

Piotr Semka

Review of the document: 'Functional and Content Programme of the Main Exhibition', produced by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, that is the team of: prof. dr hab. Paweł Machcewicz, dr hab. Piotr M. Majewski, dr Janusz Marszalec, and dr hab. Prof. KUL Rafał Wnuk. The document is dated January 2016.

1. Analysis of the text section entitled: The Functional and Content Programme of the Main Exhibition.

The authors of the programme write 'it is the mission of the Second World War Museum in Gdańsk is to create a modern facility telling the history of the war as the gravest cataclysm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.'

Doubts arise about the expression: 'cataclysm' used in the very opening of the draft programme. Admittedly, the phrase has been used when referring to the Second World War, though in very general, metaphoric speeches. Much more often, especially in the first three years following the war, reference was made to the invasion of the free world by the Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. Actually, the ambiguous position of the Soviet Union being both an aggressor, and a party engaged in combatting the Third Reich, was overlooked, particularly in the countries under the Soviet domination, this however did not alter the fact that it was clearly highlighted who waged the war, and who was the victim of the invasion, just as the identity of those who first halted Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo

in the attempt of conquering the whole world and then brought Germany and Japan to capitulation.

The phrase ‘cataclysm’ is not incidentally used to refer to natural calamities. Frequently, events of the kind have nothing to do with human activity. Contrary to the above, the Second World War broke out as the result of aggression of specific countries. In the case of Germany – this came as the effect of the policy moulded by Adolf Hitler – a politician elected in democratic elections and supported by a substantial part of the German society. Up to the Stalingrad defeat, a vast majority of the German population not only backed Hitler’s war targets, but benefited to varying extents from the policy of plundering exploitation of the occupied Europe. The same was true of the Italian (up to 1943) and Japanese societies. The war with its dramatic crop crept into the Axis states only when bomb raids of Germany began and the allied forces put their foot on the Italian soil. Numerous historians share the view that the air raids did not erode the German mass support for the Third Reich leader to any substantial extent.

The expression (cataclysm) further suggests helplessness of the humans facing the events. Contrary to that, the essence of the war laid in a clash of the predatory and criminal ideology of Nazism with the dedication of the population and the armed forces of the democratic societies and the courage they demonstrated staging mass military and civilian resistance despite the occupation, to name e.g. the Polish, the nations of Yugoslavia, or Greece, and though with multiple reservations – the Czechs, Slovaks, Norwegians, or French.

The authors write:

‘The goal is still ahead of us, since even though more than 70 years have elapsed since the outbreak of the Second World War there is no museum either in Europe or the world which would show a comprehensive picture of the developments and nature of the conflict.’

It is hard not to refrain from voicing numerous reservations when reading those

words. Admittedly, there has been no museum which would be dedicated to the Second World War alone, however, the Imperial War Museum in London was set up as early as in 1917 to commemorate the struggle of Great Britain in the First World War, broadening its programme to include World War II after the subsequent war. Indeed, since the nineteen eighties the exhibition has taken note of the post-war conflicts and been expanded to include the Holocaust of the Jewish population, though the British experience of both wars remains its core.

It is elevating to read that ‘one of the Museum’s prime goals is to show the world the war-time experience of Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in many aspects different from and little known to the Western Europe and countries outside Europe’ and that ‘incorporation of the Polish history in the European and global perspective will enable the visitors from outside Poland to gain a better understanding of the Polish experience.’

The text, however, continues to say that ‘the narration focuses primarily on the fates of individual people, communities, and nations. The military history, even though represented abundantly in the main exhibition through attractive exhibits, plays no other role than that of the background against which the story of the daily lives of civilians and the military, of the terror of occupation, of such phenomena as genocide, of resistance against the occupant, and the large-scale politics is told. The purpose of the approach is to capture the unusual nature of the Second World War experience in Poland where the heaviest life losses were suffered by the civilians subject to extermination for political and racial reasons under the German occupation, and ideological and class reasons under the Soviet rule. Here too, the unique phenomenon of the Polish Underground State built on social self-organisation existed.’

Writing the above sentences, the authors contradict themselves. Why should the suffering of the Polish nation – immense as it was – be an argument against the presentation of an exhaustive picture of the military developments?

After all, the Polish story of the Second World War is woven of both: armed struggle and civilian anguish. Why should the two be separated or prioritised?

The authors write weird sentences. The 'military history' is intended to play no other role than that of 'the background against which the story of the daily lives of civilians and the military' is told.

How does this translate to practice if we speak of the soldiers? Will the exhibition show the daily chores, the food and pastime of Anders' men while treating the battle of Monte Cassino as nothing more than the backstage?

As concerns the Home Army or Peasants' Battalions, will it focus on how the partisans provided for food, how they slept in dugouts, or manage the washing in their forest lives whilst treating their fight against the Germans or skirmishes with the collaborating formations of the Lithuanians or Ukrainians only as „the setting”?

What is the rationale behind this emphasis on the 'day-to-day life'? Why should the military history be reduced to the background? Why do the authors consider this limitation so obvious that they even do not explain the reasons of their choice?

Indeed, the Polish fought on almost all fronts of the Second World War, so should they not be willing to say that to the visitors from Poland and abroad?

The authors of the project divide the exhibition into three major blocks:

The first – 'The Road to War', the second – 'The Horror of War', and the third – 'The Long Shadow of War'. They say that 'the arrangement into the above blocks serves only the function of injecting order.'

It is hard to share the view. While one can see the identification of the blocks 'The Road to War' and 'The Long Shadow of War' logical, the motto chosen to signal the middle section ('The Horror of War') triggers opposition. Firstly, central to the exposition, the block must be much larger than either the first, or the last one.

Secondly, here too we see that the bias underlying the programme, i.e. to tell the story of martyrdom, not the history of combat, comes to the fore.

Admittedly, no mentally sound human denies that war carries horror, but it is not without a reason that we honour those whom the horror of war does not reduce to passivity, cowardice, servility to the invaders, or limit them to fight for their own survival, possibly that of their next of kin. Telling the story of war one should not conceal its atrocities, but all along one should highlight the toughening up of the character, the resourcefulness of the resistance, and social solidarity. Nor should one omit what has always fascinated people – the personalities of the commanders, the quality of the combat tactics, and the bravery in the battlefield.

For years on end its complaints were voiced, sometimes rightly, that the stories of the leaders and battles were blind to the suffering of the rank and file. Today, we observe a swerve in the opposite direction: focusing only on the fate of the civilians with literally programmed marginalisation of the pride in the military history.

In the case of Poland which can take pride in the scale of its armed effort, the tendency is astonishing.

Analysis of the assumptions underlying individual Blocks.

Referring to Block No. 1 named ‘The Road to War’, the authors write:

‘The block shows that the post-Versailles order following the First World War turned out very fragile. The western states weakened by the losses they incurred could not oppose the forces which aimed at revising the peace treaties, led by the

newly formed totalitarian regimes of fascism in Italy, communism in the Soviet Union, Nazism in Germany, and the Japanese imperialism in the Far East.’

The thus formulated overview of the events must give the impression of an incomplete picture of the developments.

Firstly – it is hard to grasp why the authors of the exhibition waive an overview of the First World War, brief as it might be. From the Polish perspective, it is more important than one might think, since in effect of the First World War Poland regained Pomerania and the Poznań region seized during the partitions of 1772-1793, plus gained a part of Upper Silesia. The German expansionism of the Kaiser era turned into revanchism after the lost First World War.

The democratic Weimar Republic represented the same dangerous trend, even before the Nazis. It was revanchism, which inclined the state led by Friedrich Ebert, Paul von Hindenburg, or Gustav Strasseman to engage in secret military cooperation with the Soviet Russia.

Those facts reveal how inaccurate it is to identify the moment the war-oriented tension developed only with the Nazis’ gaining the rule in 1933.

There is no mention of the scale or cruelty of the Bolshevik revolution and civil war in Russia. The authors of the exhibition fail to notice that the shock evoked by the scale of the Bolshevik atrocities led the societies of Italy or Germany to the illusive belief that only „strong people”, not democratic systems, would prevent the spreading of communism all over Europe and the world.

In the note from the authors of the exhibition programme, devoted to the presentation of the Italian fascism, we read:

‘The visitors can also listen to inspired speeches of the Italian dictator which from our perspective are on the verge of being comical.’

If the aim is to help the young visitor grasp the brooding and extensively demoralising essence of fascism, a film strip with Mussolini’s recorded rally rhetoric, today ‘verging on being comic’, will be less touching than what could be conveyed when playing a fragment of an Italian film tape showing the terror of the ‘black shirt’ armed hit squads, e.g. the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, a socialist politician, in 1924. The same goes for the Soviet Russia: it would be proper to devote more space to the system of lagers and depict the scale of the slavery toil of millions of victims. The Polish thread of the tragedy which should be present in a Polish museum is the extermination of our fellow countrymen from the so-called Polish regions called after Dzierżyński and Marchlewski in 1937 and 1938.

As concerns section 2. – space 2.1, it is surprising to see that the literary record of the civil war in Spain is limited to the reports of two authors fighting on the same side – the Republicans, while there is no report by any writer on Franco’s side. Admittedly, the views of Ernest Hemingway froze at the stage of uncritical fascination with the Republic, while George Orwell described the brutality of the communists’ suppression of the anarchist POUM movement; nevertheless, both Hemingway and Orwell represent but one side of the conflict.

In space 2.2, Who would die for Danzig?, when outlining the consequences of World War One, the authors of the draft use the expression ‘separation of Gdańsk from Germany’, which implies that Germany was victimised.

‘From day one of its existence, the Free City was a source of German-Polish conflicts’. Do these words imply symmetry in escalating the incidents and feeding hostility? Aggression in those disputes was injected by the Weimar Germany first, and the Third Reich later on. The harassment which ultimately pushed the Polish Republic to building its own port in Gdynia needs to be stated and exemplified clearly.

## Space 3.2 German atrocities in Poland

It is objectionable to put together the victims of the air raids of Poland in September 1939 and those who fell victim of the Einsatzgruppe actions aimed at extermination of the local Polish population. This is a preview of what the same troops of 'masters in crime' did after the outbreak of the war against the USSR, i.e. after 22 June.

Air attacks of the civilians – this is a slightly different, though equally important topic.

It is particularly important to highlight the murders perpetrated in Pomerania and Upper Silesia in the autumn of 1939.

This calls for a separate „space”.

One can imagine selecting and documenting but one of scores of murder scenes with an example of a single village.

The story could start with the engagement of the German minority in compiling the list of individuals proposed for extermination, through the facts linked to the Einstazkommando murders, the typologies of those designated for slaughter – teachers, members of the Polish Western Borderlands Defence Union [*Związek Obrony Kresów Zachodnich*], or activists of the national democracy, and up to the stance taken with respect to the murders by the local Germans not involved in the 'Fifth Column'.

A separate space is needed for the repression of the Polish clergy in Pomerania and Upper Silesia. The West is almost unaware of the fact that the Church was the object of particularly acute hatred of Hitler's supporters, not to mention the scale of the repressions.



What strikes in space 3.1, The defence of Pomerania, is the relatively marginal note of the Westerplatte defence, the fight for the Polish Post in Gdańsk, and Col. Dąbek's defence of Oksywie. There is no mention of the incidents in Bydgoszcz.

Space 3.4, Despite the enemy's prevalence, devoted to the September campaign, makes a scarce mention of the Defence of Mława, the Battle of Wizna, of the Battles of Kutno and Kock. There seems no space left for the epic legend of Maj. Henryk Dobrzański 'Hubal', and the cause thereof instantly comes to mind. The episodes, so vital for Poland, are military in nature; hence the logic followed by the authors of the exhibition pushed them back stage because of giving priority to portraying the torment suffered by the civilian population.

The subsequent spaces: 3.5 (The siege of Warsaw), 3.6 (The Invasion of 17/09/39), 3.7 (The partition of Poland), and 3.8 (The new government and army in the West) do not raise any major reservations.

Nevertheless, the following question comes to mind: Why were they not incorporated in the main section devoted to World War Two? Why does the 'Horror of war' begin with the Finland/USSR winter war of November 1939 instead of the gun shots of the Schleswig- Holstein armoured vessel?

Section No. 5 is sociological in nature mixing presentation of the new logic of war geared against both the military and the civilians with an odd injection of sociology here fulfilling what was presaged in the introduction with a picture of the daily life of the army men. The authors write: 'the section ponders on the issues comprising the war experience of millions of soldiers: the mobilisation, everyday life, communication with their nearest and dearest, entertainment, hygiene, as well as captivity, etc. Alongside, the section gives an overview of the major technical innovations in armament and equipment, which influenced the methods of conducting armed operations.'

I do not question the need to have such a section, but it should come later on.

The German terror of 1939-1940 should go first – the Sonderaktion Krakau, the executions in Palmiry and Wawer, and the setting up of the concentration camp in Oświęcim. This is certainly the place to show a whole range of small scale resistance varieties and the budding of the Polish underground state structures.

The extermination of the Polish elite, i.e. the AB action, and the Katyń massacre, coincide in time – March-April 1940.

Instead, the authors of the exhibition focus once again on the topic of the civilian martyrdom – in the programme, we read: ‘The criminal methods of waging war the Germans first tested in Poland were then employed against other countries. Let us but mention that bombs killed thousands of residents of Rotterdam, London, Belgrade, and Stalingrad. More than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war were killed in PoW camps. Millions of residents of the German-besieged Leningrad and tens of thousands of Jews they put in ghettos were starved to death. The Japanese also murdered prisoners of war and civilians. The allied operations aggravated in brutality over time, too: the British and American air force wiped out German and Japanese cities, one after another, and the Red Army soldiers retaliated against the German prisoners of war and civilian population.’

The latter sentence witnesses the ever-present and pushy portrait of the Germans being the victims. Why is the sentence about the retaliations spoken here – in the story of the years 1940-1941? Indeed, the first Soviet retaliatory action against German civilians came only in October 1944, when the Red Army wiped out the village of Nemmersdorf in East Prussia.

With all atrocities of the war summarised in one place – space 6.1, the Katyń massacre - so important to the Poles – shrinks to nothing among other numerous examples of maltreatment of the prisoners of war.

The same dogma of putting the civilian suffering in the foreground made the authors of the concept have this section of the exhibition dominated by the 871 days of the siege of Leningrad, even though there was no mention of Hitler's invasion of the USSR earlier on.

On the other hand, we learn little of the deportations of the Polish to Siberia and Kazakhstan.

A high priority is given to the bombings, and with all due respect to the tragedy of Rotterdam, Coventry, and London, it was the Germans whom this form of warfare hit gravest.

The chopped narration results in having no emphasis laid on the Polish engagement in the Battle of Britain. It was too early to present the topic in section 3.8, At home and in exile, and later on there is not good place to weave in the story of the Polish pilots.

We are taken back to the German occupation as late as in space 7.1 – again seen from the European, not Polish perspective.

Space 7.2 is supposed to take us through the Soviet occupation discussed in very broad terms, but the visitor will be excused, if his mind goes dizzy. The space deals with the years 1939-1941, even though not that long ago (space 6.2) he was told the story of the siege of Leningrad in the years 1941-1944!

Space 7.3 of the exhibition visualises the Japanese occupation, while space 8.1. reverts to the German terror spread in the occupied territories in retaliation. Why could this theme not have been merged with section 7.1 called 'The German occupation'?

Moreover, why does the section devoted to the Katyń massacre only come afterwards?

If the reader of the draft gets things mixed up, how much more disoriented will the tourist wandering around the museum rooms be?

Space 8.2 goes triumphantly back to the dogma putting the narration of the suffering civilians above and over the military history. In effect, the visitor does not learn how Hitler's invasion on the USSR ends, nor does he learn that Stalingrad put an end to the German thrust into the USSR interior.

He/she will not learn anything about the benefits the German society reaped on exploitation of Europe, or that rank and file soldiers and clerks of the occupational administration would bring things plundered in the occupied countries home to Germany.

The title of the following space 8.2. is: 'Resettlements, deportations, expulsions'. Why do the authors use the last of the terms, typical for the German historiography and propaganda of the wrong done to the Germans?

Indeed, the phrases: 'Deportations and resettlements' would be absolutely sufficient. Is that a bow towards the German historical sensitivity?

There is no reservation to formulate about sections: 8.3 (Forced labour), 8.4 (The system of concentration camps), or 8.5 (Extermination of the ill and handicapped), or about the fact that a separate section is devoted to the Holocaust, even though it repeats some phenomena of sections 8.1-8,4 to an extent, this time emphasising that they refer only to the extermination of the Jews.

Traces of new trends can be found in section 10 (Ethnical cleansing). The traditional vision of the Second World War considered those conflicts as a derivative of the German actions.

A very serious objection must be voiced about the failure to spin off a separate space for the slaughter of the Poles in Volyn within the ethnical conflict area. This is truly scandalous.

Because of the multitude of the sections devoted to martyrdom, the time for the story of the resistance staged by the occupied nations of Europe comes only in section 11.

Here too, the Polish resistance is not dwelt upon separately, but brushed through summarily.

This brushing through actually comes down to an utter waiver, particularly that the Polish resistance deserved to be deemed phenomenal, even if set side by side with the rest of Europe, and can only be compared to the resistance staged by the nations of the former Yugoslavia or Greece.

Hard to believe, the authors do not devote a single separate space to the Warsaw uprising!!! Not a word is said about the Wola massacre; instead, the Warsaw uprising is equalled to the events in Slovakia or Paris. Seeing such a scandalous choice of „blank patches”, it becomes less important that the drama of the Polish Eastern borderlands is totally omitted, though the local Home Army not only fought the Germans, but had to cope with hostility from the Soviet guerrillas, the Lithuanian and Belarus collaborators, and the UPA.

Not surprisingly either, the ‘Allies on the offensive’ of 1944 and 1945 are only dedicated one section - section 14; admittedly, the authors of the exhibition reserve most of the space to the Polish engagement in the war in the West. Even though, the Battle of Monte Cassino disappears and vanishes into thin air. This is actually so! It is no mistake – if I am not guilty of overlooking things, the draft programme of the exhibition of the Polish museum of the Second World War makes no mention whatsoever of Monte Cassino. Nor can one read anything about the combat fought by the ‘Kościuszko’ army.

Section 15., The end of the war, is dominated by the narration of the bitter balance of the war for the nations of Eastern Europe. The question that comes to mind here is: what makes this section stand out versus Block III, The long shadow of war? Once again too, one cannot escape voicing the objection seeing different varieties of the suffering the period brought all given the same status. The authors write: ‘The exposition proper is made up of three separate sub-spaces, each presenting a case of forced migrations of the populations: the so-called repatriation of the Poles from the areas annexed by the Soviet Union, the expulsion of the Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, and the deportations of the Baltic nations and Ukrainians deep into the USSR.’

The Polish or the Balts did not democratically elect the man who set the world on fire – the Germans did. Giving the migrations the same status comes down to forgetting the difference. The last section, section 18: From war to freedom, is a chaotic list of liberation movements of the years 1944-1989.

Overall assessment:

The conceptual idea of the museum gives an impression of an exhibition intended to focus on the war viewed as a cataclysm which fell upon the heads of the Europeans out of the blue – without making distinctions between those who waged the war, those who fell its victims, and those who defeated the aggressors.

The dwarfing of the distinction between the German nation, the nations dragged into war alongside the Third Reich, the nations fighting for freedom, and the separate case of the USSR, has been a relatively common trend over the last 20 years. The message is: the war was terrifying and everyone had their share of

suffering, except for the Holocaust - pain incomparable to anything else. The domination of that logic has proved disastrous to Poland. Our country is commonly perceived as having nothing to boast about with respect to the Second World War, and worse – it is associated with aiding the Holocaust and with the Polish death camps.

Viewed from this perspective, the proposed exposition of the Museum of the Second World War appears to be a compromise between the new, fashionable trends, and apprehension that scandal might erupt and that followers of the traditional vision of the history of Poland might launch an attack on the heads of the Gdańsk institution.

In October 2008, journalists of the 'Rzeczpospolita' tracked down the assumptions for the exposition of the Museum of the Second World War.

As early as in those days, the goal declared by its creators, Paweł Machcewicz and Piotr M. Majewski, was phrased as showing the most recent war as the 'European tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'. Since the new draft goes back to those assumptions in many places, let me recall the theses of the then polemics I started with the then visions of the narration of the Second World War.

According to the 2008 assumptions, the exhibition was to focus on the plagues haunting the societies: the resettlements, ethnical cleansing, bombings, and massacres. The consequence of the perspective is that the history of the Second World War seen as a conflict of the nations is shoved deep into the background. It means that the struggle between the Nazi Germany and its allies on the one hand and the countries which fell victim to them or challenged them on the other hand is pushed aside. Back in 2008, the authors of the draft stressed that 'they were not interested in building a museum of martyrdom of the Polish nation, or the glory of the Polish armed struggle. They made it a point to stress beforehand that such events as the Warsaw uprising would be outlined in brief for the sake of keeping the universal nature of the exhibition.

Today, it is evident that they have adjusted their intentions but marginally.

One could understand such a concept, if a museum of the history of Europe in Brussels were at stake. But this museum is meant to be opened in the country frequently ranked among Hitler's aids in extermination of the Jews. This country should make sure that the glory of the Polish armed struggle and the Polish martyrdom are remembered. Once we have taken care that a visitor from London or Vienna realises our share in putting an end to Nazism, the time will come to expand the exhibition to include more universal themes. It is also hard to remain silent about the fact that presentation of the Second World War as an anonymous suffering of all Europeans is advantageous to the Germans and the nations which collaborated with the Third Reich. When the weight of personal suffering is highlighted, the fact that there were nations which stood up to fight the Germans, and others, which submitted to Hitler's will becomes insignificant. The idea conceived in the country where veterans of the September 1939 campaign, the Battle of Britain, or the battle of Berlin are still alive seems weird.

Why should the Museum of the Second World War reject the logic of chronology? It is chronology which reminds us that the Poles fought longest of all European nations.

Why should we shy away from focusing on our losses at the time when the world is forgetting the scale of extermination of the Polish nation?

Let us recall a quotation from the exhibition draft of 2008: 'Because of the location of the museum and the Polish initiative of calling it to being, the war fate of Poland and the Poles will be highlighted there. This, however, cannot be achieved through belittling the experience of other nations, Germans and Russians included. It needs to be stressed that we do not intend to create a museum of the martyrdom of the Polish nation, or glory of the Polish arms, but a universal institution where the events which took place in Poland will be but a fragment of a broader picture'. Those project assumptions have been adjusted slightly under the weight of broad criticism, but the idea behind the project remains the same as in the year 2008.

During the Second World War, and over the immediately following 20 years the Polish got used to seeing Europe and the world divided against the criterion of the



side taken in the recent war. Some belonged to the victorious coalition, others to the states led by the Nazi Germany which lost the war. Struggle against Hitler ennobled, collaboration brought disgrace.

Neutral nations evoked ambivalent feelings. Those who lost a lot in the war against Hitler, just as the Polish did, compensated their tangible losses with the realisation that at the time critical to our continent they made the right choice. The Polish were proud of having an honourable record of the partisan warfare and a record of active engagement in combat alongside England and the USSR.

Following the then wave of pride in elimination of Nazism, almost all countries took effort to stress their share in the war. France put the figure of Gen. Charles de Gaulle and the Resistance to the fore. Yugoslavia and Greece were proud of their guerrillas. Norway noted it had its own resistance, and Czechoslovakia took pride of its units in the West and paid homage to the Lidice massacre. The disgrace of Rev. Tiso's state would be balanced with the inflated Slovak national uprising. The Austrians would eagerly prove they were an occupied nation.

Even Bulgaria and Romania which remained subordinate to the Third Reich for a long time heralded their participation in the struggle against the Germans in the last months of the war. The conviction that almost everyone fought Hitler echoed the allied propaganda which implied that whole Europe opposed the Teutonic raid a single body. There were the damned countries too, though: Germany for obvious reasons, followed by such states as Hungary or Finland. The Polish had their less official bad memories of the Ukrainians, Latvians, or the Asiatic nations who joined the armed forces of the Third Reich. Did that division exhaust the entire complex reality of the time of war? Obviously not.

The division between the Allies and the Nazis, and the official ideology of the Polish People's Republic shed a veil over the fate of the victims of the USSR. This proved easier since many of those victims, to name e.g. the Baltic nations or the Ukrainians, were actually marked with the stigma of collaborating with Hitler. Even against that background, the Poles found themselves in a quite convenient situation. They could testify to Stalin's crime, and at the same time no one could accuse them of collaborating with the Nazis. It is hard to assess to what extent the situation enabled us to keep a relatively straight moral backbone throughout the times of communism. Although deprived of the Eastern Borderland and hobbled with the communist economy, the Poles took pride in their stance during the war.

It seemed that the capital of this history would increase with independence regained in 1989. We wanted to be the nation who first fought Hitler and the country of 'Solidarity' which was first to challenge the Soviets in 1980. Alas, the more time passed since the end of the war, the more bleak the capital became. This was particularly due to the fact that the Poles, accustomed to think about the war as a battle of the nations: the good and the bad ones, faced a new phenomenon. As of the 1970s, Europe moved to the phase of redefining the essence of the developments of the last war versus the exceptional nature of the Holocaust. This new perspective overshadowed the glory of the military effort to an extent, and the heroism of martyrdom came to the fore. The subsequent question was frequently asked in a context unfavourable to us: did the Poles and other nations of occupied Europe benefit on the slaughter of their fellow citizens? Was sufficient effort taken to oppose the Holocaust?

Another turning point came with the fall of communism and a wave of remembering the harm suffered by the former subjects of the USSR. In release of tension, the Soviet atrocities were vividly brought back to mind, and this in turn rocked the moral clarity of the old template: good allies versus bad Germans. Some publicists from Germany and Eastern Europe exploited the gap and began publicising the Germans, Croatians, or Hungarians as victims – with the “crime of expulsion” opening the list. It was then, in 2005, that a German journalist, Helga Hirsch, asked the following question on the 'Rzeczpospolita' pages: must the pain felt by a German woman whose child was buried during an air raid in Świnoujście be lesser than the pain felt by a Polish woman whose son, member of the underground, was shot in Pawiak? As the German publicist sees it, theses of the type do not turn history up-side-down; quite the contrary, they make it normal.

Is that really so? This depends on the point of view. Many Germans sighed with relief. At last, they could get rid of the stigma of the heirs of 'the gravest evil in the history of times'. This went well with the historic revisionism supported by such academicians as Ernst Nolte who had already pointed out that Stalin's inhumanity should incline us to take a more relative view of the criminal activities of the Third Reich. For us, these new trends coincided with disadvantageous European tendencies. The first Polish glory to fade away was that of the first nation which bravely opposed the Third Reich. Ever since the nineteen nineties, there has been the growing trend of putting the 1939 invasion of Poland alongside other items on Hitler's success list, i.e. the conquering of Austria and Czechia.

Ever more frequently it is accepted that the Second World War actually broke out in 1941, which is convenient to the Soviet and US historians, as well as those who research the Holocaust and link the year with the onset of gigantic-scale genocide perpetrated on the Jews.

Moreover, the recent years have witnessed a gradual loss of identification with the tradition of the effort the allied coalition put into fighting Nazism. America and Great Britain refer to it rather infrequently. Russia focuses on the myth of the big war for the homeland which reverberates in such former USSR countries as Belarus or Kazakhstan. If it ever happens for Russia to go back to the tradition of the anti-Nazi coalition, it either does so fitting into the new trends by pointing out that Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviet army, or trying to court its new allies. For that very reason, during the 2005 celebrations of the 60. anniversary of the war end, the then president, Vladimir Putin, mentioned German and Italian anti-fascists, but kept demonstratively silent about the Polish contribution to defeating Hitler.

There is yet another phenomenon: there is a process in progress of wiping out the Germans' responsibility for the Second World War, as Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz noted rightly in 'Kinderszenen'. The Germans, as the perpetrators of the tragedy of 1933 - 1945 are being replaced with the 'Nazis' or 'supporters of Hitler'. Although adverse to mass responsibility by principle, we cannot consider the process as anything else, but twisting the history. Should this perspective be adopted, we would have to say that the 1939 defence against Hitler's troops was staged by supporters of Rydz Śmigły, and that the Battle of Britain was won by Churchill's pilots. Furthermore, it is impossible to deny that the Nazis enjoyed huge support of the German society virtually until the last day of the war. The Nazis literally bribed the German society with affluence, as Gotz Aly discusses in the book: 'Hitler's Beneficiaries'.

As long as the war rolled far from the German borders, the average citizen of the Third Reich could indulge in life much more than ever earlier in history. 'When the War Entered Germany' – that was the title of a series of articles published by the German 'Der Spiegel' weekly which made it a point to note that the face of that war was nowhere near the horror of the German atrocities in the East. No one in Poland plugs his ears not to hear the stories of tens of thousands of raped German women and girls, or of the victims of the torpedo attack on 'Wilhelm Gustlof'.

Still, one cannot simply miss the fact that the Germans did not experience the numerous forms of torment perpetrated on the Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarussians – the burning down of barns, churches, and synagogues with live people locked inside, the gas chambers, the planned mass executions of representatives and elite groups, the pacifications of entire villages or regions. Back in 2008, the authors of the programme of the Gdańsk museum argued that their concept was driven by the desire to reach the broadest possible group of visitors. Therefore, they proposed to give the exhibition a universal character.

It is hard to share their approach. After all, no one would dare suggest that the Israeli universalise the Yad Vashem. And, the possible outcomes of attempts to bring certain problems to the European level could be seen at Erika Steinbach's exhibition in Berlin. The German media reported that respect was paid to all the expelled, not limited to the Germans, and that was true. However, few noticed that presenting the expulsion topic against the European background included the Germans in the victims' club. The reason why we have resolved to go through this lengthy analysis of erosion of the tradition of pride in engagement in the struggle to fight Hitler is to demonstrate that that very tradition should be the Polish treasure and our capital. We must remind Europe that we fought Nazism on our own initiative and without cowardly indecisiveness. We are truly and deeply indebted to our grandfathers whose heroism has been forgotten in Europe. This is our capital, the capital which does not need adding an artificial air of heroism to it, as the case is with building an aura around the legend of Stauffenberger's conspirators in Germany. By the way, the West happens to discover our capital quite incidentally, as was in the case of the Swedish Sabaton group which recorded a song about the 1939 Polish heroes of Wizna.

One can wonder to what extent the nature of the exhibition will be that of an existentialist homage paid to any form of pain, and to what extent it will highlight the cause-and-effect relationships between the German invasion and its consequences.

Against the wealth of the capital, it seems almost absurd to see wariness among some of our elites about the idea of the historical policy proposed by the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. The degree of mistrustfulness to this concept is

astonishing.

Only against all this background one can grasp why it is so difficult to react calmly to the assumption that the Gdańsk museum will reject the logic of chronology, the factor which reminds us that the Polish fought longest of all European nations. Why should we now, at the time when the scale of extermination of the Polish nation has been forgotten, be sparing in remembering our losses? One thing more. The draft clearly highlights the significance of forced migrations. The topic is important, although only 20 years ago it was deemed less important than the prime Polish war experience - mass slaughters. The political strength of homeland associations in Germany has artificially inflated the motif of 'the expelled' – to use the German terminology. Today, every effort is taken to link it to such phenomena as e.g. expulsions of the Jews. Finding several references to resettlements in the 2008 draft I had every right to see them as following suit of the fashion born on the other bank of the Oder River. Today, I find the same phrase used in the most recent draft.

When arguing with those who criticised their assumptions in 2008, Paweł Machcewicz and Piotr Majewski took ungentlemanly attempts to prove that their adversaries were reducing things to the alternative: focus on the Polish anguish, or European universalism. A good exhibition should reserve space for both. May only the authors of the concept not be surprised about the existing expectation that the fate of our land and our ancestors will be put clearly in the forefront. It would be absurd, if all other capital cities presented the paths of the war emphasising their own praiseworthy actions and their victims, and Gdańsk were the sole place where the share of what was specifically Polish would be measured with apothecary's meticulousness against the new-European historic syncretism.

Final conclusion:

The currently presented concept meets the expectations of the Polish story of the Second World War only to a limited extent.

The exhibition requires substantial alterations.