

FAKE OR REAL

A HISTORY OF FORGERY
AND FALSIFICATION

PRESS RELEASE

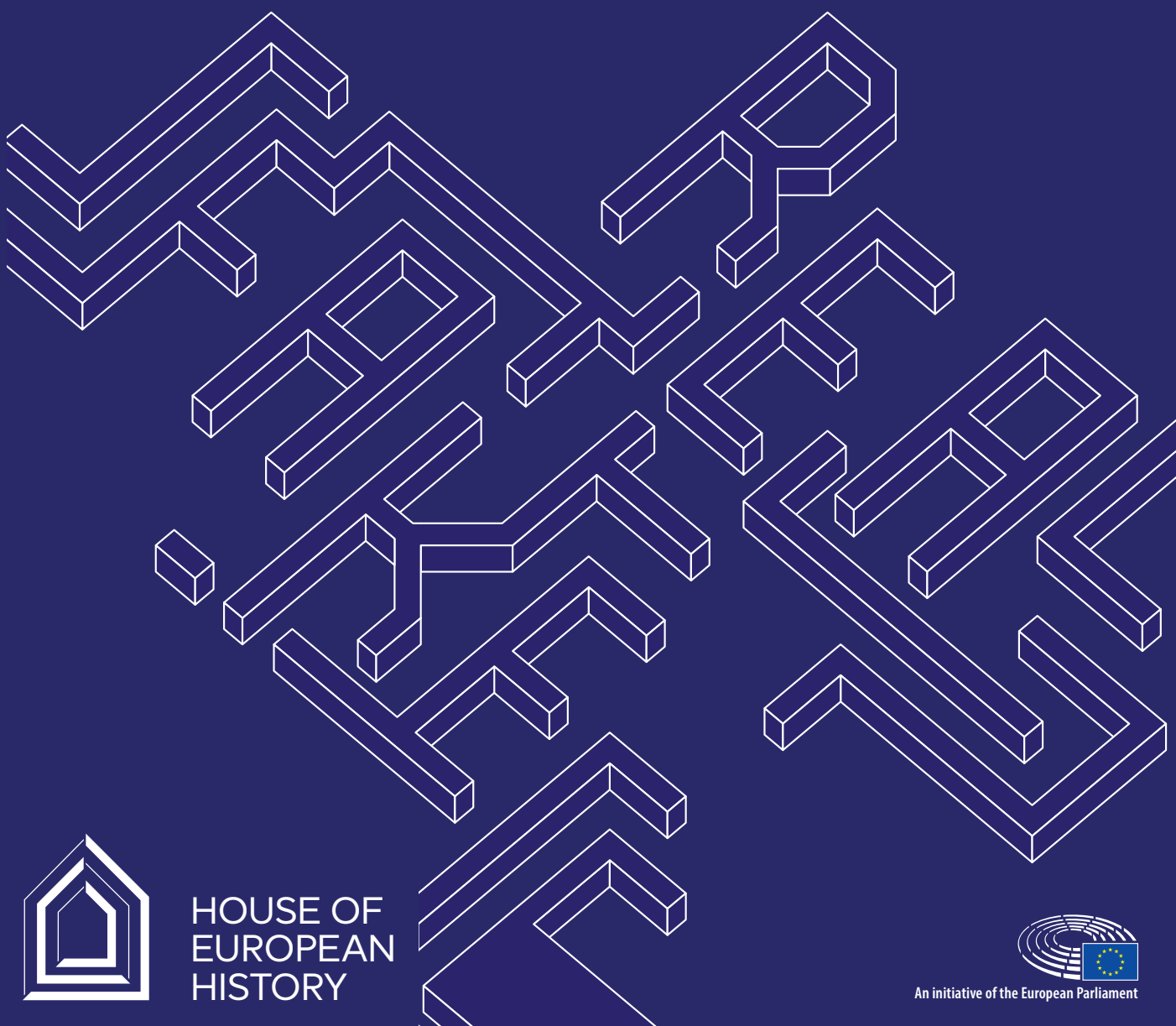


Museum of the Second World War

Museum
of the Second
World War,

Gdańsk

30.07. – 02.11.2025



HOUSE OF
EUROPEAN
HISTORY



An initiative of the European Parliament

The exhibition *"Fake for Real: A history of forgery and falsification"* is organised by the Brussels-based House of European History and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland. The new touring exhibition opens on 30 July 2025 and will be accessible to the public until 2 November 2025. Uncovering the fascinating world of forgery, fakes and falsehoods, visitors will be swept along a dramatic narrative, spanning from antiquity to the present day.

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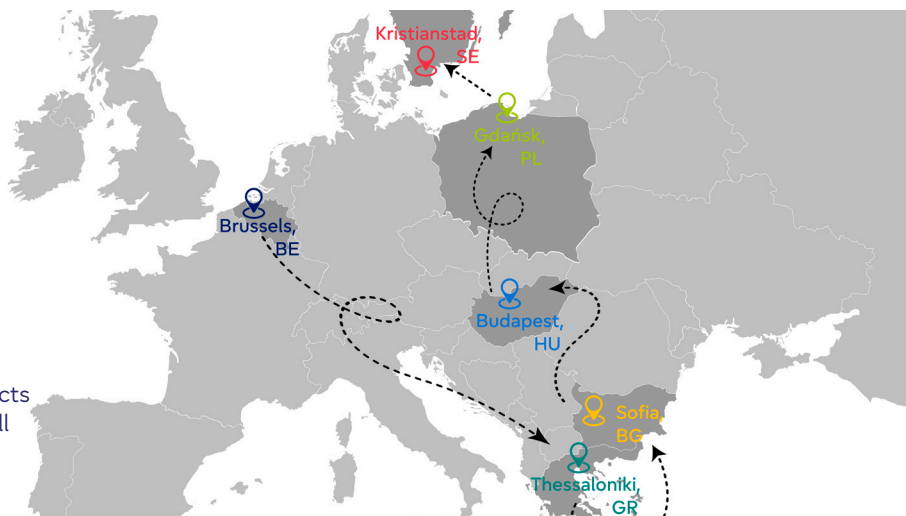
th stop of an exhibition touring in Europe, from Thessaloniki, Greece, to Kristianstad, Sweden

6

themes and a chronological timeline

100

remarkable artefacts originating from all over Europe



The exhibition

Throughout the centuries — in war, politics, the economy and other spheres of human activity — forgery and deceit have been used to advance their creators' goals. Diligently crafted, these complex falsifications hide the facts in a maze of half-truths and complete fabrications. To get to the truth, one needs to follow the thread to the labyrinth's core, discovering and exposing every lie or forgery on the way. We live in a world in which the quantity, spread and prevalence of these distortions have drastically increased.

The exhibition presents falsifications throughout European history, a theatrical journey through the motives, impact and exposure of fakes. It describes the specific historical circumstances that explain their appearance and how they were ultimately debunked.

The artefacts

Each tells a compelling story of deceit — from the erased records of the Roman emperors, manipulated biographies of medieval saints, stories of travel that never happened — to a fake army used by the Allies in WWII. They also include documents of critical importance in our history such as the Donation of Constantine and the letters used to accuse Dreyfus, illustrating how emotions and personal beliefs can affect how we want to understand the world, or deliberately misrepresent it.

The learning programme

The school workshop explores the concept of 'fake', one of today's most widely discussed topics, as a common thread throughout history. This engaging workshop is designed for students aged 12 to 23 to foster media literacy. Participants will analyse, practice, and reflect on disinformation and their own reactions to it. Aligned with the *Fake for Real* exhibition, this workshop raises awareness on how facts, techniques, and emotions can be blended to influence our worldviews, both in the past and present. Students will unravel the complexities of media manipulation and develop critical skills needed to navigate the information landscape.

INTRODUCTION

In the routine of daily life, the sensational, spectacular and supernatural are sweet seduction. They allow us to escape the ordinary. But the game of deception is only fun when we have agreed to it. When we are deliberately deceived, we can lose our money, credibility, integrity — even our lives. While the current quantity of fakes is unprecedented, the problem is an ancient one. History is filled with countless examples of fake masquerading as real.

From the lessons of the past, a roadmap can be pieced together: one that lets us wander into the realm of the fantastical and fabricated, while providing an exit strategy for when we are ready to return to reality.

1. RULING AND PRAYING

What makes power legitimate? Since time immemorial, the political and the religious spheres have bolstered each other's claim to power and legitimacy. Roman emperors became Gods. Popes held temporal power.

Keen to combine religion and political power, the crowning glory for a Roman emperor was deification — becoming divine and immortal. The ultimate punishment by contrast was being forcefully erased from history. In the modern era, the term *damnatio memoriae* was coined to describe this practice. Those condemned were deleted from records, their wills were annulled and their likenesses were destroyed. In Geta's case — murdered on the orders of his brother and co-emperor Caracalla — merely mentioning his name became a capital offence.

As with any coveted item, objects of devotion have a long history of falsification. The cult of relics is no exception. Already in the medieval times, several intellectuals and theologians were critical of false relics. Guibert, abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy (1060-1125), in his treatise "*On the relics of the saints*", formulated arguments against the cult of certain saints and their relics. Guibert ridiculed the abundance of relics attributed to John the Baptist. By the same token, several monasteries in France claimed to possess the body of Mary Magdalene — promoted as 'the apostle of Gaul'.



Coin with an erased profile of Geta following the act of *damnatio memoriae*
Roman Empire, c. 200 A.D.
© House of European History, Belgium



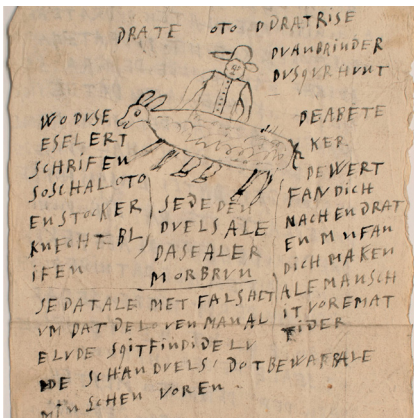
John the Baptist Reliquary, France, 11th century
© Wyvern Collection, United Kingdom

2. UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD

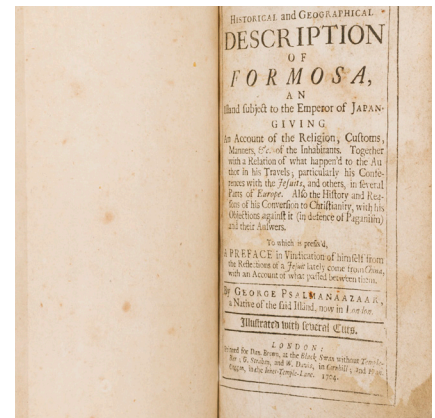
The invention of the printing press ushered in a new era with information becoming available on an unprecedented scale. Lack of control over content created unease akin to today's concerns about fake news, distorted realities and hate speech. The print revolution had many victims. The popularity of texts dealing with witchcraft fuelled a wave of persecution, and led to the deaths of thousands of supposed witches over more than two centuries. Meanwhile, increasingly literate Europeans gained access to books, pamphlets and newspapers empowering them to strive to acquire civil liberties and change the course of history.

False travel narratives have a long history and lasting effects on geographic knowledge, cartography, and expansionist ambitions. French-born George Psalmanazar was able to pass himself off as East Asian, coming from Formosa (today's Taiwan). Gaining allies by converting to Anglicanism, catering to the appetite for accounts of inaccessible faraway lands, Psalmanazar briefly acquired fame and respect — which he lost when his fraud was ridiculed by other travellers whose own accounts were less fantastical.

Science based on empirical research strives to deliver facts. Yet scientists inevitably leave traces of bias in their work. Others deliberately pervert research for personal gain. Charles Dawson was one such man. Finding fertile ground among palaeontologists eager to confirm their own theories, the 1912 'Piltdown Man' hoax took forty years to uncover. Its exposure illustrates the strength of the scientific method. Unlike religion or ideology, scientific knowledge can be disproved, and proved.



Anonymous note accusing pharmacist David Welman of witchcraft and being a werewolf and a witch.
Lemgo, 1642
© Stadtarchiv Lemgo, Germany



George Psalmanzar, *"An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island Subject to the Emperor of Japan"*. Giving an Account of the Religion, Customs, Manners, &c. of the Inhabitants, London, 1705
© House of European History, Belgium



Reconstruction of the Piltdown Man,
Institut Royal des Sciences
Naturelles de Belgique, Belgium
© Bernard Fontanel, DEC

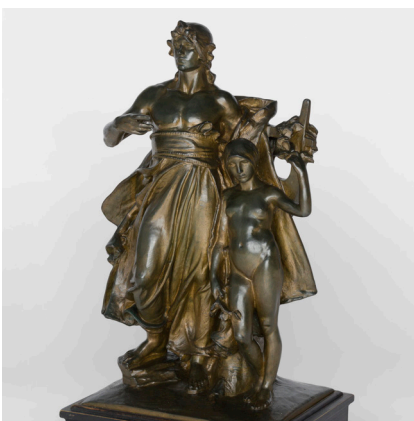
3. UNITING AND DIVIDING

Fakes and forgeries were powerful instruments in the processes of creating ethnic and national identities in the 18th and 19th centuries. All over Europe, 'patriotic' fakes mixed with genuine historical discoveries reinforced national movements. The creation of modern nations required common histories but also common enemies. Forged documents, conspiracy theories and miscarriages of justice were used to create and condemn society's scapegoats, with devastating and long-lasting consequences.

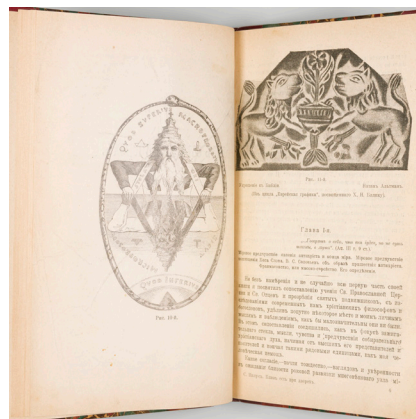
History, literature and art became important political tools in national identity-building in 18th and 19th century Europe. The urge to 'fill the gaps' gave rise to numerous forgeries. Each 'discovery' traced a nation's history as far back as possible and proclaimed its cultural superiority. Even after being exposed as fakes, these stories continued to have considerable influence. For example, the manuscripts of "*Queen's Court*" and "*Green Mountain*" were allegedly discovered in 1817 and 1818 by Václav Hanka, philologist and librarian of the National Museum in Prague. The manuscripts carried a political message, as proof of a Czech democratic tradition and the struggle against foreign attempts to suppress it. Hanka was probably the author of both manuscripts, although he never admitted it.

In 1894, a document was found offering to sell French military secrets to Germany. The crime could not go unpunished. A case was hastily built against Alfred Dreyfus, the only Jewish officer on the French Army's General Staff. On the basis of forged documents, a 'Secret Dossier' and far-fetched 'expert opinions', Dreyfus was convicted of treason and condemned to military degradation and permanent deportation. The 'Dreyfus Affair' divided France, fanned the flames of antisemitism and exposed the exploitable biases of the judicial system.

A conspiracy theory maintains that some covert, highly influential group of people is the cause of dramatic and seemingly inexplicable events. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, published in Tsarist Russia in 1903, claimed to uncover Jewish plans for world domination. This forgery in the form of a conspiracy theory became the most influential antisemitic text of the past hundred years. Although it was soon debunked, the ideas spread, with devastating consequences.



Bard Lumir and Song, Josef Vaclav Myslbek, 19th century Bronze statue
© House of European History, Belgium



4th Russian edition of "*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*", Russia, 1917
© House of European History, Belgium



Illustrated supplement of "*Le Petit Journal*" issued in January 1895 depicting the degradation of Alfred Dreyfus
© House of European History, Belgium

4. FIGHTING WAR

'Truth' has been described, in a phrase whose origin is still uncertain, as "the first casualty of war". War is certainly a time when those engaged in it resort to falsehood and deception. During World War II, all of Europe became a battlefield, and choices of whom to trust had fundamental consequences.

Establishing the facts of crimes covered up and whitewashed by totalitarian regimes became a task for subsequent decades. A notable example is the Soviet Union's denial of responsibility for the Katyn massacre. The exhibition presents it along with the Third Reich's attempts to exploit the facts for their propaganda purposes. It tells the story through artefacts and personal testimonies of the families, who had to wait decades for the truth.

A pen, a rubber stamp, a typewriter, acetone. In the hands of brave individuals, these objects saved thousands during World War II. Throughout Europe, rigorous administration enabled occupying Nazi regimes to identify, deport and exterminate millions of Jews, and anyone else deemed undesirable. A new identity could mean avoiding the concentration camps. Forged documents enabled daring acts of sabotage and espionage. With the right papers, it was possible to cross borders and fake ration cards, saving a person from starvation.

Military deception is used widely during war. Its proper and improper uses are defined by international law. It starts with camouflage, but during the Second World War it went as far as creating an entire 'fake army'. Operation Bodyguard was organised by the Allies at the end of World War II to hide their plans for landing in Normandy. They created dummy military units, fake tanks, inflatable aeroplanes, movements of troops, and fake radio conversations.



The Polish language newspaper of the Union of Soviet Writers 'Nowe Widnokręgi' denying Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre, Lvov (Lviv), 1944
© Private Collection



Image from the film by Imperial War Museum, Visual Deception, APY 31, 1946-1947

5. FAKE AND FORTUNE

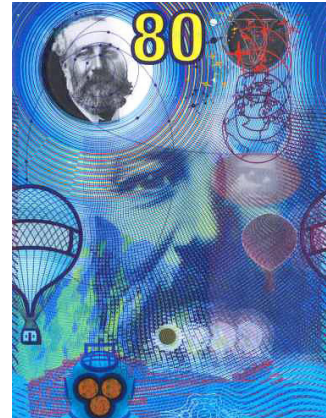
Throughout history, profit has been one of the main reasons for producing forgeries. Works of art, luxury products, everyday consumer goods and currency are forged for financial gain. Faking what people most desire, be it a painting by a Dutch Old Master or high-end brands, has become a key element of the globalised consumerist society that we live in. But fakes have also been used to expose our insatiable desire for "more, cheaper and newer", as in the 'Czech dream' experiment and documentary.

Consider the painting "*Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery*", which Hermann Göring paid 1 650 000 guilders for, convinced that he was buying a painting by Johannes Vermeer. Han van Meegeren, a forger, made millions selling his own paintings as works by Dutch Old Masters. He fooled art experts and Nazi collectors alike. When threatened with charges of collaboration after the war, he confessed to the lesser crime of forgery. From traitor he suddenly became a national hero, a man who swindled Göring. Yet perhaps creating this palatable public image was his last great trick!

'The world's 'second oldest profession', forging currency is as old as money itself. In antiquity, counterfeiting typically involved diluting the quantity of precious metal in a coin with base metals and then covering it with a thin layer of gold or silver. Yet as minting and printing technologies improved, so too did the forger's skillset. Since the appearance of banknotes, increasingly high demands have been placed on the artistic and technical skills of both currency designers and forgers, as each tries to outsmart the other. The long history of counterfeit currency goes hand in hand with that of ingenious design and cutting-edge science.



Han van Meegeren, Interior of St. Lawrence Church in Rotterdam, painted mimicking the techniques of the Dutch Old Masters, The Netherlands, ca. 1913, Oil on board
© House of European History, Belgium

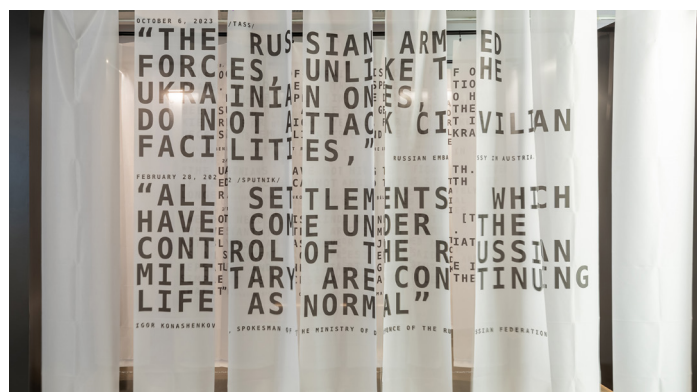


The 'un-fakeable' banknote by Roger Pfund, Geneva, 2012
© House of European History, Belgium

6. THE ERA OF POST-TRUTH?

The term 'post-truth society' describes a culture in which public opinion is shaped by emotion and personal belief rather than by facts. 'Fake news' is often considered its most apparent symptom. The modern means of communication, notably the internet, allows for the rapid spread and dissemination of information on a global scale. It is often difficult to determine what is true and whether a source is reliable. Fortunately, there are ways of tackling these challenges: a critical mind that questions first impressions, an awareness of one's own prejudices, and determining how serious the source is, may help us separate fact from fiction and navigate our way through the complexities of reality.

The exhibition ends with an immersive installation "*Behind the Blinds*", conceived by the Ukrainian artist #NEIVANMADE, about disinformation in the context of the current war. False information spread by Russian media and published in Europe, denied the war of aggression in Ukraine and its brutal character, destroying everyday-life objects, a selection of which are on display from the city of Irpin.



"Behind the Blinds"
© Mayvaert, facts and fiction

About the House of European History

The House of European History is a history museum in Brussels, Belgium, focusing on the recent history of the continent of Europe and the European integration process. It is an initiative by the European Parliament, and opened on 6 May 2017.

The museum offers a unique perspective on the history of the continent. It takes a transnational approach to the main events and phenomena that have united and divided Europeans through time and the diverse legacies and interpretations of its history. While learning about Europe's past, visitors are encouraged to think critically about its present in order to engage in its future.

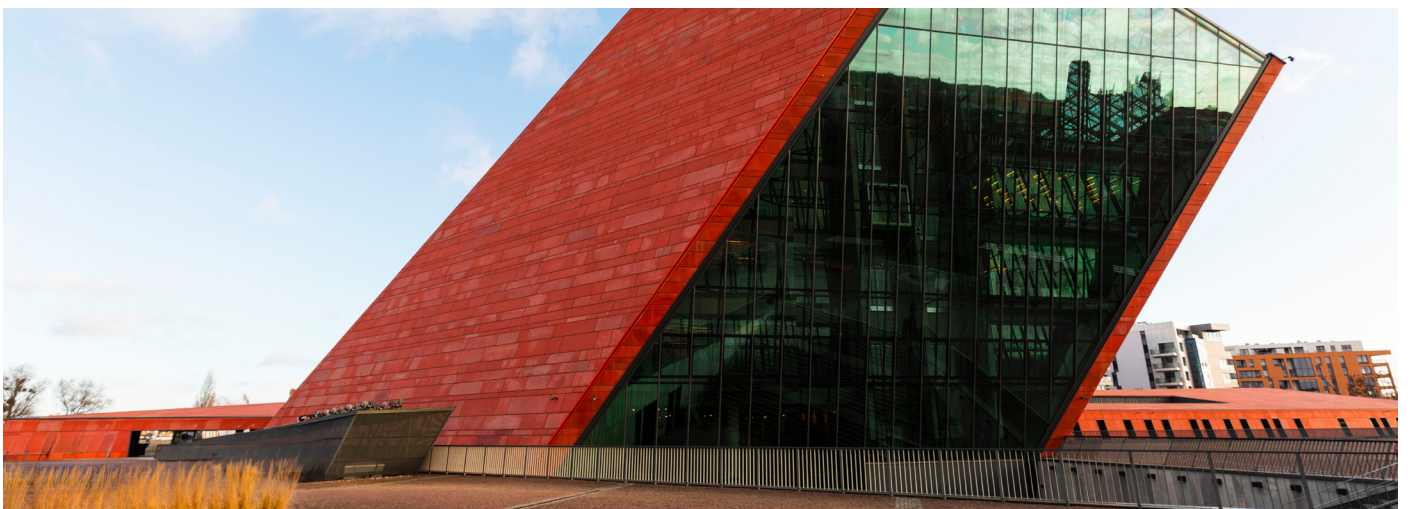


© House of European History, Brussels

About the Museum of the Second World War

The most devastating armed conflict in the history of Poland and humanity was World War II. Therefore, the mission Museum of the Second World War is to preserve its material and immaterial evidence, to conduct research on both micro and macro scales, to create a comprehensive and accurate account of the war, and to disseminate knowledge about it to audiences worldwide.

Only by placing the unique wartime experiences of Poles within the broader context of European and global events can we convey their full significance. A profound reflection on the past should inspire the rejection of violence as a tool of politics. The main exhibition opened on March 23rd, 2017 and has been complemented by temporary exhibitions, publications, educational initiatives, and cultural events, which help to share this message with audiences from Poland and across the globe.



© Museum of the Second World War

Practical information

Opening days & hours:

from September–June:	in the months of July–August:
Tuesday: 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM	Tuesday: 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM
Wednesday–Sunday: 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM	Wednesday–Sunday: 10:00 AM – 8:00 PM

The museum is closed on Mondays.

Tickets:

Normal – PLN 11, discounted (students, retirees) – PLN 8

How to find us:

Due to the location of our Museum in the city center, you can get here in many ways:

On foot: access to the Museum from the Main Railway Station and from Długa street takes only 15 minutes

By public transport: line 130 – at a stop called the Museum of the Second World War.

By bicycle: for cyclists we have prepared stands where you can park your bike.

By car: we have prepared 142 parking spaces for motorists, including 10 spaces for people with disabilities.

Contact for guided tours / educational requests:

Book your guide via this link:

<https://muzeum1939.pl/en/guides-entitled-to-show-visitors-around-the-museum.html>

Educational contact email: edukacja@muzeum1939.pl

Contact for media requests:

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Fake for Real – A History of Forgery and Falsification

Curators: Joanna Urbanek, Simina Badica

Touring exhibition project manager: Raluca Neamu

Based on "Fake for Real: A History of Forgery and Falsification" temporary exhibition, between October 2020 and January 2022

Images of the exhibition can be downloaded here in high-definition:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cL5VijXam_9dxMnb6Jj15nf06B-FrLH3?usp=sharing

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