

dr hab. Piotr Niwiński, Prof. UG
Head of Division of European Studies and Civilisation
University of Gdańsk

**Review of the functional and content programme of the main exhibition
produced by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and authored by Prof. dr
hab. Paweł Machcewicz, dr hab. Piotr M. Majewski, dr Janusz Marszalec, dr hab. Prof.
KUL Rafał Wnuk as at January 2016.**

The functional and content programme of the main exhibition, produced by the Museum of the Second World War and presented for review is contained on 75 pages of text interspersed with photographs. It presents the proposed general plan of the exhibition compiled by the team. Upon reading the whole text, one is struck with the rather high level of generality of the entire document. It is but the backbone of the future exhibition, taking the reader along its planned parts. There is, however, no specific message which is most important in educational space. There are no actual descriptions of the suggested exhibits or scenarios of the multi-media projections. Therefore, the whole programme can only be reviewed superficially.

The main assumption underlying the museum exhibition is that it will show the Second World War as the ‘gravest cataclysm of the 20th century’ (p. 3), and practically the whole narration retains the spirit. The tragedies caused by the war are visualised, but the other side of the medal (or only marginally present), i.e. the forging of the human nature, the most noble motifs triggered by extreme situations, is absent. The exhibition is meant to warn against the horror of warfare, but few of its elements set such behaviours as patriotism, civic stance, or devotion to other as examples to be followed. In summary, one could define it all as domination of the bane over other features. The whole message could be most properly summarised in a well-known slogan of the times of the Polish People’s Republic – ‘No more war, not now, not ever’. This is apparent e.g. in the fragment of the description of section 11 ‘Resistance’ which contains the following sentence: ‘the Second World War brought extreme and horrible experience to the occupied nations of Europe’ (p. 52).

Thus, in principle, it is a museum or martyrdom. The titles of the three basic blocks to make up the exhibition convey the same idea:

- The road to war
- The horror of war
- The long shadow of war

The blocks are made up of the so-called sections, i.e. notional exhibition rooms. The sections, on the other hand, are filled with topical spaces (there may be several spaces in a single room).

The spaces are very roughly described in terms of the scenography of the planned exposition, with some exhibits indicated (a few of them shown on the inserted photographs), and through the so-called facts, which – as I understand it, will constitute the description intended for the specific space. Since the facts of history are of key significance for any specific space (considering the exhibits and their descriptions are missing), my attention focused thereon.

The thing one can notice in all historic facts is the actual blurring of the vision of the Second World War as a concrete event in history. The process is due to e.g. the avoidance of any type of figures, estimates, or even visual indices, and if any appear, they are used irregularly. Let me exemplify the above by noting that the number of victims is given for the tragedy of the population of such cities as Leningrad, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki; this is not so in the case of Warsaw. Similarly exemplifying may be the fact that the uprisings of Prague, Paris, and Warsaw are all listed in a single line, which is obviously and totally unrepresentative. What pokes one in the eye is the missing comparison of the forces engaged in the struggle at different stages of the Second World War, even the estimate figures. Should they be included, Poland in 1939 would be shown more objectively (against the Third Reich and USSR).

On the other hand, the few numerical data given are provided in a way that is possibly not thoroughly thought through. This applies to the fact-discussing fragment of section 17 where some physical losses suffered by Poland are given in exact numbers. The level of detail in this case is not easy for the visitor to follow. Perhaps, a better way would be to visualise the same data in percent or graphically.

The adopted principle of generality gives me the impression that the issues are “diluted”. In my belief, a visitor with limited knowledge of the most recent history will leave the exhibition having learnt little about the war, except for the invariably stressed human

misfortune. A visitor with a broader knowledge, on the other hand, may leave with a pretty strong sense of unsatisfied desire. This is the impression one gets having read the general concept. Nevertheless, even if the proposed concept is adhered to, the choice and description of individual exhibits will be most important.

The Polish thread, Pomerania included, is clearly presented throughout the exhibition concept. However, even in this case the message conveyed is too dispersed. The exhibition does not give but an overall picture of Poland against the background of the Second World War, or that of actual engagement of the Poles on all fronts of the war. There is no comparison between the Polish effort and that of the other countries (while the Warsaw and Prague uprisings are set side by side), and this shortfall means that the exhibition misses the element which, should it be present, would leave the Polish visitor with a sense of pride and the foreign visitor with admiration for the Polish effort.

The adopted form of presentation does not surprise. The exposition follows a linear, chronological arrangement in an attempt to raise all issues of the Second World War. Still, linearity does not seem to carry all too interesting an effect. The narration does not engage the mind and its level is geared at broad audience. Those who know nothing of the Second World War will get a rather uninteresting story, others will be slightly disappointed with the modesty of the museum and scarcity of the facts it shows. The only elements capable of attracting the visitors are the exhibits and interactivity which will enable different types of visitors to personalise their lesson. Now, as concerns the exhibits, we know little of them, as mentioned before (only some are depicted, abstracted from the form of their setting), and the feature of interactivity is practically non-existent (I have counted but three stands altogether).

The first “more inspiring” multi-media element is the multi-touch table located almost towards the very end of the exhibition, in space 11.3; a moment later, section 12 is fitted with two interactive stands. There is no information of any other interactive stands, so attractive as they are, at least to the young.

A major problem may arise because of no indicative maps envisaged. There is no certainty that the visitor will locate the geographic names used in the historic facts correctly. Many locations and even geographic regions might be unknown to him. This applies to Poland and Pomerania in particular, but may be a problem to the visitor no matter what other place is referred to – let me just point to the name of Leningrad, not widely known today.

With the said maps and interactive stands missing, perhaps it would be desirable to have a smartphone application developed to locate the information given by the exhibition physically in space?

Reservations are not limited to the general concept though. Doubts can be expressed about the details too.

Characteristically, emphasis is laid on the martyrdom aspect of the war right from the start. On page 3, the authors state it explicitly that the military history will only serve as the background for the story of the civilians. Terror and genocide are more important than resistance or big politics. Noteworthy, the same priority is retained throughout the text (p. 4 – the suffering and crime of war first, the resistance, heroism and human decency later), and this goes against the adopted logic in that the authors declare that the message they create ‘should be built into the contemporary patriotism and civic stance’. Do they intend to trigger them by having examples of the negative sides of war dominate the positive ones?

Space 1.0: Here, saying that Poland of the pre-war times had to face numerous challenges stemming from poverty, economic crises, minority conflicts, and internal conflicts is rather enigmatic (p. 7). The expression I have underlined is very unclear, it does not add anything to the narration, and visitors with limited knowledge may even mistake it for conflicts of the Spanish proportions (the visitor will soon be reading about).

The message proposed in space 1.1 is highly disputable. I am not sure whether there is a need to write what Marks and Engels thought. The more so, that – by analogy – the Nazi system is not supported with an analysis of Hitler’s works. Criminal as it was from the very start, the communist system is here presented in very general terms, in principle, and without any negative tint.

Space 1.2 describes the domains conquered by the fascist Italy but makes no mention of the war in Africa or the seize of Albania.

The story told in space 2.2 uses the phrase ‘separation of Gdańsk from Germany’ after the First World War. Later on, however, there is no mention of the separation of Vilnius or Lvov. I do not believe the phrasing is fortunate. It is disrespectful to all countries which ended the First World War victorious. It suggests that the peace of Paris was unfair.

Section 3 marks the onset of the grouping of the Polish citizens by two nationalities – Polish and Jewish (p. 15 – the Germans murdered ‘Polish and Jewish civilians’). Actually, there were more nationalities in Poland, but they are not mentioned. The same continues until the end of the exhibition. Admittedly, p. 18 provides an attempt at explaining the division (to highlight racial prejudice), but it is hardly convincing. Going further, section 3.6 speaks of collaboration with the soviet occupant (the text consequently uses the ‘soviet’ attribute) undertaken by some unspecified national minorities. There is no mention of the Jewish or any other minorities.

Space 3.1 leaves out col. Stanisław Dąbek from among the defenders of Pomerania. This is a major figure and the traits of his character can set a perfect example for the society to follow.

Space 3.2 names those who perpetrated executions of the population (the Jews consequently standing out, though the reasons of focusing on them are not given: whether they were racial, or perhaps wealth-related), but what is missing alongside the special Einsatzgruppen troops and the Wehrmacht is the role of the local German inhabitants. The provided facts, on the other hand, lack specific events, e.g. a reference to Piaśnica.

The description of the 1939 defence war provided in space 3.4 is fairly disputable. The information given there has become questionable today: were the Polish armies beaten as early as on 3 September? For reference, please see e.g. T. Pawłowski’s book: *Armia Marszałka Śmigłego. Idee rozbudowy wojska polskiego 1935-1939 [Marshal Śmigły’s army. The ideas of enlarging the Polish armed forces 1935-1939]*, Warsaw 2009.

The historic facts given in space 3.6 miss an indication of the atrocities perpetrated by the Red Army on the Polish soil in 1939, even if for the sole reason of balancing them against the earlier presented German crime.

Section 5, *A war of a new type* is very general. The description of the states of the Axis is limited to Germany and Japan. There is no mention of Italy, very active at that time.

Space 6.2 devoted to the siege of Leningrad does not say a word about Stalin’s responsibility for having the civilians left in the city. The whole text is very general.

Section 6.3 gives a highly general overview of the war-time bombings; still, I miss here such examples as e.g. Frampol – the first town treated as a training ground, or Wieluń, London, or Coventry. The description is practically limited to Tokyo.

Soviet deportations are first touched upon as late as in section 8 (p. 36). The question is whether the exhibits will make it clear that the first deportations of the Second World War were authored by the Germans, but the Soviets resorted to them to the largest scale. There are no numerical data, even estimate figures, anywhere in the section. (pp. 41-42). A similar problem arises with the forced labour topic. While some text is devoted to the German forced labour, there is practically nothing about the Soviet lagers. Will the exhibits fill in the gap?

The historic facts given in section 11.4 *Uprisings* present the Warsaw Uprising alongside the uprisings of Paris, Slovakia, or Prague – the presentation lacks any perspective. Only the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto is reported in more detail (p. 56).

The concept of the exhibition is highly varied. The list of its strong, positive sides certainly includes much accent laid on the topic of the Polish Underground State – the phenomenon actually barely known in the world. Pity, though, that it is shown as an immense, down-up social movement without using the phrases: ‘civic spirit, civic movement’ so fashionable today (even though the authors themselves come close to the notion on p.4). The diary of the Polish presence in the Second World War, as already mentioned, is given a rather scanty and sometimes highly enigmatic overview. It is positive that the history of the closest neighbourhood is told, with specific Pomeranian localities associated with the Second World War named.

There are, however, elements perceived as quite negative. First of all, it seems that the preliminary assumptions might have not been given full consideration. My initial understanding was that the Museum was intended to be innovatory, based on multimedia, and addressed at men brought up in cyber space. This is not the case, though. Right in block one we have a film lasting about 6 minutes. The film is significant, as it introduces to the causes of the Second World War. Still, I have serious doubts whether many visitors will keep posted watching the film in a standing position (or even seated) for so long. It is certainly worth thinking of another form of presentation. I once more appeal for interactivity.

There are (hopefully only in the submitted description, not in the planned exhibition) some inaccuracies, to name e.g. the fact that Poland of the pre-war period is portrayed as one

of the few countries with an authoritarian system (p.6.) After all, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, not to mention Italy or Germany, were on the list too. Most of Europe!! Few were those countries which did not impose an authoritarian system.

I am not convinced about some of the suggested settings. A large panel with the figure of Neville Chamberlain in space 2.1 is meant to recall the indecision and submissiveness of the West towards Hitler. I am not sure whether a rank-and-file visitor will find it meaningful. Perhaps it will be such, if an exact description of the phenomenon is added next to it, but then the panel will actually prove redundant. It can be replaced with an interesting exhibit.

It seems that the programme has been compiled quite haphazardly, hastily. The text is not free from spelling mistakes, and the obviously erroneous facts stem probably from the tempo of writing (I do not presume that the authors are unaware of which part of Poland the Soviets seized in 1939 – the eastern or western – p. 15). Sometimes, stylistic inaccuracies may contribute to deformed perception of the information. The facts of history in space 9.4, p. 50, contain the following fragment: ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau, a locality in southern Poland incorporated into the Reich’ although it would sound better phrased like that: ‘in the expanse of southern Poland incorporated in the Reich’.

Attention should also be paid to the terminology used: the whole text is fairly consequent in using the phrase ‘soviet’ or the USSR, but p. 28 features the phrase ‘Soviets’.

Many a times lack of consequence becomes apparent too. In many places references are made to extermination for political and racial reasons – whenever this relates to the Germans, whereas only ideological and class reasons are mentioned in the case of the USSR. After all, political reasons existed also on the soviet side.

The whole programme fits closely in the principles of political correctness. Here, we have the ‘separation’ of Gdańsk from Germany after the First World War (p. 14), and equal weight ascribed to the suffering of the victims of the Nazi system with that caused by the Allies’ air raids of the German and Japanese cities, while the crime of the Red Army is referred to as retaliation on the German prisoners of war and civilians (p. 27). Similar in character is the balance given to the fate of prisoners of war kept in German, Japanese, and Soviet camps by showing the death of the German PoWs in the latter camps.

It is the same political correctness which results in the generality of the whole exhibition and in the blurring of the essence of the conflict. On the one hand, the authors want to describe the whole war in a comprehensible manner, but on the other hand, they do not offer anything above a base level story. Let a fragment of space 7.1 serve as an example: ‘The allies and satellites of the Third Reich, i.e.: Italy, the Independent State of Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, had their own share in the occupation of Europe. The collaboration found in the occupied countries took different forms.’ Being the only element of the exhibition which touches on the issue of occupation by countries other than the Third Reich or the Soviet Union, it is highly enigmatic, and contributes virtually nothing. There is no element of comparison, say between Denmark and Poland. The resistance to the occupant shown on the Polish example may be interpreted wrongly as illustrative of the whole Europe.

This generality does not explain why e.g. there is no mention of the aid the Jews received from the Catholic Church, or why the name Żegota does not appear (even though there is mention of the Polish action of saving the Jews, p. 48).

Equally puzzling is the presentation of the escape of the German population before the oncoming Red Army (section 15, p. 60). The sentence: ‘The German population fled en masse in panic to escape the approaching Red Army’ is true, but abstracted from the fate of the population of other nationalities (say the Poles or Lithuanians) it twists the reality. Again too, to me the fact that the ‘fate of the German civilians’ is set side by side with the ‘so-called death marches of concentration camp prisoners’ (p. 61) seems out of place, to say the least. This is because there are no differences between people, but there is a difference between the wrongdoers and the harmed. German evacuation was not forced, contrary to the death march. Of course, this is but one aspect of a whole range of differences.

Similar objections can be voiced about the following sentence of section 16: ‘The measures intended to prevent any new conflicts included forced migrations agreed by the Allies, particularly expulsion of the Germans’ (p. 66). Meanwhile, there is not a word about the so-called “repatriation”, which in actual fact meant expelling the Poles from the eastern territories of the Polish Republic.

Subsequently, page 69, space 16.2, dwells on forced migrations. The example given, of equivalent weight, as I understand – which is historically untrue – is that of the resettlements of the Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, and Germans. The same trend is also visible in

the description of the facts dedicated to that space. When giving an overview of the territorial changes following the Second World War, the text speaks of annexation of the Japanese land and loss of land by Germany. Apparently nothing, but the phrases are not equivalent and as such trigger the association that unlike the Japanese, the Germans were treated with injustice.

Space 16.3, devoted to the post-war trials of war criminals speaks only about trying the Nazis, while nothing is said about Japan or the Soviet Union. That account settlement comes only in space 16.4, and is rightly shown as failure of justice.

To recapitulate, the presented exhibition programme is marred with many major drawbacks. The question is: how to overcome them? The proposed exhibition is definitely traditional in nature. The multimedia are made use of to a marginal extent. For the moment, it is unknown to what extent they will be replaced by exhibits.

In the situation, would it not be better to combine the proposed linear layout with a horizontal one; to leave the chronological narration of the developments of the Second World War while enabling the visitor to “hop about” between the sites of his choice? Here, I can see the role for the multimedia. The narration is there, but one can dig deeper via an interactive stand.

At this point, the core question arises – why have a Museum of the Second World War? If the answer is: to show the whole war, it is too limited. If, in turn, the aim is to teach the young selected fragments of the world conflict, we miss the interactivity feature to attract them (to mention but learning by “touching”). The selected, linearly presented “dry facts” will rather deter the young.

Another prime question is about the message the Museum is to convey. At the moment, its main message is that of the exceptional tragedy the war is. It focuses primarily on the negative aspects. On the other hand, it does not particularly highlight the positive elements such as patriotism, generosity, devotion, or acting in the name of interests higher than the private ones (even if only through a presentation of cooperation between the Polish underground political parties, despite the previous divisions).

War is more than physical destruction inflicted by warfare or technical progress, it also stands for change in human stance. War releases lower instincts in people (which, according to the presented assumptions, will be visualised at the exhibition), but it also triggers positive

behaviours. After all, it comes down to defending one's values, those most vital for each human being, at any price. Those values are: freedom, dignity, fraternity. At this point, one could quote John Paul II: *'everyone has a Westerplatte to face'*. It is those words and that context that I miss in the whole programme. Coming to the aid of the fellow neighbour is a similar aspect. Here, it would be perfect to have a section devoted to saving humans, Jewish primarily, by their own neighbours (to name e.g. the Żegota organisation, Irena Sendler, or the Ulm family).

According to the documentation received, it is the mission of the Museum to show the fate of the civilians, the rank and file soldiers, without aspiring to become a classical military museum accumulating military gear. The assumption is not right to me. The war can be shown through the context of technology, politics, or human being, but a comprehensive view is best. The authors of the programme have, however, selected only one of the elements. This limits the role of the Museum to that of a Museum of the Fate of the Civilian Population during the Second World War, i.e. the role of a museum of only one of the threads.

An attempt at showing a comprehensive view of the Second World War whilst the main emphasis is laid on the horror of war, conveyed through the lives and fate of the civilian population, leads to the creation of rather twisted and one-sided picture. What is portrayed, and quite selectively too (hopefully because of the exhibition space available), is the dark side of the war, and whatever bright was born is pushed far back.

Another problem consists in the fact that it is not clear who the museum is intended to address. If the Polish visitor – it contains many elements which may be unclear and at the same time fail to interest him. If the foreign visitor – many elements are shown so enigmatically that he can get lost in the narration.

Once again, it needs to be repeated that a lot will depend on appropriate choice of the exhibits and the multimedia presentations. The collection covers the Home Army, conspiracy, resistance to the occupants, the occupational terror, criminal face of the war, the Holocaust, concentration and PoW camps. In its core backbone, the programme is very general and in principle does not trigger many controversies. However, the exhibits and presentations will be the vital complement and will reveal the true narration. Their selection will create the exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War. One could say: the devil's in the detail.

Hence, should the existing functional and content programme be sustained, meticulous care and thought should be given to the choice of the exhibits and their captions.

Nevertheless, I would prefer working on modifying the programme so as to attain a comprehensive view of the phenomenon of the Second World War, also its political and military aspects shown to a much broader extent. Furthermore, I am against keeping in line with the language of political correctness at any cost, as this may cause that the history will be read erroneously triggered by linguistic consequences. I encourage laying even more emphasis on the Polish cause during the Second World War and making use of multimedia installations to a much broader extent so that on top of going through the main line of the exhibition the visitor may “take an escapade” inside the phenomenon of his own choice.