germany, but can be noticed in other nations too.

To clarify these processes of change, some basic questions concerning the presentation of historical knowledge and insights have to be asked: To which degree do exhibitions present authoritative master narratives of events in contrast to open ended, discussing approaches? How much is still to be seen of the classical identity-based contents? How do exhibitions answer the challenge of finding a balance between the ideals of the research community of critical, non-partisan investigation and discussion on the one hand and the aim to educate and to convey basic values on the other? Are there significant differences between exhibitions aiming at different audiences and target groups? Are there important differences in the form of exhibitions and how does this relate to their contents? This last dimension above all considers the difference between object-based exhibitions where collected items are central and concept-based exhibitions where attention is focused on messages, regardless of whether there are artifacts or other objects at hand to illustrate and underline the narrative and message told within the exhibition. (Dean 1996: 4pp.)

Below I will broadly distinguish between two main types of war exhibitions, the first one communicating national narratives much in line with traditional historical museums, and an alternative one, basing focus and activities on universal values, usually including human rights and adherence to an open, democratic society. What separates the two types of exhibitions is the character of the values they support and wish to convey. This means that within both types one may find exhibitions following high academic standards as well as exhibitions where the message overrules research-based conclusions.

A brief note also needs to be added on what is meant by a museum. Museums are usually regarded as places containing and exhibiting material artifacts and objects. This is reflected e.g. in the definition of a museum approved by The International Council of Museums, which defines a museum as a: "a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment" (Ambrose/Pain 2006: 8). This definition excludes museum-like institutions of research and education-producing exhibitions that are to a large degree concept-based. In my discussions, however, these institutions will play an important role, not least because they often serve declared educational purposes and defined universal values.

Therefore they have at least implicitly been forced to deal with the question of the historical consciousness of their visitors.

The patriot narrative

After World War II, the patriot master narrative of fighting, hardships and sacrifices for the country, liberty and other good causes is well represented in war exhibitions. The point of view is normally clearly partisan, presenting "our own, our parents' and our grandparents' war". For obvious reasons narratives of this type are normally to be found on the victorious side. However, they differ from earlier patriot narratives by not glorifying the own nation's victories as the main achievement of the war. Instead, as a rule, they legitimize the war efforts as a fight for justice and honorable general values against dictatorship, oppression, injustice and the inhumanity and barbarism of the enemy.

The Norwegian Resistance Museum, situated at Akershus fortress in Oslo, is a paradigmatic example of this master narrative approach. The museum is also a research institution with extended educational activities, centering on the main exhibition of the museum, which has been left largely unchanged since its establishment in the early 1970s. The exhibition tells an unambiguous story of invasion and collaboration, resistance and victory, heroes and villains with limited space for alternative perspectives, questions and discussions. The narrative is very much in line with the way in which war history has been presented in history textbooks during most of the post-war period, and it may easily be considered an authoritative version of the national Norwegian war narrative. The exhibition builds upon thorough scholarly research, and, apart from questionable omissions of allied activities in sections of the exhibition covering the prelude to the German invasion, it is difficult to raise serious objections against the treatment of any of the subjects. Above all, what makes this exhibition an orchestrated master narrative is the way in which themes and events have been chosen, highlighted and linked together by help of an authoritative, undisputable mode of presentation.[1]

Without doubt the best known Western European master narrative museum is the Imperial War Museum, founded in 1920 to commemorate British participation in the First World War and to collect items connected to the war effort. It gradually developed into a general museum of war during the 20th century, and might be seen to epitomize the grand

1 http://www.mil.no/felles/nhm/start/Utstillingen/#= Personal visits, latest March 2009.

museum of national standing taking great pride in its collections. The museum announces on its website:

"Chronicling the history of conflict from the First World War to the present day, the Museum's vast collections range from tanks and aircraft to photographs and personal letters as well as films, sound recordings and some of the twentieth century's best-known paintings."[2]

Since its first years, the museum has shifted the focus from its original nationalistic perspectives to a more distanced, scholarly approach with a broad appeal, not least to schools. Recently the museum has tried to reinvent itself by adding a Holocaust exhibition and a specially commissioned film on human rights violations. But the main impression of the major parts of the museum is still that of solid, traditional presentations, well founded in historical research, but virtually devoid of surprises and challenges for reflection. This does not mean that the exhibitions are value-free. The underlying message of the whole institution is to showcase the British army as a necessary tool in defending the country, the British way of life and the values of the British political system, but also to emphasize the central role of Britain in the total war effort. Regarding World War II, there is a clear tendency in the exhibitions to overestimate the British contribution to victory compared to that of the Soviet Union.

The message of a museum is not only derived from its contents, but also from the form in which the contents are being presented, which may be illustrated by the recently opened northern branch of the Imperial War Museum in Salford (Manchester).[3] "For all its audiovisual innovation and striking building, this is a very traditional museum of the history of warfare in the twentieth century," the British philosopher Beth Lord writes in an analysis of the museum and continues:

"The museum is organized around a timeline which runs along its walls, with relevant objects arranged near the key dates. The objects illustrate the points on the timeline and fit neatly into the chronology. The space is punctuated by 'silos' using objects to illustrate big concepts that don't fit neatly into the chronology: propaganda, women at war and so on. In traditional style, the visitor moves through time as he or she moves through the museum, following the trajectory and development of the twentieth century through its wars […]" (Lord 2007: 360)

2 http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.182. Accessed 10/20/08. Most of the analysis is based on this large, well organized site.

3 Personal visit January 2005

This kind of display, according to Lord, "arguably […] is a good way of communicating a long and complex history in a short time and small space" (Lord 2007: 360). But presenting history in this way as a fixed and continuous line where one may mount events and objects is also a way of conceiving history as a kind of stable objection-free totality.

This way of presenting history may be well in accordance with deep-rooted traditions in British museums. According to Tony Bennett "the British past was largely shaped through the commemoration of military exploits of empire, a tendency that was equally strong in France" (Bennet 1995: 137). This marks a contrast to another preservationist philosophy, which originated in Scandinavia, but also adopted in the United States, in which material objects of folk culture were assigned historical significance. This argument may explain differences in the main profiles of the national museums, but not the specific features of war exhibitions, where the Norwegian resistance museum seems to have much more in common with British institutions than with other historical museums within the Norway.

The Western master narrative differs substantially from the version found in Central and Eastern Europe during the era of state socialism. Like other institutions with educational purposes, museums were required to serve the overall needs of the state and the ruling party. Consequently exhibitions had to adjust their messages to the party version of history, which means that the victorious adversary of Nazi barbarism and inhumanity was not the liberal democracy, but socialism and people's democracy. This was not least the case in the Soviet Union, where the sufferings and hardships of war made sense as a necessity to preserve not only the political system, but also the nation itself.

This aspect of the war narrative has become even more crucial after the fall of the Soviet Union, a fact well illustrated in the new Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which opened in Moscow in 1995. In contrast to earlier Soviet representations, which glorified Stalin and the Party as the great leaders of the war effort, the museum has shown a will to also confront the more problematic aspects of the war, like the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty, the catastrophic mistakes of leadership during the early phases of war and the fate of the prisoners of war. Nevertheless, there is no doubt about the museum's patriotic message, as illustrated by a quotation from one of the directors of its research department in 1996:

"The people were not forced to fight, pressured by political institutions. They fought consciously for their fatherland, for Russia. And we won, not because

of but despite the inhuman regime of oppression and terror. Here are the roots of our victory." (Prusakova 1997: 87)

An almost ideal typical example of a nationalist military museum is to be found at the old Kalmegdan fortress in Belgrade. The Kalmegdan military museum was founded in 1878, shortly after the war when Turkey lost control over large parts of the Balkans. During the era of Tito the authorized narrative of the Yugoslav partisan war 1941-45 was a highlight of the museum. It still boasts Serbian resilience and resistance, e.g. by displaying parts of an American stealth bomber destroyed during the 1999 war.[4]

Within the former GDR, the memorials at the Nazi concentration camps of Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück and Buchenwald were organized in a way that not only displayed a well-documented presentation of the history of the sites until 1945, but which also intended to demonstrate Communist resistance against the Nazi regime. This was particularly the case at Buchenwald, which had the strongest concentration of Communist inmates of all camps during the period. In this way, the memorials also showed how the GDR regime actually belonged on the side of the victors of the war – in contrast to the Federal Republic. After the reunification of Germany the presentations and the narratives they conveyed were replaced by newer ones more in line with the history being told at other German memorials. At Buchenwald, the old exhibitions have been supplied with two new exhibition buildings, one focusing on the site's usage as a prison camp during the early days of the Soviet occupation, the other one presenting a meta-history about the development of the exhibitions and monuments at the site between 1945 and 1989.[5]

These new exhibitions may even be characterized as a kind of meta-museum, an approach that has been quite rare so far. Concerning war history at large, however, an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London in 2008, titled "Re-vision" may be viewed as a kind of meta-exhibition. There, paintings and other pieces of art from the collections of the museum were used to show ways of presenting the war through art during the first fifty years of the museum's existence.[6] Hopefully this

4 The website of the museum is only in Serbian/Croatian, but the pictures on http://muzej.mod.gov.yu/stalna%20postavka/postavka.htm (accessed 10/20/08) give an impression of a rather old fashioned object based exhibition, which seems to have changed very little since my visit in August 1974.

5 Personal visit. November 2007, cfr. http//:www.buchenwald.de/index_en.html.

6 http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/conEvent.2292nd.

is only the first step towards a more comprehensive meta-museum project within that museum.

An interesting variety of the patriotic exhibitions may be found at local or regional museums with sections on the 20th century. Of particular interest are city museums of big cities like Tokyo, London and Hamburg, which all have large sections about the local effects of the war. To a larger extent than other museums dealing with the war, these museums are able to show how war affected civilians and their lives, from the fears and sufferings following large-scale bombings to everyday struggles of finding food and shelter. However, the approach becomes problematic when local history is not properly tied to the overall structures of politics and war strategies.

The "War and Reconstruction" section of the spectacular Edo-Tokyo Museum is a good case in point. The effects of the great air raids on the city in March 1945, with the number of people killed in the firestorm exceeding that of the immediate casualties of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, are displayed extensively. But as the civilian sufferings are not contextualized against Japanese warfare at large, the main lesson to be learnt from the exhibition is about Japanese suffering, with no reference to Japanese guilt and the suffering inflicted upon others.[7]

The impressive Museum of the History of Hamburg also displays a thorough and well-researched narrative, not only of events narrowly tied to the war, like the firestorm following the air raid in 1943, but also the story of the local growth of the Nazi movement and regime. A visitor cannot avoid noticing repeated statements about the local Nazi regime, which is considered relatively mild compared to the harsh repression elsewhere, but there is no mentioning of the extensive cooperation between city authorities and the SS on brickstone deliveries from the Neuengamme concentration camp to the city (On the theme of victim and guilty in national history culture see also the contribution by Ahonen).[8]

Most countries occupied during the war have resistance museums of various kinds. Some of them, like in Norway, are on a national level and bear an official stamp, whereas the state in France seems to have been quite reluctant to reproduce memories of the war through this type of central institutions. From the mid 1980s, however, 25 or so museums have been erected on regional and local levels with "resistance" or "deportation" in their name.

7 Personal visit April 2003, http://www.edo-tokyo.msusum.or.jp/enlish/index.html.

8 Personal visit November 2007, http://www.hamburgmuseum.de/index_e.html. (Kaienburg 1991: esp. 97 pp).

This development seems to coincide with an increased openness in French memory culture towards the more problematic sides of French war history, particularly concerning the Vichy regime. But the fact that a majority of the institutions have been erected within Vichy controlled territory calls for further investigation, and a possible explanation suggested by Kevin Walsh is that memorizing resistance in these parts of France might be seen as an effort to counter impressions of widespread regional collaboration. In this way, regional and local institutions answer more to regional than to national needs, as Walsh suggests:

> "What such an analysis reveals is that it is very difficult to discuss national memories, and in fact a regional approach to the study of identity is the only valid and useful approach […]. No matter how hard the state tries, popular memory at the local or regional level cannot always be subsumed by the crafted national memory, constructed by national ideology." (Walsh 2007: 446)

Exhibitions as media for moral messages

After Auschwitz, a strictly value-neutral presentation of the history of World War II seems impossible, even preposterous, and it seems quite appropriate that war exhibitions signal some kind of value-based approach, not only defining the enemy as evil, but also trying to identify some of the values to be defended. Not least after the Nuremberg trials and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 this seems to be an appropriate approach. However, there is a broad variety in how the institutions choose to communicate these values, and their main messages vary extensively. This does not least apply to the presentations of the war and its messages in the countries on the losing side.

A most interesting case in this respect is the Hiroshima peace memorial museum. Like the Edo-Tokyo museum it offers an extensive display of human suffering. However, the Hiroshima museum's approach to the past differs profoundly from that of the Tokyo museum. The museum opened in 1955 with a declared aim to contribute to abolishing nuclear weapons, and the oldest parts of the exhibition almost exclusively focus on the effects of the bomb, using quite strong effects to raise emotions and provoke attitudes. During a thorough reshaping and extension of the museum in the early 1990s, a new section was added, representing the events and developments leading up to August 6th 1945, when the bomb was dropped. This part of the exhibition maintains an analytic, reflective approach and tells different, but intertwining narratives leading up to the fatal date of the bomb.

One narrative focuses on the development of Japanese militarism and imperialism that led to the efforts to realize the vision of an "Eastern Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" by brute force. Another narrative tells of scientific progress, particularly in nuclear physics, which was a precondition for making the bomb. A third story follows the internal development of the city of Hiroshima, which due to its proximity to the Asian mainland became a port of departure for armies to Korea and China. A fourth one deals with American war strategies, where extensive space is given to the chilly tale of why Hiroshima was chosen as target for the first full-scale test of the new weapon, while Kyoto, with a similar topography of hills on three sides of the city, was spared because of its cultural heritage treasures. Frequent special exhibitions have focused upon sensitive topics like the early post-war period efforts on the American side to cover up the effects of the bomb, but also on politically less controversial issues like the reconstruction of the city.[9]

Commemorating the atrocities and guilt of one's own group or state is historically a very rare occurrence, and despite some serious efforts to include a perpetrator perspective into the exhibitions, the main approach at the Hiroshima museum is the city and its inhabitants as war victims, a position not difficult to understand or defend. Turning to Germany as the other great loser of the war, similar victim's perspectives may be found in sections of city museums dealing with the allied bombing campaign. As a rule, however, German museums and memorial sites display a clear will to admit the nation's perpetrator role, not least when it comes to the fate of the European Jews. This is not only the case at the sites of former concentration camps, but has also become so widespread in other museums and memorials that one might virtually speak of a kind of remorse industry, which has accelerated during the last 20 years or so. (See also the contribution by Borries in this volume, which presents a typology on ways of dealing with burdening pasts.)

As a whole, the institutions, particularly the latest ones, display a scholarly approach to the war and give due respect to all kinds of victims. I find it appropriate to call this approach to the war the "scholarly remorse and guilt approach". For instance, the museum exhibitions at Bergen Belsen, opened in the autumn of 2007, not only present the relatively short history of the concentration camp whose infamy British war photographers helped to bring to public attention shortly after the surrender, but also the prisoner-of-war camp at the site as well as the post-war period where it functioned as a camp for displaced persons, mostly

9 Personal visit April 2003. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (1999), http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jb/index_e2.html, accessed 25/11/09.

Poles and Jews. The exhibitions are organized as what has been termed "study exhibitions", where materials for more comprehensive studies are available on shelves, in drawers and in digital storage media within the exhibition building. The study material is a wide selection of factual sources, and in this way it differs profoundly from the emotionally charged approach in other areas of the camp's site which were organized at an earlier time.

The exhibitions at Neuengamme are another example of the scholarly study exhibition approach which is not aiming directly at the empathy and emotions of the visitor, but instead aims at making an impact and inducing visitors to take a stand by way of reflection and insight. A special exhibition focusing exclusively on the SS perpetrators was widely discussed before opening, as some critics feared that the perpetrator focus might result in some degree of identification with the perpetrators. The danger seems to have been largely overestimated, and even when some leading SS functionaries of the camp are being followed quite closely, even with notes and pictures of their family life, the main focus is on their actions as SS members and camp personnel. Instead of identification, this approach rather raises the imminent question of what actually turned these men into perpetrators and of the interplay between the system and the individuals in these cases.[10]

Parallel to the growth of the German institutions and sites displaying remorse, their role and meaning within German contemporary culture at large have been discussed, more or less independently of their specific contents and character. In 1988, Martin Broszat raised a warning that through their reference to the fascist era, monuments "may not remember events as much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations." (Quoted inYoung 1993: 5) This was part of a wider discussion where Broszat argued that the time had come for the Germans to historicize and normalize their attitudes towards their National Socialist past. He drew heavy criticism for this position, and the renewed interest in building and organizing large museums of repentance may on one hand be interpreted as an argument in favor of the position that the time is not yet ripe for historization. The comment of Mary Fulbrook on an "obsessive concern with guilt and shame" which was displayed in a debate about the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin may be taken as a support of this view (Fulbrook 1999: 229). On the other hand, the scholarly approaches at the newest sites also bear witness to a kind of approach that manages to attend to the values without falling prey to

10 The description of Bergen Belsen and Neuengamme is based on the author's own visits at the premises in November 2007.

shallow emotions. At all events, the question of how World War II is being presented within German museums and exhibitions has become a part of the much larger theme of the German struggle to make sense of its traumatic past.

Another value-based approach that might have been chosen in exhibitions is what may be called "the reconciliation approach". Reconciliation between earlier enemies has been an honorable aim for different kinds of institutions, probably the most famous being the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of the political changes in the country in 1994. Another institution based on reconciliation between former enemies is the Georg Eckert Institute of Textbook Research in Braunschweig, Germany, which was founded shortly after the Second World War with the explicit aim of defusing nationalism and reciprocal animosity by harmonizing the narratives in history textbooks from different nations.

In the museum world, a paradigmatic example of reconciliation as a goal may be the museum inaugurated in 1967 at the World War I battlefield of Verdun. Its explicit aim has not been to generate pride in the glory of the French army, but to promote understanding between the former enemies.[11]

History exhibitions aiming particularly at reconciliation are much more rare when considering Word War II. One main explanation for this is the fact that reconciliation demands a minimum of reciprocity between parts and a minimum of admittance on both sides that they may have something to regret. Opinions are very clear as to who bears the overwhelming guilt and blame for the war. Hardly any serious historian would object to this verdict. However, recently research has focused more extensively on themes like the allied air campaign against German cities and the Soviet army's harsh behavior during its advances on the Eastern front, but also in Poland and the Baltic states during the first year of the War. One might very well imagine that special exhibitions focusing on subjects like these may be curated under the banner of reconciliation. But then reconciliation cannot be separated from other feelings and attitudes, like admittance of guilt, remorse, repentance and forgiveness.

An example of the reconciliation approach may be the German-Russian museum at Berlin-Karlshorst, which opened in 1994. From 1967 on, the building, where the armistice between Germany and the Soviet Union was signed in 1945, was the site of a Soviet army museum

11 http://memorial-de-verdun.fr/m-historique-et-missions.html, accessed 28/02/10.

"for the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945".[12] After German unification and the fall of the Soviet regime plans began for a new museum, aiming at providing a common German-Russian interpretation of the war. The approach is low-keyed and based on the idea that when facing unheard of amounts of terror and mass murder, one has to give the visitors some possibilities to distance themselves emotionally. Only from some distance the scale of the monstrousness may be grasped, the organizers maintain. (Jahn 1997: 11 pp.) In this way the museum clearly distances itself from a row of other institutions that deliberately seek to evoke emotional involvement, even immersion in individual fates.

Concepts like guilt and repentance are closely tied to religious attitudes. Religious expressions are not least visible at exhibitions commemorating the Holocaust, but also at other memorials focusing more generally on massive violations of human rights before and during the War. This approach, which is very common at Holocaust memorials, may be summarized by the words "remembrance and sorrow".

First and foremost in this category one finds institutions like Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and Auschwitz in Poland. In contrast to Auschwitz and other memorials built on the premises of the atrocities, Yad Vashem resembles the Holocaust Memorial in Washington DC by being situated a long distance away from where the atrocities were committed. Nevertheless Yad Vashem has become a model and source of inspiration for a large number of memorial sites and exhibitions, not only because of its early foundation in 1953, but also because of the solid base of research for its activities. Auschwitz has to be mentioned in this analysis, not only because of the scale of the atrocities that were committed there, but also because the very name has become emblematic of the Holocaust all over the world.

Institutions in this category do not only research and teach history in an academic sense of the word. A crucial aim is to invoke feelings and empathy with the victims as a means to produce and strengthen values and attitudes. A particular method of employing empathy may be found at the Holocaust Memorial in Washington, where visitors are equipped with an ID card of a victim, with whom they are supposed to identify and to connect emotionally. The method is not unique, as it has also been employed at the Flanders Field Museum at Ypres, where the subjects of identification are soldiers at the World War I battlefield (Lord 2007: 358). However, the method has been subject of discussion, and

12 http://www.museum-karlshorst.de/html/gebaude/aa/langtext.shtml, accessed 28/02/10.

has not been replicated in a grand scale at other institutions (see also the contribution by Bjerg in this volume, on the relationship between evoking empathy, history education and history culture).

A further development of this approach is what may be called "The educative human rights-focused exhibition". Following a rapid increase in public as well as academic interest in human rights, new centers have sprung up. Here, displaying the history of the war is not an end in itself, but primarily a means to draw attention to and to illustrate more general principles of human rights. An example of this category is the Centre for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities in Oslo, with an "explicit aim to be a meeting-place for people who want to participate in the enduring controversy concerning all kinds of religious, racist and ethnic motivated repression", as stated on the website of the center.[13] Other Norwegian centers with pronounced profiles of linking human rights to Second World War experiences, are the Memorial and Human Rights Centre at the former concentration camp Falstad in Central Norway and "Stiftelsen Arkivet" (The Foundation the Archive), based in the former regional headquarters of the Gestapo in Kristiansand. The institution declares that

"[b]y promoting dialogue, historical reflection and communication among different generations, Stiftelsen Arkivet wants to assist in the achievement of human rights, human dignity, peace building and conflict prevention".[14]

In practice it is difficult to draw a clear line between these generally oriented centers and exhibitions with pronounced educational goals, e.g. at former concentration camps in Germany. Under all circumstances are they to be judged not only by virtue of their ability to communicate desired values, but also on whether they manage to uphold scholarly principles. The tendency of "universalization" can also be observed outside the museum world. See e.g. the contribution by Bjerg in this volume.

Developments and challenges

From this overview four main lines of development may be drawn:

- There is a clear development away from patriot grand narratives of hardship and victory towards more general, moral questions.

13 http://www.hlsenteret.no/English, accessed 10/23/08.
14 http://stiftelsen-arkivet.no/english, accessed 10/24/08.

- War exhibitions based on material objects have to a large degree given way to concept-based exhibitions. Authentic war objects have to serve some communicative function to deserve being displayed.
- Exhibitions tend to be based on a more distinct scholarly approach at the expense of one-dimensional didactic narratives.
- Exhibitions are to an increasing degree being combined with other means of communication and learning.

These trends seem to be well in line with general trends in historical exhibitions. However, there are other trends in museum development that represent more profound challenges to how war should be exhibited.

On one side there has been a recent trend in some big museums to tune down the historical context of artifacts, emphasizing instead the objects themselves, particularly when aesthetically valuable. This is a very rare approach in war museums, not only because aesthetic properties as a rule are of minor importance compared to other properties of the objects connected to war, but also because war exhibitions invariably convey some form of message which demands explaining the contexts where artifacts have been produced, used or found.

Another challenge may be seen as an extension of post-modern tendencies to criticize grand narratives and what the British philosopher Beth Lord characterizes as "the heavily didactic displays of the past" (Lord 2007: 362). "Ideas of universal truths or single fixed histories are ideas that the best museums are trying to challenge", she maintains. "If the past is to be genuinely open, it cannot be presented as a fixed truth that can only be remembered" (Lord 2007: 358).

As opposed to the fixed way of telling history, Lord advocates a "general history" in Michel Foucault's sense, where the main methodical approach is examining particular artifacts or documents and developing how they fit into "multiple, discontinuous historical series. General history does not assume that all such documents will be evident for a single principle governing the time and place they are from, it takes their differences, specificities and discontinuities as primary", Lord writes. (2007: 362) She is preoccupied with changing the role of the objects in exhibitions, and her ideal is a museum where the object has become

"a living site of difference. It contains infinite differences and specificities to be opened up, related to other things and arranged in discontinuous series. The museum object is not the inert trace of a fixed past with which we can only connect through memory and empathy. Rather, in working with the object, in developing it into different causal series and multiple micro-histories, we will recognize the object as an integral part of what we are, and understand how

these causal series have been the condition of possibility of present circumstances." (Lord 2007: 364-365)

However noble Lord's ideals may be of giving "power to both objects and visitors" by employing principles of general history, the ideals of "presenting history without narrative, without memory, and without empathy" (Lord 2007: 365) pose huge problems, epistemologically as well as ethically. An open-ended micro-historical approach to World War II would serve to confuse and complicate rather than clarify not only the explanations of what happened, but also the profound moral issues at stake.

Lord too seems to concede this. "Perhaps for many histories – the First and Second World Wars among them – it is too soon to treat them without reference to memory," she maintains rather inconclusively (Lord 2007: 366). An alternative view would rather state that it is not only "too soon", but also that for an indefinite future the war of the past neither is nor ought to be "genuinely open" and devoid of fixed truths. Avoiding dogma, there nevertheless are truths, e.g. about atrocities and genocide that are undeniable, and trying to present this history "without narrative, without memory, without empathy" would be untenable. The challenge is to find ways to combine empathy and moral engagement with scholarly discussion, multi-perspective approaches and an urge to pose, face, and explain even the most profound and disturbing questions.

The very best war museums have come a long way towards these goals. They also manage to take advantage of the main features of exhibitions as a medium, namely their three-dimensionality. A conscious spatiality and a successful employment of object-based narratives are the main arguments for choosing exhibitions as a means of communicating history. This means that one not only has to decide what to tell, but also how to tell it.

Another challenge stems from the meeting between the intentions of the curators of the museum and the visitors' memory, historical consciousness and expectations at large. "Although visitors may fully expect and desire to be educated, instructed, to learn 'something new', as soon as that knowledge conflicts with memory and experience, trouble begins", Susan Crane (2004: 322) maintains in a comment on the controversies about the Smithsonian's plans for a commemorative exhibition on the bomber Enola Gay, 50 years after it dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The row demonstrated that important parts of the American public simply did not want to be confronted with inconvenient parts of the past. "The original Enola Gay exhibit, with its images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing victims and artifacts from

'ground zero', would have transgressed the bounds of acceptable American memory by emphasizing 'suffering caused'", Crane writes (2004: 329).

In short: Museums may aim at influencing historical consciousness and at creating more profound morally based understandings, but they have no control over the outcome of the meeting between the exhibitions and the expectations and prejudices of the public.

References

Ambrose, Timothy/Paine, Crispin (eds.) (2006): Museum Basics, 2nd edition, Routledge, London/New York.

Bennett, Tony (1995): The Birth of the Museum, Routledge, London/New York.

Bordage, Roger (2007): "Sachsenhausen, a flawed museum". In: Sheila Watson (ed.), Museums and their Communities, Routledge, London/New York, pp. 228-233.

Crane, Susan A. (2004): "Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum". In: Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.), Museum Studies, Wiley-Blackwell, London/New York, pp. 318-334,

Dean, David (1996): Museum Exhibition. Theory and Practice, Routledge, London/New York.

Fulbrook, Mary (1999): German National Identity after the Holocaust, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Jahn, Peter (1997): "Gemeinsam mit den Schrecken erinnern: Das deutsch-russische Museum Berlin-Karlshorst". In: Hans-Martin Hinz (ed.), Der Krieg und seine Museen, Campus, Frankfurt/New York, pp. 11-23.

Kaienburg, Hermann (1991): 'Vernichtung durch Arbeit'; der Fall Neuengamme, J.H.W. Dietz, Bonn.

Lord, Beth (2007): "From the document to the monument. Museums and the philosophy of history". In: Simon J. Knell/Suzanne MacLeod/Sheila Watson (eds.), Museum Revolutions, Routledge, London/New York, pp. 356-366.

Luke, Timothy W. (2007): "Nuclear Reactions: The (re)presentation of Hiroshima at the National Air and Space Museum". In: Sheila Watson (ed.), Museums and their Communities, Routledge, London/New York, pp. 197-212.

Prusakova, Alla Andrejewna (1997): "Das Zentralmuseum der Grossen Vaterländischen Krieges in Moskau". In: Hans-Martin Hinz (ed.), Der Krieg und seine Museen, Campus, Frankfurt/New York, pp. 73-87.

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (1999): The Spirit of Hiroshima, an Introduction to the Atomic Bomb Tragedy.

Walsh. Kevin (2007): "Collective Amnesia and the Meditation of Painful Pasts". In: Sheila Watson (ed.), Museums and their Communities, Routledge, London/New York, pp. 435-447.

Young, James E. (1993): The Texture of Memory, Yale University Press, New Haven.