

REPORT

On the Image of the Enemy:

**The Representations of the Second World War in the City Museums of
St Petersburg, Warsaw and Dresden**

by

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INTRODUCTION

Preliminary remarks

This report is a result of the international project “The Image of the Second World War in St. Petersburg, Warsaw and Dresden”, which is a part of the History Workshop Europe programme sponsored by the "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" Foundation and the Robert Bosch Foundation. The project lasted for one year (June 2007 – June 2008) and was carried out by the Graduate School for Social Research and the Historisches Seminar der Universität Hamburg. An international and interdisciplinary team from Germany (Christian Ganzer and Tim Buchen), Poland (Zuzanna Bogumił and Joanna Wawrzyniak) and Russia (Anna Lubivaya and Maria Senina) participated in the project. Our main aim was to compare the forms and contents by which the history of the Second World War is visualized and described in the city historical museums of Dresden, Warsaw, and St. Petersburg. While analyzing the exhibitions we focused on the ways in which the enemy is presented, and we tried to decode the role that this plays in the historical narrations. For the purposes of our analysis we defined the enemy as the agent who threatens the existence of the main character of the exhibition’s story. Although there were different common themes that we could treat as a base for such a comparative analysis (e.g. death, resistance, ordinary life experience), from the beginning we wanted the project to be an input into the European unity process, so we decided to pay special attention to the construction of the figure of the enemy, which can interfere in this process.

While focusing on this theme, we deliberately chose the museums in the cities, which represent national symbols of suffering under the cruelties of WWII. Dresden with its often overestimated death toll and the loss of baroque architecture in the „Anglo-American firestorm” has been for long remembered as an “innocent” city; as a city of art and culture, not as a wartime military industrial complex, but as a place of demonstration of the destructive forces of modern warfare, a target for the furious revenge of the allies for what Germany had brought to Europe. Thus, Dresden has been often perceived as representing a kind of better, older, pre-Nazi Germany, a “land of poets and thinkers”, which was unjustly brought to ruin at the end of WWII.

The siege of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) also stands out in this double aspect of the meaning of the city and its fate in WWII. The events that took place between 1941 and 1944 were unique in the USSR in terms of the length of the blockade and of the number of civilian victims. While Stalingrad was the setting for an enormous battle between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht, it is remembered as a place of glory for military men. Leningrad, on the contrary, is perceived as the scene of an heroic defence by city dwellers against the cruelty of Nazi belligerence prepared to conquer and annihilate the city by any means, including those of mass starvation and bombardment.

Warsaw too without any doubt is a significant city in the history and memory of the Second World War. The Polish capital was not only conquered by Nazi Germany, but also experienced two uprisings and the destruction which followed them. Its people suffered deprivation and death, and the city lost architecture of unique value. Nevertheless, in Poland the city is not only remembered as a place of suffering, but also as space of unusual heroism. In particular the Warsaw Uprising constitutes the national symbol of the Polish will to survive.

There are at least two connections between these cities which justify our comparison of them. First, since the cities all were perceived as victims of war in their respective countries, therefore they are interesting with regard to the representations of the perpetrators of their suffering. Secondly, the bombardment of Dresden, the siege of Leningrad and the destruction of Warsaw are traumatic stories not only of local, but also of national, significance. One should note that their histories were the subject of intensive propaganda treatment in communist times and afterwards became the subject of equally intense reinterpretation and rewriting in each of the countries. For some national discourse makers, the cities' wartime stories even serve as the symbolic embodiment of the fate of whole societies in WWII. Our approach therefore locates our project within so-called memory studies and concerns the way in which the communities remember their past¹. We assume that history is socially constructed and that its transmission can take various memory forms, one of which is the historical exhibition.

The city museum tells a story

In our analysis we treat exhibitions as narratives told in particular historical time and space. First of all, along the lines of the new museology studies², we perceive them as the result of scientific achievements and popular interpretations³. Furthermore, we understand the museum, after Sharon Macdonald, as a medium in which the society expresses itself.⁴ We claim that the historical exhibitions create a certain reality, which is often comprehended by the visitors as the "objective" truth about the past. The museum stores memories, but the collections of objects are in fact "the basis of cultural or national identity, of scientific knowledge and aesthetic value"⁵. Like other cultural artefacts, such as works of literature, monuments or other symbols, museum exhibitions construct "imagined communities"⁶. In short, museums are the places where social memory often wins against history as an academic discipline. The historical exhibitions about WWII seem to be good examples of this. The last World War is still the subject of vivid discussions, dilemmas, understatement and silences⁷.

¹ John Urry, "How societies remember the past", in *Theorizing Museums*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 45-68.

² Peter Vergo, ed., *New Museology: A Historical Perspective on Museums* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1989).

³ Sharon Macdonald, Introduction to *Theorizing Museums*, in *Theorizing Museums*, ed. Macdonald and Fyfe, 1-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵ Susan Crane, *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

⁷ See: Vera Zolberg, „Museums as contested sites of remembrance: the Enola Gay affair, in *Theorizing Museums*, ed. Macdonald and Fyfe, 69-82; Thomas F. Gieryn, "Balancing Acts: Science, Enola Gay and History Wars at the Smithsonian", in *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 197-228; Julia Adeney Thomas

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