

Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions. Wolfgang Muchitsch, ed. Edition Museumsakademie Joanneum, vol. 4. Bielefeld, Ger.: Transcript Verlag, 2013. 223 pp.*

Reviewed by James B. Seaver

Does war belong in museums? The title of this book might suggest to potential readers that the contributors to this volume grapple with this question at length, proposing alternate sites where the horror and destruction of war might be better represented than within the static walls and display cases of the museum. For the most part, they do not. Rather, the 21 individuals whose essays appear here begin with the premise that war does indeed belong in museums. The complicating question—and the central theme of this splendid volume—of course, is how exactly the violence, trauma, and devastation of war should be represented in historical exhibits.

More than ever before, curators at military and war museums are mindful of their special role in shaping the public's understanding of past conflicts and therefore scrutinize their own work with increasingly critical eyes. As editor Wolfgang Muchitsch explains in the introduction, the task before them is essentially a balancing act:

More or less every museum is at one time or another confronted with displaying topics of war and violence. And, in most cases, the presentations of war and violence oscillate between, on the one hand, the fascination of terror and its instruments, and on the other hand the didactic urge to explain violence and, by analyzing it, make it easier to come to terms with or prevent. [10]

Curators know that many patrons visit their institutions because they are lured there by their own voyeuristic desire to see the machinery of death and destruction as well as its impact upon those people who found themselves on the receiving end. The curators' challenge, then, is to responsibly design exhibitions that give the public a little bit of what they expect to see without glorifying war and while simultaneously using their visit as an opportunity to pose new questions and initiate wider debates about war's place in modern society.

This challenge and several others are outlined in Jay Winter's superb opening chapter on museums and the representation of war. He observes that war museums, unlike most other museums, almost always function as both museums and memorials to the combatants; as such, they must find a way to bring both the sacred and the profane together harmoniously under one roof. This process is inherently political as multiple interest groups with competing memories weigh in on the design (whether their opinion was solicited or not) and is driven by practical concerns such as how to find enough money to pay the staff, maintain the collections, and keep the lights on. "In a nutshell," Winter writes, "war museums entail choices of appropriate symbols and representative objects, arrayed in such a manner as to avoid controversy especially among veterans, to hold the public's attention and to invite sufficient numbers of visitors to come so that

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the bills can be paid” (23). He warns curators not to whitewash the horrors of war and to make clear to patrons that there are limits to what can be represented within the walls of the museum. The real conditions of the battlefield can never truly be replicated in all of their confusion and horror within an exhibit comprised of silent guns, faded uniforms, and black and white photographs. To suggest otherwise would be to do the public a profound disservice by portraying war as far more ordinary and comprehensible than it actually was.

Like Winter’s keynote address, the other articles in this book grew out of a September 2011 museum studies conference in Austria that drew scholars and museum practitioners from throughout the United States and Europe. Accordingly, the text rarely deviates from the standard conference format in which discrete and localized case studies reflect upon different approaches to the problems of historical representation—most of them stemming from the first and second world wars—outlined in the introductory chapters. That is not to say that this volume makes for dull, tedious reading—far from it! Most readers with an interest in the history of violence and modern war, memory studies, museum methodology, or the politics of representation will find something of value within these pages.

For example, Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining, both curators of armed forces history at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, provide a brisk yet engaging overview of the evolution of war museums as they shifted from the trophy halls and armor collections typical of the 19th and early 20th centuries to the polished, intentionally ambiguous, and sometimes even immersive re-creation-style exhibits found today. A sea change occurred in the 1980s, they note, when curators began to embrace the “new military history” (i.e. the innovative approaches of social and cultural history directed toward military topics) that had already begun to transform other corners of academia around that time. New emphasis upon the everyday experiences and contributions of ordinary soldiers, women, minorities, and other previously neglected groups radically transformed the kinds of exhibits that had existed in the past and the stale stories of war that they had told. In this vein, other contributors to the volume highlight the various changes and challenges facing a multitude of war museums spanning across Europe as they have worked to bring their institutions in line with these recent developments.

On this side of the Atlantic, Robert M. Ehrenreich and Jane Klinger of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum draw the reader’s attention back to the moral responsibility curators at war museums have not to overlook the experiences of noncombatants during wartime, especially those of victims who perished in unprecedented numbers during the Second World War. In particular, they address “the problem of conveying that the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust were real people with real lives and families. How can an exhibition return the humanity to all the people murdered in the chaos of war when the numbers discussed are literally incomprehensible?” (146) The strategy they propose—and one for which museums are uniquely suited—is to draw the visitors’ attention to personal objects once attached to individuals and prompt them to ask themselves what they would do if they were in those people’s situations. More importantly, doing so reminds visitors that these people had lives of value and were once part of thriving prewar communities. To display a wedding ring, a family photograph, or a personal souvenir along with the poignant personal stories attached to them shows that these people were defined by far more than the tragic circumstances of their deaths. While Ehrenreich and Klinger discuss this strategy in relation to noncombatants, they are certainly not the only

museum professionals to adopt it. In fact, the very best war museums today routinely highlight the stories, experiences, and possessions of ordinary soldiers and civilians as a matter of course, providing a richness to the museum experience that never existed in the days when such museums primarily featured biographies of great generals, wall-sized tactical maps, and displays of artillery pieces.

In sum, this is an insightful and intriguing volume worthy of wider readership among scholars and museum professionals in the United States than many academic texts published by foreign presses usually receive in this country. Taken as a whole or in excerpts, this collection of articles will prove useful for researchers as well as for instructors looking for practical, approachable texts suitable for use in undergraduate- or graduate-level history, anthropology, or museum studies courses. It is sure to inspire many lively classroom discussions in response to the book's central question offered in the title. Perhaps, as Jay Winter so provocatively suggests, students may come to see that:

war belongs in a museum because [museums] have a semi-sacred aura. They are the repositories of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we have come to be who and where we are. In light of the fading of the conventional churches in many parts of the world to retain [their] previously central place in our moral lives, where else can we find a venue for posing difficult moral questions concerning war? Museums are places where we pose questions the liturgy and the clergy no longer reach. [24]

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