Hero worship at all costs?

The dispute over the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/7843>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.7843

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2018

Number of pages: 110-116

ISBN: 978-2-930953-07-6

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Martin Sander, "Hero worship at all costs?", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 127 | 2018, Online since 10 February 2022, connection on 14 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/7843> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.7843>

Site mémoriel

HERO WORSHIP AT ALL COSTS?

THE DISPUTE OVER THE MUSEUM OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN GDANSK

♦ Museum
building from
the outside.

The new landmark of Gdańsk is a leaning tower made of glass, steel, and red concrete located on the Motława river. The panorama windows of the restaurant at the Museum of the Second World War offer the only view of the old Hanseatic city with its town houses and its Brama Żuraw (crane gate). The legendary Lenin Shipyard (now Gdańsk Shipyard), where the Solidarność was once launched, is just a short walk away. Lech Wałęsa's fame as an anti-communist workers' hero has faded though. The present leaders of Poland consider Wałęsa as a communist agent and traitor of the nation because of his alliance with the much-hated liberals. The new hero is Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the PiS-Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice). A Gdańsk graffiti artist immortalized him on a firewall across from the museum, as an angular head with a Roman toga. The great chairman currently exercises his power over many people, even in the new leaning tower by the Motława.

INTERCEPTION AT THE GUEST HOUSE

I have an appointment with Janusz Marszałec at the museum's guest house. The historian has earned a reputation for his work on the Polish Underground State during WWII. He was one of two deputies of the museum founders. Among other things he was responsible for the construction of the new building. After he had been downgraded to a simple member of staff, with his remit severely curtailed, Marszałec left the museum in June 2017 as the last member of the founding team.

While Marszałec is explaining the concept of the permanent exhibition to me, adding comments on the most recent developments, a security guard enters the guest house and declares in a mildly regretful tone that "the authorities" had prohibited Marszałec from guiding journalists through the exhibition. Of course, outside the building interviews were allowed.

This scene exposes the battle of interpretation of Polish history that is being waged in this museum, with all means imaginable. Since the PiS party came to power in autumn 2015, it really tested its influence in Gdańsk. Janusz Marszałec calls it the Gdańsk experimental lab of the National-Conservatives. The museum was used as a test case of how far they could go. The details of what happened here has already become a research topic of its own. Paweł Machcewicz, historian at the Academy of Science in Warsaw and founding director at Gdańsk, was removed from the team early on and is currently Fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study. He recently presented a book on the topic, *Muzeum* (published in Polish by Znak, Krakow 2017).

♦ Janusz Marszałec, co-founder and former vice-director of the museum, at the construction site.

According to Machcewicz, the dispute over the WWII narrative really illustrated rather diverging perceptions of Polishness, patriotism, and national history. For some people, the museum ought to provide a "Polish point of view" on the war and sing the praises of Polish martyrs and heroes. Others would like to put the Polish experience into an international and especially European context. In this way, they want to get across the particular nature of the Polish situation, the enormous extent of German crimes and the special suffering of Polish citizens. They prefer a history related to everyday life. Against the backdrop of military events they are interested in the fate of the civilian population. Machcewicz and the museum founders share this position. They see themselves as advocates of an open society in Poland. They believe that after the collapse of communism, they succeeded in bringing about a transformation of the country. A return to national authoritarian structures as in former communist times is something they are not willing to accept.

... AN UNFINISHED RELIC OF AN UNPLEASANT PERIOD

Right from the start, the museum of the Second World War became an issue of contention. In 2008, a year after he replaced Jarosław Kaczyński as prime minister, Donald Tusk, a historian originally from Gdansk, put the idea on the agenda. The museum was supposed to be built where World War II had started and to provide an international perspective. In Paweł Machcewicz Tusk found the person to realise this idea. In November 2008 the government in Warsaw secured the financial and administrative resources for the project. Machcewicz' team in Gdansk was able to draw up plans for a permanent exhibition of four to six thousand square meters and received advice from a panel of Polish and international experts: Tomasz Szarota and Włodzimierz Borodziej from Poland, Norman Davies from Great Britain,

Timothy Snyder from the US and Ulrich Herbert from Germany.

In 2015, when after eight years of parliamentary opposition, Kaczyński's PiS-Party returned to power, building cranes still dominated the construction site. Pieces for the exhibition were stored in a number of places. Some exhibits could be viewed on the museum's website. From the point of view of the new rulers, the incomplete museum represented an unfinished relic of an unpleasant period. They couldn't stop this museum. Therefore they were going to make it their own.

"SON OF A BITCH" OR THE BANALITY OF HUMAN SUFFERING

To impose its approach to history, the PiS government unleashed a take-over battle by installing its own personnel. It went about it in quite a strategic fashion.

First of all, it promoted a rival micro-museum which was founded as

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late as 2015. A two-room apartment on the Gdansk Westerplatte served as its seat. It was intended to be dedicated to the Polish defence against the German assault on the Westerplatte in September 1939.

Soon after, the Ministry of Culture in Warsaw put this installation on an equal footing with the nearly completed Museum of the Second World War by declaring it an equal partner. In the next step, it propagated the merger of the two rather unequal institutions. The government's administrative measures were accompanied by a barrage of articles and media statements by the National-Conservatives.

At times they would decry Paweł Machcewicz' team as "sons of bitches" on Facebook, at other times they would immerse themselves into a political and historical discourse. Among the Polish Right, Piotr Semka, a busy expert on German affairs, complained that the plans for the permanent exhibition were leaving out Poland's great military achievements.

The historian and PiS-politician Jan Żaryn accused the exhibition organizers of infantile "pseudo-universalism" and demanded greater Catholic patriotism. Semka and Żaryn weren't just active in the media. They also worked as internal expert reviewers for the Ministry of Culture in Warsaw.

TAKE-OVER BATTLE AND TRIUMPH

The following year, 2016, was marked by a continuous campaign against the museum. Machcewicz and his team did not give up though. On the one hand, they used scientific arguments to fight off criticism of the still unfinished permanent exposition. They received the support of prominent historians from around the world. On the other hand, they tried to stop the hostile take-over by the tiny Westerplatte-Museum through legal action. While all this was happening, they were about to rush towards the opening of the Museum of the Second World War and its permanent exhibition.

The inauguration took place on 23 March 2017. Two weeks later, on 5 April, an administrative court decided on appeal that the plan to merge the two unequal museums couldn't be objected to on legal grounds. Because of this verdict the Minister of Culture was able to nominate an administration convenient to him. The strategic objective had been

Project of the Westerplatte-Museum, merged by court order with the Museum of the Second World War.

© Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk

◆ Paweł Machcewicz, founding director of the museum, at the opening.

© Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk

◆ Jarosław Sellin, PiS Secretary of State at the Ministry of Culture, and new director Karol Nawrocki.

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◆ “Five Year Plan” board game, a propaganda tool developed under Soviet rule. It was removed from the permanent exhibition by the new management.

●●● achieved. Already on the following day, Karol Nawrocki, a Gdansk historian and local activist closely related to PiS, was appointed as the new director of the Museum of the Second World War. Nawrocki has been firmly entrenched in this position ever since.

PROPAGANDA IN THE SHAPE OF ARGUMENTS OVER DETAIL

In January 2018 the permanent exhibition has been on for nearly a year and already been slightly changed. As Janusz Marszalec wants to show me around the permanent exhibition, there are obstacles to overcome. We are getting suspicious looks before the barrier that blocks the exhibition area opens for us. Ahead of us are eighteen

sections, from the Treaty of Versailles to the post-war period and, in addition, a separate children’s museum. We walk along the wide main corridor.

This is where circumstances of everyday life and survival in times of war are documented, showing Poland, France, Norway and other occupied countries. Everything is still in the same order as at the opening ten months ago. The first adjoining room, which presents Stalin’s Soviet Union which together with Hitler’s Germany divided Poland in 1939, seems unchanged, too. The walls are paved with posters spreading Soviet propaganda.

Angrily, Janusz Marszalec points to a “Nagant” revolver. This had in the meantime been placed on a spot where

a game for children developed by Soviet propaganda used to be on display. This off-topic symbol of immediate violence made a mockery of the message of the hall, which was actually about the manipulation of the masses by means of propaganda.

The sacked vice-director directs me to the other side of the central corridor towards the section on resistance. Here, the new directors want to correct their predecessors as soon as possible. To outsiders, the reasons behind all that might sound insignificant, even absurd. Yet, for National Conservative specialists in the politics of memory the matter is of supreme importance.

A kind of basement-room, grey, low-rise, equipped with lots of pipes and a few recesses, represents the national Polish Underground State. In the years between 1939 and 1945, this state, co-operating with the Polish government in exile, defended itself against foreign occupants, most of all the Germans that administered parts of the country (“General gouvernement”).

A special institution of this Underground State was the so-called Żegota. Since 1942 it fought to save Jews, organised hiding places, procured false documents and helped out with money. Irena Sendler, one of Żegota’s protagonists, made sure that up to 2000 children were smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto to find shelter with Polish families. Across all political camps, Sendler’s merit is beyond dispute. In the recesses, exhibition visitors are undisturbed and can devote themselves to the information offered.

If however you look at Sendler’s picture from a certain angle in the underground room, a pipe belonging to a fire hydrant might obstruct your view. The

new directors publicly expressed outrage about this fact and promised remedy. Irena Sendler, a socialist with heart and mind and certainly not a supporter of nationalist ideology, serves nevertheless as an icon and an ambassador of the national dogma, according to which the rescue of Jews had been of paramount concern for all members of the Polish Underground State. What is more: Those who question that fact, as eminent historians do with reference to historical archives and witnesses of the time, are said to be defaming the Polish state and the Polish nation.

So the message is: Because Irena Sendler is visible only behind a basement fire hydrant, the exhibition organizers around Paweł Machcewicz have ruined Poland’s reputation.

The new directors are also displeased with the way in which the sacked founders present German concentration and extermination camps on Polish territory. At the moment, there is still a small photo on display in the corresponding section. It shows Helena Plotnicka, a little-known woman from a village near Auschwitz who together with her daughters secretly supported prisoners in the camp. She was imprisoned in 1943 and perished herself a year later in Auschwitz. The new direction does not like the selfless heroine and simple woman to be placed there. It would prefer a portrait of world renowned father Maximilian Kolbe who died as a martyr in Auschwitz and was declared a saint by the Catholic Church.

Janusz Marszalec argues that this fragment of the exhibition was significant exactly because it granted space to a woman who wielded next to no influence and whose actions were bound to be forgotten. As far as Kolbe was con- ●●●

- cerned, he thought a special temporary exhibition could be dedicated to him. The new direction of the museum however requires Kolbe's presence in the permanent exhibition as a national-conservative Catholic and opponent of Zionism.

CRUEL HEROES AND SIMPLE TRUTHS

The new direction around Karol Nawrocki also claims museum space for a particularly controversial representative of the Underground State. In November 2017 a special exhibition was organized to celebrate Romuald Rajs. Rajs, who was called "Bury", is a hero for National-Conservatives and extreme right-wing groups that are partly allied with them, because even after 1945 he continued the armed struggle against Communists and Soviets. During these activities "Bury" caused a massacre among Belarussian civilians, among them women and children, along the border to Belarus. This type of hero thus conveys a criminal aspect of the national Polish partisan movement. In terms of the present official approach to history, "Bury" has the makings of an idol. Whether he will also be granted a place in the permanent exhibition remains to be seen.

The recent changes of the Gdansk museum might seem minimal. But they certainly serve the purpose of accusing the founders of the museum of betraying Polish interests. At the same time, the new direction wants to find historical reasons to legitimize a nationalist democracy. To do that, simple truths are required. Towards the end of the tour through the museum, these are offered in a new film. The original film showed the realities of war and connected them with images from Vietnam and Eastern Ukraine. The new director however uses a production of the Institute for National Remembrance which the PiS-government has transformed into an institute for national propaganda.

The new message of the film is clear: The history of Poland, in particular during the years between 1939 and 1945, is the story of an heroic, lonely fight for freedom. Poland has always been betrayed, has achieved victory despite of that and must not rely on anybody else.

At the end of January, the founding directors under the auspices of Paweł Machcewicz filed a lawsuit for copyright infringement against the new direction around Karol Nawrocki. In this way, the plaintiffs want to make sure that the permanent exhibition is preserved in its original form and that their achievement will not be destroyed.

In case Nawrocki's team wins the lawsuit, lenders have declared their solidarity with the authors of the original exhibition. They will then withdraw the artefacts they made available at the time, among them personal documents, flags and everyday objects. Such a decision would leave a major gap in the exhibition. Still, at the moment things have not yet reached that point in Gdansk. ■

Martin Sander

Translation from the German: Elisabeth Tutschek

◆ Temporary exhibition on Romuald "Bury" Rajs who is considered a national hero by National Conservatives, and a war criminal by many historians.

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