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## **War Museums as Agonistic Spaces: Possibilities, Opportunities and Constraints**

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### **Introduction**

According to Chantal Mouffe (2013, 101), despite the neo-liberal trend towards commodification, which has reduced museums to ‘sites of entertainment for a public of consumers’, it is still possible to argue that ‘museums can become privileged spaces for escaping from the dominance of the market’. Mouffe provides some examples of art museums which, in her opinion, have succeeded in providing ‘a space for debate and conflict’ (2013, 102). One of these is the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) whose director set out to ‘recover the museum’s role as an educational institution’ not least by forging close links with the city’s social movements (2013, 102-3). In her view, critical art is especially apt at promoting reflection and self-reflection and at prefiguring alternatives to the dominant socio-political order. Furthermore, Mouffe argues that artistic practices can mobilise people’s emotions and in so doing ‘play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity’ (2013, 96).

Following Mouffe, Clelia Pozzi (2013, 10) argues that even national history museums can engage with counterhegemonic practices, ‘that portray the nation’s hegemonic narrative at the same time that they destabilise their monolithic nature through counter-narratives’. While warning of possible dangers, including the risk of ‘agonistic dialogue [...] being implemented as the result of a top-down decision and process’ (2013, 10) or indeed the risk that agonism turns into antagonism or into ‘a static acknowledgement of conflicting positions’ (2013, 11), she puts forward some suggestions as to how this can be achieved. One suggestion is to privilege temporary and thematic exhibitions over permanent and chronological ones, another is to make consistent use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which allow interactive practices and multiple perspectives, and can also

involve visitors ‘in the construction of the museum’s narratives’ as well as ‘accommodate conflicting voices’ (2013, 14).

Mouffe and Pozzi therefore argue that museums can be transformed into agonistic spaces both in terms of how they approach collections and exhibitions so as to fully incorporate dissonant voices and ‘hot’, emotionally charged memory (Uzzell 1989, Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998), but also in terms of how they can open up to bottom-up participation on the part of grass-roots movements. There have been various instances of museums approaching exhibitions and engaging with the public in novel ways. For instance, as Basu and Macdonald (2007, 16) document, a series of experimental exhibitions strove deliberately to ‘engage with complexity’, creating ‘a space for conversation and debate’, in which visitors played an active role as ‘meaning-makers’. Most of the exhibitions concerned art museums, confirming that they tend to be at the forefront of thought-provoking interventions. In the case of dark heritage sites, history or war museums, experimentation is less common and could take different forms. For example, as pointed out by Bernbeck and Pollock (2007, 219) in relation to archaeology, the inclusion of the perpetrator’s perspective could constitute such a thought-provoking intervention, supplementing the sometimes much too easy commemoration of the victim’s sufferings.

However, the issue of which actors would have the power and agency to impress this transformation upon existing museums has not been openly addressed. In Mouffe’s example of the MACBA, Mouffe refers to the role of the Director, Manuel Borja-Villel, in establishing ‘a new model of what a museum should be’ (2013, 102), yet a Director is only one actor in a wide array of stakeholders with a direct interest in and decision-making power over museums. Furthermore, Mouffe suggests that a museum has traditionally had an educational function – admittedly, for the ‘construction of bourgeois hegemony’ (2013, 101) – which has been supplemented by a consumerist function but which can nevertheless be re-established in a new counter-hegemonic guise. However, museums engage in a much wider range of functions than just as educators and entertainers. For instance, they participate in processes of memorialisation and reconciliation (Apsel 2016). They also often attempt to negotiate divisive memories of the past, both at the national and international levels. As Sharon Macdonald remarked, we are witnessing ‘*an internationalisation of how memory is performed*’ (Macdonald 2016, 19). Museums also play a role in states’ cultural diplomacy and soft power, an area where supranational institutions like the EU have started to become involved (Clarke, Cento Bull and Deganutti 2017).

As part of a Horizon 2020 research project ([www.unrest.eu](http://www.unrest.eu)), the authors carried out extensive fieldwork in museums dedicated to the First and Second World Wars in France, Germany, Poland and Slovenia in order to assess the extent to which they act as agonistic spaces and explore their potential for being transformed into such spaces. Drawing on fieldwork findings, this paper argues that all these museums play complex and multi-layered roles, which include having an educational function, promoting local socio-economic regeneration, attracting domestic and international visitors, acting as sites for external political/diplomatic relations, negotiating difficult and divisive memories as well as entertaining the public. Our findings indicate that these complex and not easily reconcilable roles act as major constraints in terms of adopting an agonistic approach.

However, the paper also argues that war museums are especially apt to become sites of political contestation able to engage with agonistic memory and unsettling counter-narratives. This is due in large part to the nature of the subject matter they deal with, as war and conflict lend themselves to being represented in ways that emphasise patriotic consensus but can also highlight dissent, contestation, antagonisms, multiple perspectives and alternative visions of society. Furthermore, the representation of war and conflict in museums can arouse affective reactions and strong emotions, even after several decades, especially when exhibitions make use of interactive ICT or artistic installations and hence mobilise a range of emotions, including political passions.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses Mouffe's theory of agonism and defines different modes of remembering, including an agonistic mode. This is followed by an analysis of the multiple functions of war museums, which are in turn associated with multiple stakeholders, whose contrasting interests and veto powers can place very considerable constraints upon the approach to, and content of, permanent exhibitions. In light of this, the next section argues that many war museums have tended either to prioritise a cosmopolitan approach to history and memory in their exhibitions or a mix of cosmopolitanism and antagonism, as a relatively easy compromise to manage complex (and often conflicting) roles and stakeholders. Agonistic practices can emerge when a combination of top-down and bottom-up agency is able to take advantage of particular socio-political circumstances or cultural developments. When such windows of opportunity open, there is good potential for agonistic practices in war museums. The last section discusses a new exhibition on war memory planned for late 2018 as part of the UNREST project in Essen, Germany, which aims to communicate in an agonistic fashion with its audiences and has been conceived as a strategic, visitor-centred political intervention.

## **Theorising agonism and agonistic memory**

The concept of agonism has been submitted to different interpretations by, among others, Hannah Arendt, William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe (Yamamoto 2011). The UNREST project builds explicitly on Mouffe's understanding of the concept, which is collective in scope and informed by her analysis of contemporary politics.

According to Mouffe, contemporary society is a post-political society in the sense that neo-liberalism has developed as the hegemonic ideology for several decades and politics has degenerated into the negotiation of technicalities within an undifferentiated political centre. Furthermore, liberalism's individualist outlook has turned politics into an issue of morality: 'nowadays the political is played out in the moral register' (Mouffe 2005, 5). In this context, there is a pressing challenge to make the real and material differences of political interests visible. While neo-liberal ideology has demotivated political participation, cosmopolitanism as a liberal 'light' version promoted by the elites, cannot grasp or give expression to average people's experiences of conflict and struggle, and therefore leaves dangerous gaps for extreme nationalism to fill.

This need for the creation of clear, collective political identities makes Carl Schmitt's (1932) understanding of 'the political' appealing, as he insists upon the inherent antagonistic character of society. According to Schmitt, political identities consist of 'Us/Them' relations, but as a postmodern constructivist Mouffe obviously cannot subscribe to Schmitt's essentialist outlook. She instead applies the notion of the 'constitutive outside' developed by Henry Staten and Jacques Derrida as the theoretical parameter for understanding how identities are created through social discourse (Mouffe 2005, 15). Thus, according to Mouffe, one of the main challenges of contemporary society consists in recognising and reactivating political tensions within what she calls 'conflicting consensus', which means that the Schmittian 'enemy' of the antagonistic relation can be converted into an adversary, admitted within an agonistic, democratic setting. She therefore speaks in favour of the development of counterhegemonic projects and processes that can simultaneously create passion for real political alternatives, challenge mainstream outlooks and open the public sphere to the agonistic encounter of opposing worldviews.

When it comes to agonism within the field of cultural memory and heritage, the UNREST project relies on a theoretical paper by Cento Bull and Hansen (2016). According to the authors, it is possible to distinguish between three ethico-political modes of remembering: the antagonistic, the cosmopolitan and the agonistic. The dividing line between

them revolves around the moral categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Whereas antagonistic memory (nationalistic, religious, political) tends to apply these moral terms to specific roles and characters in the form of heroes and villains (both active agents, but with opposing sets of values), cosmopolitan narratives tend to deconstruct this opposition in favour of a focus on the suffering of the passive and innocent victim. This narrative template, developed as a transnational offspin of Holocaust memory discourse, depoliticises the conflicts of the past in order to create compassion for individual suffering and call attention to the violation of human rights. While the moral categories of good and evil are reproduced, they are primarily attached to the ideological systems underlying the conflict: totalitarian rule vs democracy.

Agonistic memory discourse acknowledges the existence of social and political conflicts within a democratic society, but it refutes the use of moral categories. Instead, it contextualises the conflict and redefines the roles of the different characters: simple roles of innocent victims and guilty perpetrators are recast as complicated relationships between conflicting parties. Furthermore, the social and political conditions that create and legitimate mass perpetration are revealed: social and economic inequality, the marginalisation of recognisable groups of people and the reduction of their civil rights, the establishment of certain ethnical, religious and/or ideological standards for being recognised as citizens. Evil acts are not excused or legitimised, but neither are they conceived of as the acts of evil individuals. Hence, agonistic memory discourse re-politicises the binary categories of good and evil, and by doing so re-politicises the relation of present society to the past.

When agonistic memory discourse sets out to understand mass perpetration, the danger of being misunderstood obviously exists. Therefore, many agonistic memory discourses apply a multi-perspectival approach to their narrative. This approach allows for the voice of the perpetrators to speak out in their own right, but opposes their self-understanding to that of other agents such as victims, by-standers and/or historical successors. Through this dialogic juxtaposition of different discourse positions, the reader/listener/spectator is enabled to take a qualified stand.

Agonistic memory discourse is highly self-reflective, conscious of its own social and political prerequisites and conditions, which at the same time arouses passions in order to engage people in issues of political conflict. Cosmopolitan memory discourse is also reflective and dialogic, and it often uses multi-perspectivity, but in order to dialogise different victim’s positions or voices belonging to the past and present, that is, as a means of deliberative reasoning over responsibility and guilt in the past and present. In this sense, it resembles the concept of rational dialogue in Habermas’ (1984) social philosophy. It cannot

allow the voice of the perpetrator to speak out and juxtapose it dialogically with other voices, representatives of other social and political positions. It cannot allow dialogism to play out in a Bakhtinian sense (Gardiner 2004, Koczanowicz 2011), and it is therefore not able to provide an understanding so to speak ‘from the inside’ of how mass perpetration can be generated. It can only condemn.

### **War museums’ politico-diplomatic roles and their impact on permanent exhibitions**

In recent decades, history museums and heritage sites have emerged as key venues of education and entertainment and premier sites of negotiation about official historical narratives, enjoying record visitor numbers across Europe and the West (Arnold-de Simine 2013). The success is part of the collective turn to memory but it also reflects specific innovations and accomplishments in the museum world (Vergo 1989, Message 2006). The important subgenre of the war museum is part of this development. Together with war cemeteries and monuments, war museums, especially those located at sites of battles or atrocities, are part of the phenomenon known as ‘dark tourism’ (Lennon and Foley 2000) or ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton 1996), which has become an important lever for economic growth. On the other hand, these sites play an increasingly important role in what has been termed ‘memorial diplomacy’ (Graves 2014). The scenography of museums and exhibitions that seek to provoke unsettlement is also a significant area of research when dealing with the interpretation of difficult histories/heritage in museums (Macdonald and Basu 2007; Logan and Reeves 2009). The focus of this section is on the impact of political and diplomatic dimensions on the historiographical content of exhibitions rather than on how they are configured.

As part of the UNREST project, five war museums in various European countries were selected for analysis. The main purpose was to generate new empirical data for testing, revising, and fine-tuning the key concepts of antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic modes of remembering and approaches to history and memory. Various factors contributed to the choice of case studies: the need to include museums specialising in both the First and the Second World Wars; opting for museums established after 1990 or with newly remade permanent exhibitions, thus allowing for meaningful comparisons; including locations in both western and eastern Europe; including smaller, locally-based and larger, national/international institutions. The selected museums comprised: the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, France; the Kobarid Museum in Kobarid, Slovenia; the German-

Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst, Germany; the Oskar Schindler's Factory in Kraków, Poland and the Military History Museum in Dresden, Germany.

Fieldwork by UNREST researchers relied on qualitative methods, including archival research, interviews with museum curators, as well as in-depth group analysis of permanent exhibitions. Interviews with visitors and analysis of the visitors' books at each of the five museums were also part of the fieldwork. In the course of the research, the multiple roles played by each of the five museums and the ways in which they impacted directly on the nature and content of the respective exhibitions became increasingly apparent. The influence of political stakeholders in establishing these institutions and the diplomatic role the latter have come to play stood out as especially significant.

The Kobarid Museum, for instance, was established as a bottom-up initiative of a local politician, Zdravko Likar, who aimed at relaunching the economy of the town by capitalising on the daily flows of Italians from across the border in search of cheap goods. As the site of a major Italian military defeat in 1917 and a massive ossuary built by Mussolini in 1938 to honour that country's dead, Kobarid seemed well placed to attract tourists from neighbouring Italy and other central European countries whose armies had fought on the Soča/Isonzo front. As Likar told UNREST researchers in 2016, it was decided not to delve into issues which might lead to feelings of humiliation among hoped-for Italian visitors, such as the flight and surrender of thousands of Italian soldiers to the enemy after the defeat of the Twelfth Battle. Hence, the exhibition has a cosmopolitan approach, emphasising the suffering of all soldiers and conveying an explicit, if generic, anti-war message. Likar (2016) recalls: 'We wanted to show visitors that war brings only horrors, fear and despair [...] how common soldiers suffered during the war'. The anti-war message starts in the Foyer, which displays portraits of soldiers of many nationalities, crosses from military gravestones, and the flags of the fighting nations. A White Room focuses on the trenches and the harsh mountainous environment, which claimed many casualties. A Black Room includes portraits of soldiers at prayer before going into battle, the gate of an Italian military prison, displaying anti-war graffiti in Italian and German, horrific facial portraits of wounded soldiers and photographs of hanged ones. An art installation depicts a series of black dots on a wall and on the ceiling, gradually becoming smaller and more numerous, graphically showing the mass death toll of the First World War.

This cosmopolitan approach, inspired by the values of peace and reconciliation, was later reinforced when the museum caught the attention of national politicians, following Slovenia's independence in 1991, and of the EU itself. In 1992, it was awarded the Valvasor



Prize by the Association of Museums of Slovenia, and in 1993, it received the Council of Europe Museum Prize. The peace message conveyed by the museum resonated positively with the EU's values and mission and with Slovenia's aspiration to join the Union. Since then, the museum and the surrounding area have become an important site used by state officials when hosting international diplomatic encounters to stress the internationalism of Slovenia's foreign policy (Clarke, Cento Bull and Deganutti 2017). At the same time, the museum plays an important role in national reconciliation as it foregrounds the relatively uncontentious (and until then largely disregarded) memory of the First World War rather than the much more divisive and antagonistic memory of the Second, when the country was divided between pro-Tito partisans and collaborators of the fascist and Nazi occupiers. Furthermore, by remembering a war when Slovenes fought as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the country was able to reassert its European, as opposed to Balkan, credentials (Kravanja 2014, 104). The interests and needs of multiple stakeholders at local, national and European levels have therefore largely converged in determining and preserving the museum's cosmopolitan approach.

Similarly, the first stone for the Historial de la Grande Guerre was laid in 1991 initially under the initiative of the municipality, which hoped to attract visitors to the town, not just from France but also from Britain, the Benelux and Germany. Linked to a determination to address the perceived 'dearth of tourist attractions in the area' (Farrugia 2015, 65) was a desire to commemorate the Battle of the Somme at one of its sites. In what was at the time a daring and innovative undertaking, the founders decided to include a German perspective in the permanent exhibition and consulted various First World War historians from different countries, including Germany, to ensure a relatively impartial approach. As Jay Winter (2017, 164-5), one of the historians who worked closely with the curators, argued: 'This was [...] a transnational project from the start'. Its transnational approach was evident both in the display of French, German and British objects on parallel shelves, thereby showing 'how similar were the artefacts, cultural as well as military, produced during the war across national boundaries', as well as in the 'use of horizontality in the organization of space'. Soldiers' uniforms and objects, in fact, are displayed in open pits below ground level, again showing shared conditions and experiences across the different armies. More controversial issues including soldiers' mutinies or self-mutilations, are not

represented in the main exhibition, something that spearheaded controversy among historians in the 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

Through the horizontal display of the uniforms, the exhibition attempts to de-fetishise the soldier by restoring his human dimensions and emphasising his vulnerability. Rather than tell stories of individual heroism, the Historial introduces a cosmopolitan narrative of shared suffering which includes the experience of soldiers at the front and those detained as prisoners of war, along with that of civilians in occupied territories and the grief of mourners in the domestic sphere. Whilst this approach may contribute to a shared sense of European experience in the present, the extent to which the museum's presentation of the soldiers can contribute to our historical understanding of their world can be questioned. By introducing the soldiers with such a forceful allusion to their deaths, the museum denies visitors the opportunity to engage with their lives and collective actions, and conditions visitors to view the soldiers as victims throughout the remainder of the exhibition. By universalising the soldiers' experiences, the figures are depoliticised and their national insignia reduced to obsolete tokens (Wahnich and Tisseron 2001, 65). Arguably, the Historial abridges a diverse, multivocal history to a univocal interpretation, in line with the tenets of victimhood-centred cosmopolitanism. The Historial's comparative and transnational approach to history influenced the Becker report of 2007, commissioned by the French government in preparation of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war. According to Farrugia (2015, 74), both the report and the anniversary commemorations need to be considered as part of 'the celebration of the European Union'. Hence this museum, like Kobarid, developed an important role in national and transnational commemorative and reconciliation diplomacy, which in turn contributed to the preservation of its cosmopolitan approach.

The German-Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst fully confirms the constraints museum curators have to work with when international diplomacy is at stake. This museum is a partnership between the two countries. The exhibition, which focuses on the Second World War, has to be negotiated by both partners in a joint committee, made up primarily of historians on the German side and of diplomats on the Russian side. It has a sober, documentary character and uses mostly two-dimensional material, such as official documents, books, posters, photographs, maps and a limited number of three-dimensional

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<sup>1</sup> In the Room of Portraits there is one reference to self-mutilation in an etching by Otto Dix, 'Dead Sentry in the Trench'. The label ends with the following lines: 'Attempts at suicide or self-mutilation were common among all belligerents, and were severely condemned by the command structures.'

objects. Every aspect – in terms of content and display - has to be agreed and the result is a compromise whereby the museum presents visitors with a tightly negotiated narrative.

The compromises to reach a single narrative despite obvious interpretational differences are best illustrated by the way in which National Socialism and Stalinism are presented in the exhibition. For example, in the section dealing with Nazi Germany the exhibition focuses on political and racial persecutions and anti-Semitism. The part of the display dealing with the Soviet Union is more refined. It mentions the violent character of Bolshevik rule and the Stalinist terror, visualized by a propaganda poster from the time of the Great Purge. But it also emphasises Soviet efforts to modernise the country, the industrialisation process, women's emancipation, the electrification and alphabetisation campaigns, as well as the recognition of national minorities and their languages. The selection of objects and images and their subtitles suggests that the mass terror was not a constitutive element of the Stalinist regime, but merely a side-effect of the modernisation process. This is demonstrated clearly by a photograph illustrating the collectivisation campaign in the USSR. The image features women gathering cereal at a collective farm in Ukraine in August 1933. In the forefront of this almost bucolic scene, visitors can see a propaganda truck accompanying the harvesters. Only in the subtitle, they read that the collectivisation campaign was 'accompanied by force, repression, deportation, and finally starvation for five million people, many in Kazakhstan or Ukraine.'

In the exhibition, then, Nazi Germany is presented as the perpetrator bent on a policy of total annihilation, while Soviet Russia is portrayed as the liberator and hero. Following negotiations in the joint committee, there are some acknowledgments regarding the human consequences of the Soviet policy of land collectivisation in the 1930s, the presence of nationalist groups in the Eastern European territories opposed to the Communist partisan movements, and finally the rapes perpetrated by Russian soldiers on German women after the 'liberation'. The exhibition is therefore the outcome of heavy politico-diplomatic constraints and points to a mixture of cosmopolitan intentions brought from the German side into the negotiations and antagonistic elements brought to the table by the Russians.

Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory is located in the administration building of the former German Enamelware Factory run by Oskar Schindler. The museum's main stakeholder is the city council, which financed the project and owned the property, donated to the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków in 2007. A Committee with representatives from the city council, the curators and the designers, all with different aims and interests, was responsible for the content and nature of the main exhibition. The socio-political context at

the time is also highly relevant. Steven Spielberg's film on Oskar Schindler, released in 1993 and shown in Poland in 1994, had generated considerable interest in the story of this Nazi and started a flow of tourists to Kraków eager to see his former factory. Alongside the desire to capitalise on an inflow of foreign tourists was the city council's determination not to turn the new museum into a story about a 'good German'. The council, in fact, wanted the exhibition to focus on the history of the city's residents under Nazi occupation. The publication of a book by Jan Gross (2000), which told the story of a massacre of 1,600 Jewish men, women and children in the Polish town of Jedwabne on 10 July 1941, caused very emotional reactions and debates in Poland. This created a context in which various stakeholders on the Committee were keen for the new museum to showcase the deeds of the 'Righteous Among the Nations', that is to say, those Poles who had helped Jews during the war and were consequently awarded this title by the Yad Vashem Institute. Their views prevailed over those of historians who wanted to introduce more contrasting situations, including the stories of Poles who were hostile towards the Jews, turned blackmailers or denouncers and even connived in murdering them. The resulting exhibition, arranged in a chronological and thematic way, is a mix of antagonism and cosmopolitanism, with the Germans portrayed as villains (though partially redeemed by the story of Schindler as hero), the Jews as mainly passive victims and the Poles as both victims and heroes (because they tried to help and save Jews). The exhibition takes a heavily theatrical approach using a range of authentic objects mixed with elements of stage design, props and artistic installations. Indeed, the character of the exhibition is largely determined by the application of theatrical elements such as sound and light. This use of scenography and inauthentic objects, for example, the handwritten letters by children living in the Kraków ghetto, to enhance the visitor experience, are in stark contrast to the sober scenography employed at the Historial, undermining the historical accuracy and veracity of the narratives being told. Moreover, controversial issues like pogroms are not dealt with, even though the first post-war pogrom in Poland took place in Kraków in 1945 - but technically outside the period officially covered by the exhibition. Antisemitism is largely blamed on German propaganda and the role of the Catholic Church in relation to Jews is presented in a very positive light.

Finally, the Dresden Military History Museum was renovated in the 2000s, both in architectural terms and in terms of its permanent exhibition. Following German reunification and the merger of the two German armies, there was a perceived need to give the former German Army Museum a new look and a new direction. In 2001, Daniel Libeskind's architectural studio won the competition for the new design in a daring intervention. The

exhibition is discussed in further detail in the following section, as it shows elements of conflicting perspectives and critical reflection akin to an agonistic approach. Nevertheless, the museum itself comes under the authority of the Bundeswehr and has to fulfil an important PR and diplomatic role for the latter. In addition, it has the official normative function to educate soldiers to ‘the values and norms of the liberal democratic order’. This means that even in the case of this museum, which favours a critical approach aimed at displaying dissent and conflicting positions, political, diplomatic and corporate considerations act as considerable constraints.

### **Opportunities for agonism in war museums: stakeholders and displays**

As well as acting as constraints upon museum exhibitions, thereby severely limiting a critical approach to conflict and war-making, politico-diplomatic factors can at times have the opposite effect, thus promoting critical reflection on difficult and controversial heritage. We can refer to windows of opportunity that open in specific circumstances and historical junctures. One example is provided by the above-mentioned Dresden Military History Museum. As stated by historian Gorch Pieken (2013, 63), one of the experts who in the 2000s collaborated with the museum on its new exhibition, ‘The museum looks back on more than 110 turbulent years of history’, which is reflected in the vicissitudes of the institution. From 1897 to 1989, in fact, the building housed the collections of successive armies: the Royal Saxon Army, the Imperial German army, the Nazi Wehrmacht, and then the army of the GDR. Following the end of the Cold War and German reunification, roughly 20,000 soldiers of the East German army became part of the Bundeswehr, which faced the need to renovate the museum’s display, clearly marking its transition to a military institution embedded in a democratic country. This historical juncture thus represented an opportunity for breaking with traditional approaches to war and conflict.

More importantly, the end of the Cold War coincided with a search for a new identity on the part of the Bundeswehr, due to various factors. First, after 1990 the German army ‘lost [its] *raison d’être* [...] The initial reaction was that the Bundeswehr was an unnecessary institution that had outlived its usefulness’ (Arrington 2002, 539). This loss of direction was reflected in a decline in public support, which started to be reversed once it began to be involved in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations abroad. Second, in the 1990s the exhibition ‘War of Annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944’ (‘*Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*’), popularly known as the *Wehrmachtausstellung*, re-opened the debate on the role of the Bundeswehr’s predecessor.

The exhibition was shown by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research in thirty-four German cities, including Dresden, between 1995 and 1999, and attracted close to one million visitors. As Tymkiw argues (2007, 485), it soon became ‘a lightning rod for political controversy, which included demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, a petition to close down the exhibit [...] and the bombing of the exhibition building in Saarbrücken’. According to Nugent (2014, 250), ‘No previous exhibition or event [had] been able to pit entire generations of Germans against one another to the extent that the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* did; nor had it ever been necessary to offer psychological and pastoral counselling to exhibition visitors’. As well as causing controversy at all levels of society from the Federal government to individual families, the exhibition also incited the largest neo-Nazi protest since the Second World War, which took place in Munich.

The representations offered at the Dresden museum would arguably not have been possible without the controversies caused by the *Wehrmachtsausstellung*. The contentions raised by this exhibition around the participation of the ordinary German soldier in rape, massacres and the Holocaust were, in fact, generally accepted by the time the renovation process at the MHM started. Thanks to the new political context, in 2001 academics and museum practitioners began to develop bold and innovative ideas for a new exhibition, challenging the dominant local collective memory. As is well known, the broadly conservative city of Dresden tends to project itself as victim rather than perpetrator: ‘The city is a reminder that the German people also view themselves as victims of World War II’ (Popp, 2011).

The resulting exhibition challenges visitors in diverse ways, provoking reflection on the multiple causes and consequences of war, questioning the contradictory function of technological advances, exploring Dresden’s dual role as perpetrator and victim, and showing the nefarious use of seemingly innocuous objects such as children’s toys during the Nazi regime. Libeskind’s architectural intervention can be interpreted as an agonistic gesture, signifying a critical reflection on war in general and on the city of Dresden in the Second World War in particular. Consisting of a glass and concrete wedge seemingly penetrating the original museum located in the military barracks of Dresden, the new architecture provokes and unsettles in different ways; not insignificantly in disrupting a classical nineteenth-century building which had survived the city bombing. This wedge also creates the possibility of visiting the permanent exhibition using two different circuits: one chronological, typical of military history museums; and the other thematic, typical of a cultural history approach. These different circuits point to an approach which embraces different perspectives. Indeed

Basu (2007, 67) has argued that Libeskind's museum architecture can be defined as labyrinthine, inasmuch as it disrupts any grand narratives and potentially generates 'a diversity of paths and stories'.

This multi-perspectival approach is also present in the objects on display, for instance, the military-inspired outfit in chainmail designed by Vivienne Westwood, but also in how objects are displayed. For example, next to the imposing V2 rocket, an object of fascination for many visitors to war museums, photographs taken at the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp are exhibited, where the rocket was built. Furthermore, in the chronological section of the permanent exhibition, shoes belonging to Holocaust victims from the Majdanek extermination camp are exhibited next to display cases dedicated to military action, suggesting the cause and effect relationship of war. Finally, on the ground floor of the exhibition, visitors cannot miss a computer installation by artist Charles Sandison, called *Love and Hate*. These two words are projected onto a large wall, in a loop, in an encounter that suggests agonism (Pieken 2013). The work has been programmed so that there is a 50/50 chance that 'love' will transform into 'hate' or vice versa. This confrontation is constantly changing and points to the role of emotions and passions in socio-political and military conflicts being fully acknowledged in the exhibitions at this museum. Cercel (2018) has developed these examples of an agonistic mode of remembering in the permanent exhibition at the MHM, enhanced by the use of artistic installations.

However, as Molden (2017, 129) argues, if we are to understand memory in hegemonic and counterhegemonic terms we must acknowledge that the 'material dimension of memory is crucial' and hence 'Mnemonic hegemony theory aims to capture precisely this intersection between material structures, social experience, and discursive practices'. The main exhibition at the MHM tends to overlook material structures and socially grounded struggles, focusing instead on the human and anthropological propensity towards aggression and war. According to Heckner (2016), this approach prevents the museum from engaging with current socio-political struggles at a local level, epitomised by the revival of radical-right, anti-immigrant movements. Heckner labels the institution a 'bystander museum', 'largely refraining from taking positions on issues'. This was recently addressed by two temporary exhibitions: 'an exhibit on Rechtsextreme Gewalt in Deutschland 1990-2013 (Radical right-wing violence in Germany 1990-2013) and a current photo exhibit on a right-wing terrorist group in Germany by the artist Regina Schmeken, entitled *Blutiger Boden*' (Heckner 2016, 367-8). According to Cercel (2018), the former exhibition was able to address issues of social exclusion and inequality related to material structures and the

dismantling of the welfare state, linking them with the rise of the far right. These displays were highly relevant, given the existing tensions in the city of Dresden between neo-Nazi and anti-Fascist protestors which further underline the complex relationship between different groups in this broadly conservative city (Wichmann 2013).

As this section has shown, politico-diplomatic factors can provide opportunities for curators and historians to develop agonistic and dissonant elements in museums' permanent exhibitions, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in any specific context. However, without at least some degree of mobilisation of, and engagement with grassroots social movements, the impact of the museums in countering hegemonic representations and their degree of independence from state apparatuses remain limited. Albeit well intentioned, their educational role would not be able to resonate beyond sympathetic audiences. In short, as Molden (2016, 140) argues, 'The success of any narrative greatly depends on the social audibility and power of the voices that promote it'. Where those voices are restricted to the political and diplomatic elites and scholarly experts, the narratives cannot reach the socially and politically marginalised, the increasingly angry yet powerless groups who across Europe have found collective agency in movements that scapegoat migrants and minorities as opposed to establishing links of solidarity with them.

### **Experimenting with agonism in a war exhibition**

Leaving aside the issue of stakeholders and focusing on form and content, how can we envisage an agonistic exhibition of war? Is it possible to promote agonism without falling into a binary antagonistic representation of victims and perpetrators and without justifying the perpetrators? What are the limits and pitfalls of open-endedness and the absence of a master narrative? This section addresses these questions in light of a new war exhibition planned as part of the UNREST project, at the Ruhr Museum in Essen, Germany, in late 2018.

The exhibition with the provocative working title 'War Makes Sense' (WMS) is based on the assumption that most museum visitors from the Ruhr Valley share a cosmopolitan outlook on war and genocide acquired through media consumption, school education, and previous visits to museums and memorials. This commonsensical cosmopolitan outlook connects warfare to the age of ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and foregrounds antagonistic groups and societies, often inspired by extreme nationalistic sentiments, as confronting each other in the first and the second World War. The resulting catastrophes, so the story continues, taught Europeans and especially Germans the value of peaceful cooperation ushering in an unprecedented era of peace and economic prosperity across former World War



and Cold War battlegrounds. This popular pacifism, closely linked to Germany's and Europe's turn towards self-critical memory politics in the 1980s and 1990s, relegates war mongering to a bygone dark age and celebrates Europe's moral progress (Levy and Sznajder 2006).

WMS challenges the cosmopolitan consensus by documenting that going to war and committing genocide and ethnic cleansing has also made perfect sense to intelligent and reasonable people in the past and present. For that purpose, WMS selectively engages with five wars and three thematic foci that have had significant relevance for the population in the Ruhr Valley. The wars range from the First and Second World Wars and the wars in former Yugoslavia to the on-going wars in Afghanistan and Syria. Within this transnational frame of reference, the exhibition highlights how war, aerial warfare, genocide, and flight and expulsion are justified and remembered during and after the fact.

Consider for example the most prominent propaganda tale of 1918, i.e., the stab-in-the-back myth claiming that Germany's army had not been defeated by the enemy but betrayed by Germany's left wing parties which staged a revolution, and promptly abandoned the German troops. On the one hand, the myth amounts to little more than a vicious conspiracy theory already crafted by the German high command during the war to distract from its colossal mistakes. On the other hand, during the Weimar Republic the myth captured the imagination of many veterans who felt deceived by their government having suffered through a brutal war and facing the consequences of defeat. Is there not a case to be made for the average soldier's reasonable sense of betrayal?

By way of another example WMS relates different gestures of mourning for war heroes. The exhibit includes an original post-war honour roll from Rheinberg featuring photographs of the city's 77 young men killed during World War I, a photograph of soldiers lighting candles at the memorial for fallen Bundeswehr comrades in Kundus, Afghanistan in 2013, and, if feasible, a Taliban poster honouring the suicide bomber Mohammed Yousuf alleged to have killed 23 and injured 29 in an attack on the headquarters of the paramilitary Afghan Civil Order Police in 2016.

The history of modern warfare provides ample opportunity to construct contradictory memories that exceed the comfortable trajectories of antagonistic and cosmopolitan master narratives. On the one hand, the endless wars in Afghanistan seem to attest to a military-industrial-political complex run amok; on the other hand, ending the war in the current terms might not be in the best interests of the West and many Afghans. On the one hand, military deserters should be heralded as cosmopolitan heroes; on the other, even the German deserters

of the Second World War have never been recognised for their anti-fascist resistance because desertion jeopardises all military missions, including legitimate wars. In this fashion, for each topic, WMS seeks to assemble competing viewpoints that call into question well known antagonistic and cosmopolitan emplotments and under ideal circumstances give rise to interpretive unsettlement as well as improved understanding of unfamiliar subject positions.

The strategy of rigorous multi-perspectivity and multi-directionality raises questions as to its limits and purposes. With regard to aerial warfare, it makes sense to provide the perspectives of its competent detractors, for instance soldiers and political leaders, in addition to the perspectives of victims and bystanders of such warfare. The voices of German, Japanese, and Serbian civilians surviving the horrors of carpet-bombing, nuclear strikes, and ‘precision-bombing’ can be presented next to the voices of those who ordered and implemented the attacks. But where are the limits of multi-perspectival genocide memory? Should the position of the Turkish government, which argues vehemently that the death of between 660,000 and 1.2 million Armenians does not amount to genocide, be displayed right next to the testimony of the survivors? And what about Holocaust memory which has long been the ultimate test case for probing the limits of historical interpretations and historical taste? The opinions of Holocaust deniers cannot be exhibited in Germany for legal reasons but the motives of Nazis and their helpers who committed genocide can be presented next to memories of the survivors. The contextualised voices of perpetrators should help the public understand the discursive framework that make human slaughter appear ‘reasonable’ or even ‘necessary’ prompting the visitors to explore self-reflectively their own relationship to the perpetrators’ perspective. The agonistic approach is thus multidirectional, not only in the sense that it cuts across the material interests and political cultures involved in past genocides, but also in the sense that it invites the museum visitor to understand the material interests and political cultures leading up to present-day mass murders and mass death, be it in Syria, Afghanistan or in the waves of the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, WMS can legitimately engage with the full range of memory preferences available in today’s Europe.

The constellations of competing opinions result in a multi-voiced, discordant chorus, with each voice speaking from its socially and historically recognisable position without being subjected to an overarching, moralising curatorial narrative. WMS features a subdued expert component acknowledging its agonistic objectives and presenting facts and contexts for events under discussion, for example, state of the art assessments about the extent and number of victims for specific bombing campaigns and human rights violations. The overall curatorial strategy of WMS presents a significant, hopefully intriguing challenge for the

visitors who have to find their way through a maze of opinions and perspectives. According to the curators' intentions, this experience should put visitors in a position to understand how mass perpetration becomes possible and grasp its absolute illegitimacy.

Another specific agonistic intervention of WMS consists of custom-made, entertaining video games in which visitors have to engage with multiple socio-political perspectives through role-playing and have to make decisions about a number of historical and memory dilemmas. In this way, they can gain a better sense of the feelings of ordinary men and women who ended up becoming victims and perpetrators not least because the former faced increasingly choiceless choices and the latter moved in social contexts demanding decisive action. Thus, in one game, inspired by the Battle of the Ruhr, players alternatively take on the roles of bombers and officers on the ground in charge of evacuations. In another, players take on the roles of complex characters, based on real life ones, who are given a chance to save themselves at the expense of others. Through interaction and reflection players gain an understanding of how decisions are shaped by context but also of how the options and responsibilities of the bystanders of history and memory may exact severe moral and political sacrifices and destroy the bystanders' fantasies of non-involvement.

What agonistic goals can be accomplished in this way and what are the risks involved? WMS significantly broadens the spectrum of opinions invited into the institution of the history museum. In WMS, the interpretation of the past and the memory politics of the present are treated as open-ended political processes rather than foregone cosmopolitan conclusions. Moreover, the implicit visitor of WMS is actively involved in the production of meaning as she plots a narrative trajectory through the exhibit's real and virtual landscapes. In fact, a consistent message can only come into existence through the interpretive labour of an (inter)active visitor who sets emphases and takes sides in the battles of memory presented to her. In terms of risks, WMS's serious commitment to listening to others might potentially result in unforeseen (and unwelcome) outcomes, for instance visitors identifying with some of the antagonisms on display without a moment of self-reflectivity. But then again maybe even that experience has an agonistic silver lining in that it takes place in an unlikely location, that is, the kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century German public museum conventionally committed to a cosmopolitan frame of mind.

## **Conclusion**

As this paper has argued, a number of constraints tend to prevent war museums from adopting an agonistic approach to their main exhibitions, due primarily to the multiple roles these institutions play at local, national and international levels. Occasionally these same roles can open up space for agonistic elements. In terms of the content and form of the exhibitions, the subject matter lends itself to agonistic interventions, so that exhibits may be able to help re-politicise and re-invigorate institutional politics of memory and embrace a full range of positions through multiperspectivity and multidirectionality.

However, exhibitions in themselves are not able to put forward a new, clearly delineated, and successfully communicated post-national, non-cosmopolitan collective identity, that is, a new agonistic 'we'. They can only do so if they engage with, and are part of, wider social movements. That shortcoming also applies to the 'War Makes Sense' exhibition at the Ruhr museum discussed above, since it is not a grassroots, bottom-up project linked to an existing political movement but emerges from a collaboration of academics and museum experts eager to stage a memory experiment because they are dissatisfied with the political status quo and its memory underpinnings. For similar reasons, WMS might challenge current cosmopolitan orthodoxy but it will hardly be able to mount an effective challenge to hegemonic neo-liberalism from its privileged vantage point in a publicly funded museum.

In the end, both WMS's design and the empirical case studies discussed above suggest that agonism is easier to conceptualise than put into practice. Agonism emerges in specific constellations of objects, images, texts, and audiences but hardly in the form of a full-blown agonistic memory landscape. Exhibits can be agonistically structured and attempt to build up an agonistic relationship to the socio-political context but they are probably not agonistic in and of themselves in the way that a given exhibit can put on display a thoroughly antagonistic or cosmopolitan master narrative. Therefore, experiments in agonism carry a greater risk of being misunderstood than their antagonistic and cosmopolitan counterparts. On the plus side, however, the thick descriptions of perpetrators', victims', and bystanders' points of view characterising agonistic exhibitions prompt visitors to experience a homeopathic sense of interpretative unsettlement, as they develop an understanding for unfamiliar and unwelcome subject positions and find their usual memory positions temporarily unavailable.

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