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Cultural Diplomacy in the War Museum

The Case of the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst¹

By David Clarke and Zofia Wóycicka

Abstract

National heritage, and particularly “difficult” heritage, does not exist in isolation from the heritage of other countries. Russia’s relationship to Germany is a salient case in point in the Putin era, in which a more cosmopolitan approach to the history of World War II in many European states has been challenged by a reversion to nationalist approaches to this period in Russian memory politics. Taking the example of the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, this article explores the possibilities of and limitations to such international projects for the development of shared narratives about the past as a phenomenon of cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, museums, memory politics, cultural diplomacy, German-Russian relations, Second World War

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The War Museum as a Resource for Cultural Diplomacy

The modern museum has been identified by scholars as a key institution of public education associated with emergence of the modern nation state.² It has provided a space in which a territorially bounded national culture and history can be codified and displayed, while at the same time constructing a national public that is deemed to be in possession of that culture and history.³ In what some describe as the era of globalization or advanced modernity, however, the nation state is subject to challenge as a frame of collective identity. Scholars in the field of Museum Studies have sought to understand how the museum as institution is responding to these challenges, as it becomes increasingly “Europeanized”⁴ or “globalized”⁵ in terms of the plural identities it allows its visitors to construct. Nevertheless, just as the nation state remains the historically dominant state form,⁶ so the existence of post-national tendencies in some areas of museum practice does not mean that museums in general have become uncoupled from the construction and projection of national identity. Indeed, at a time when such identity is perceived to be in question, politicians sometimes call upon the museum to return to its role of providing a coherent conception of the nation.⁷

In the case of history museums, especially those dealing with war, there are good reasons for this perception of an important link between the museum as an institution and the construction of national identity. Although art museums, for example, may seek to define a national cultural heritage,⁸ history museums remain significant to the formulation of national biographies, in which wars have a special place. The ability to defend territorial boundaries is a pre-requisite for the existence of the nation-state and the prosecution of wars to that end requires high levels of self-sacrifice on the part of citizens.⁹ Conflicts are accompanied, particularly in the age of mass communication, by a propagandizing of national loyalty and solidarity as a key element of the war effort. This experience can become an important feature of the national memory culture, even if such memory is distorted by nostalgia; wartime is understood as a moment at which the experience of the national community was most strongly felt.

In light of the symbolic significance attributed to war in the life of the nation-state, it is hardly surprising, as Jay Winter suggests, that war museums “have a semi-sacred aura. They are the repositories of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we have come to be who and where we are.”¹⁰ The privileged role that war museums and exhibitions play in

the construction of national identity, in comparison with other kinds of historical display, can be seen in fierce controversies over the representation of the nation at war, such as the debates over the Enola Gay exhibition in the US in the early 1990s,¹¹ the controversy over the so-called *Wehrmacht* Exhibition in Germany in the late 1990s and early 2000s¹² or the latest battle over the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk (2016–2017).¹³

It is therefore notable that in recent years we have seen the emergence of memorial and museum projects in which former combatant nations seek to arrive at a shared representation of a conflict that once divided them. Researchers have long noted a trend towards more inclusive representations in the museum, which seek to promote internal reconciliation between dominant and marginalized groups in the context of multicultural societies.¹⁴ However, the emerging trend of memorials and museums that promote international reconciliation poses a new set of challenges in terms of accommodating divergent national memory cultures as well as divergent attitudes to the management and display of the heritage of war. Although we cannot provide a comprehensive survey here, we can point to examples such as the Allied Museum in Berlin, the Historial de la Grande Guerre Péronne and the related Thiepval Museum in France, the preservation of the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea as discussed by Joan Beaumont,¹⁵ or even the failed attempt to arrive at a shared representation of the Second World War in an exhibition on the history of Yugoslavia created by a team of historians from its successor states in 2013.¹⁶ Another example, which will be the focus of our analysis here, is the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorst.

Projects of this kind are potentially significant in terms of reconfiguring the relationships between states, but also between peoples. Matthew Graves has coined the term “memorial diplomacy” to describe those instances in which shared rituals (for example, wreath-laying ceremonies at battle sites) can become a means of signaling between states that their relations are now focused on cooperation rather than conflict.¹⁷ Joint museum and memorial projects potentially extend this logic. Indeed, from very early on in the creation of the German-Russian Museum, it was clear that the project was to become a visible symbol of German-Russian reconciliation. Already during the founding meeting of the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum Association (*Verein Museum Berlin-Karlshorst e.V.*), which was set up to create and run the museum in 1994, it was stated that the museum would lead to a “common Russian-German view of the history of the twentieth century.”¹⁸

In the context of “cultural diplomacy,” in which states mobilize their cultural resources in order to influence foreign publics¹⁹ and thereby extend their “soft power,”²⁰ scholars and practitioners have argued that museums represent an important resource for nations seeking to

project a positive reputation in the world.²¹ The war museum as institution clearly also has the potential to engage both foreign and domestic publics as a potential site of reconciliation, but faces specific challenges given that its focus lies with an (often still disputed) history of conflict. The German-Russian Museum was originally called the Museum of the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War, and was opened by the Soviet Union in 1967.²² Established in the building that had served as the Red Army's headquarters in the Soviet Zone of Occupation from 1945, it commemorated the signing of the act of surrender by German generals and the heroism of Soviet soldiers in World War Two.²³ In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the museum became a site of cultural diplomacy against the original intentions of those who had conceived it. The primary aim of the Red Army had been to present the museum to its own soldiers and other Soviet citizens based in the GDR. If any thought was given to how other visitors might perceive the museum, this was understood rather crudely in terms of displaying the strength of the Red Army and thus acting as a kind of deterrent to future aggression against the Soviet Union. However, throughout the 1970s East German officials, who were keen to stress their identification with the Soviet Union and to distance themselves from Germany's fascist past, organized increasing numbers of visits by groups of GDR citizens.²⁴ It was not until the 1980s, however, that the museum started to include German texts to address the needs of these visitors. The re-opening of the museum as an international project aimed at a wider audience after the end of the Cold War meant that it had the potential to take on a new cultural diplomacy function beyond the simple reinforcement of such patriotic messages aimed at a Russian domestic audience. Given that the major source of that audience, the Red Army, was now absent from Berlin, this was also no longer a viable market for the museum.

The formulation of joint commemorative or museum projects between former combatant nations can be understood as a phenomenon of international relations at the state level. For instance, as Beaumont notes,²⁵ such projects can be the result of international agreements. This was also the case for the German-Russian Museum, the funding of which was agreed in the context of the Treaty of Good Neighborliness between the Soviet Union and Germany in November 1990. However, as with much policy that falls broadly within the remit of "culture," it is not politicians or state officials who are directly involved in the implementation of these projects. Although they may be funded by the state "at arm's length,"²⁶ such projects are nevertheless handed over to qualified experts, in this case usually heritage professionals and historians.

In this instance, the German-Russian Museum is officially operated by the aforementioned Association, whose trustees include the Russian and German governments, the Senate of Berlin, and a number of Russian and German museums and research institutes. However, the actual presentation of history within the museum is undertaken by a curatorial team under its Director, whose work is informed by an Academic Advisory Council (AAC) made up of Russian and German historians and museum practitioners. Unlike in some other museum projects, members of the ACC played a decisive role in the exhibition-making process, closely following each step of the work and even reviewing the exhibition texts. Their decisions were considered to be important guidance by the curatorial team, if not as absolutely binding. What we will argue here, however, is that the professional autonomy of the advisors from the states that agreed the setting up of the museum has not lead to a consensus on the presentation of history that floats free of the national contexts from which the experts involved emerge. Indeed, the evolving memory politics at the national level have strongly informed the presentation of history at the site, leaving some key issues unresolved or in a state of uneasy compromise. The interest of this case study, given the cultural diplomacy potential of the war museum as a tool of reconciliation, is to understand how that potential may fail to come to full realization due to the continuing salience of the memory of war in the national context. In particular, we will show how the potential for soft power to be gained through cultural diplomacy in such joint commemorative and museum projects can be squandered if one side insists on imposing its preferred view of history in a way that is museum users perceive as partial or even propagandistic.

Dominant Memory Regimes and the National Context

In order to understand the continued relevance of competing national frames in the formulation of joint commemorative and museum projects, we need to establish from a theoretical point of view the link between the national memory culture and the work of the experts who are responsible for the realization of heritage initiatives. Even if the experts are not directly instructed to press for one kind of representation or another by the national governments who fund or appoint them, the national context provides a framework within which certain versions of the past are foregrounded and certain approaches to the presentation of that past are authorized. Moreover, while the German ACC members seem to be fairly independent, their Russian counterparts are all employees of the most prominent Russian state museums and as such represent the officially accepted historical interpretation, which fed into the discussions

about Berlin-Karlshorst. For example, as a member of the AAC, Victor Skryabin, deputy director of the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War, consulted extensively with his colleagues in Moscow about the details of the museum script, so that his suggestions for changes “were not my personal, but collective proposals of our museum’s staff.”²⁷ The director of the Museum, Jörg Morré, has suggested that the Russian Embassy in Berlin took a close interest in the discussions within the ACC.²⁸

While no modern national memory culture is homogeneous or uncontested, Eric Langenbacher has observed that particular interpretations of the national past dominate at any one time, and that elite actors have a disproportionate influence over those interpretations. Langenbacher speaks of a “dominant memory regime” as emerging from the communication of “privileged interpreters” such as “journalists, religious and social leaders, artists, teachers, intellectuals, and so on.”²⁹ With Andrew Beattie, we can also observe that the dominant memory regime in a given society often benefits from its translation into “state-mandated memory,” that is to say that it becomes institutionalized through state-funded museums, memorials, commemorations, textbooks, etc.³⁰ However, the dominant memory regime in the national society is neither static nor impervious to challenge.

The dominant memory regime and its resultant state-mandated memory serve two purposes. Firstly, they offer a relative sense of internal cohesion, providing a shared memory that serves to shore up national identity. Secondly, as scholars of international relations who have an interest in the function of collective memory have recently begun to argue, such memory is also important for the state’s ability to function as an actor in the international context. For example, work in constructivist international relations theory has emphasized the significance of “ontological security” for nation states. Ontological security is understood as a sense of certainty in relation to one’s identity and one’s place in the world, which allows one to continue to act purposefully and with confidence in an otherwise unpredictable environment. Theorists who have made the link between such ontological security and historical memory stress that individuals who are able to tell a coherent and positive story about their past and its relationship to the present are able to remain purposive actors.³¹

Felix Berenskoetter has linked ontological security to the formulation of a national biographical narrative, which “highlights experiences that matter” and fits these into a purposive narrative, linking past, present and future.³² This adds a stronger narrative dimension to Langenbacher’s notion of the dominant memory regime, but is essentially compatible with that concept. Berenskoetter’s framing of the argument is pertinent to joint memorial or museum projects of the kind under discussion here, in that he emphasizes how such national

biographical narratives also imply a symbolic relationship to the space in which they unfold. Berenskoetter is not the first theorist of memory to note that the identity narratives of groups are thoroughly “localized,” as the founding father of Memory Studies Maurice Halbwachs put it.³³ However, Berenskoetter states that, although the national territory is the core site where national history takes place, other “sites that matter” beyond that territory are imbued with significance because of their role in the dominant narrative.³⁴ From the Russian point of view, as the location of the signing of the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany on the 8th May 1945, the German-Russian Museum at Karlshorst is one such “site that matters.” Indeed, as one of the historians involved in the original plan for the re-design of the museum put it, for Russians it is (or should be) a “sacred place.”³⁵

For such “extra-territorial” sites that are to be jointly managed,³⁶ there is clearly the potential for national biographical narratives and the dominant memory regimes in which they are embedded to collide with the narratives of others. Therefore, while joint memorial and museum projects provide an opportunity to project the dominant national memory regime beyond the state’s own borders, they also present a potential challenge to that regime from outside. More recently, however, Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi have questioned the emphasis that some theorists of ontological security have placed on the desire of states to hold onto narratives at all costs.³⁷ Rather, they argue, ontological security implies not the defense of a static and unchanging sense of self, but rather the ability to adapt that sense of self to new circumstances in such a way as to preserve a sense of autobiographical continuity. In other words, actors do not have to stay the same in order to construct a sense of identity.

Plainly, some states have adapted their autobiographical narrative over time, reinterpreting and re-contextualizing significant historical events: the case of Germany’s celebrated “coming to terms with the past” would be a case in point. Now Germany presents itself as the nation that was responsible for terrible crimes in the past, but which has learned the lessons of history and committed itself to the values of democracy and human rights. Even if this narrative contains shameful actions, it does not mean that it cannot be a positive, purposive and coherent narrative. The case of Austria, which has also had to reckon with the legacy of National Socialism, demonstrates particularly clearly that such adaptation of the national autobiographical narrative can also be the result of interaction with others: the scandal surrounding the election of President Kurt Waldheim in 1986, in which partners whose views were significant to Austria threatened sanctions and international isolation, ultimately led to an abandonment of Austria’s narrative of itself as the “first victim” of National Socialist Germany.³⁸ Another question that arises for this article, then, is whether the interaction between

states in the context of joint museum projects, addressing events at locations that are salient for national autobiographical narratives, can lead to a modification of such narratives on both sides, or whether partners will tend to retreat into their routinized accounts of the past when encountering the perspective of the other.

The learning that might take place through engagement in joint museum projects around the subject of past conflict need not necessarily imply the formulation of a single shared narrative about this shared history, however. Maria Mälksoo has argued, for instance, that the search for consensual narratives is problematic, in that it tends to de-politicize accounts of history, replacing multiple and potentially incommensurate accounts with a single compromise.³⁹ In a similar vein to Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, who critique the EU's attempts to foster consensus based on a victim-centered "cosmopolitan" memory,⁴⁰ Mälksoo follows Chantal Mouffe's conceptualization of the political as a realm of contestation or "agonism," in which the partners nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of others' narratives. While these narratives can and should be open to contestation, that contestation should not be formulated as an ontological challenge to the others' right to exist and hold a position.

Mälksoo notes that the drive towards the formulation of shared narratives perpetuates the "securitization" of mnemonic identifications, in that the consensual narrative is one that can be subscribed to by two or more partners without the necessity for them to experience any threat to their sense of who they are. In contrast, Mälksoo proposes that states need to learn to tolerate the agonism of competing visions of their past as formulated by multiple (internal and external) actors, seeking to maintain a sense of historical continuity and identity, while remaining reflexively self-critical and thus capable of learning and change. Mälksoo argues that securitizing historical identity leads, on the one hand, to a perception that any point of view that cannot be incorporated into the existing narrative is an ontological threat; and, on the other, to an attempt to narrow the range of points of view that are permitted expression.

National Memory and the Authorized Heritage Discourse

If the dominant memory regime has the effect in the domestic context of underpinning national identifications and, in the international sphere, expresses itself as a biographical narrative that may face challenges from others, what role do the professionals charged with carrying out international memorial or museum projects play? Within the national frame, Laurajane Smith has argued that heritage professionals tend to transfer the dominant national memory into an "authorized heritage discourse" (or AHD).⁴¹ Smith's argument is not simply that such

professionals reproduce the dominant memory narrative, but rather that they translate that narrative into a set of practices and expertise for managing heritage.

The AHD combines the communication of dominant narratives with shared attitudes towards the means of representing those narratives, including professional standards in relation to conservation, display and interpretation of artefacts, and so on. Smith is careful to point out that other heritage discourses exist and can be expressed in the practices of individuals or groups outside of the institutions of the AHD. Nevertheless, some individuals, because they have recognized professional expertise and are appointed to positions of influence, have more power over the framing of heritage than others. In Smith's analysis, heritage professionals are largely responsible for translating the dominant national memory regime into the presentation of heritage in museums and at historic sites for the domestic audience. In the case of international projects of the kind to be discussed here, however, they are required to work with heritage professionals from another national context.

Although the AHD is informed to an extent by international curatorial and academic standards, the congruence between the AHD Smith discovers in her case studies, which are all from the Anglo-Saxon cultural context (UK, US and Australia), is not necessarily to be found between other nations. In the case of the German-Russian Museum, for example, we find heritage professionals and historians expressing different priorities in terms of the kinds of narratives they wish to see reflected in the museum display and in terms of the curation and display of the objects that are supposed to corroborate this narrative. Ultimately, we hypothesize, their inability to give up their original positions in order to move towards a shared third position, or even to accept the existence of differing interpretations as proposed by Mälksoo, is indicative not just of a defense of mutually incompatible professional standards, but also of the ontological threat that giving up these positions would represent not only in relation to the national AHD, but also to the dominant national memory regime, which the AHD expresses in terms of heritage practice.

This is not to say that heritage professionals in international projects will experience that threat in personal terms (although they may well do). However, they will have a heightened awareness that challenges to the biographical narrative of their own nations may be experienced by others as threatening, whether by elites in their national context or more widely in domestic public opinion. This issue will be particularly sensitive where heritage professionals might run the risk of compromising with the former enemy or even taking on the preferred narrative of that former enemy, which would be perceived in the domestic context as abandoning interpretations of the conflict that are central to the dominant conception of national identity.

German heritage professionals are socialized in a national context in which a specific memory regime dominates and in which a related AHD holds sway. Germany's dominant memory regime has been defined in terms of a "culture of contrition,"⁴² which emerged at the societal level in the 1970s and 1980s and became institutionalized in the post-Cold War period.⁴³ This is not to suggest that this regime has achieved an uncontested status in Germany. From the so-called Historians' Debate of the mid-1980s to the arguments of right-wing populists today, there have been repeated attempts to foreground more positive interpretations of German history in the public sphere that would allow for a return to a conventional sense of national pride. Nevertheless, in terms of "state-mandated memory," to use Beattie's term, and in the mainstream of political opinion, this memory regime remains dominant. It is now so taken for granted that some critics have called it a form of ritualized "political correctness."⁴⁴

Germany's memory regime is prototypically "cosmopolitan,"⁴⁵ in that it seeks to foreground the suffering of the victims of past atrocities (in this case, primarily the victims of the Holocaust) and to emphasize the cosmopolitan values of human rights, pointing out the dangers of nationalism. While "defining the current community in opposition to the past,"⁴⁶ it can be argued that this ostensibly post-national approach also makes possible a positive national identification or even self-confidence,⁴⁷ in that Germany can present itself as the country that has learned the lessons of the age of the twentieth century and overcome the dangers associated with nationalist and anti-democratic ideologies.⁴⁸ In this way, German political elites balance the need to acknowledge the crimes of National Socialism with the need for ontological security founded in a fundamentally positive biographical narrative.

This dominant memory regime in the German context is reflected in the authorized heritage discourse, subscribed to by the mainstream of heritage professionals and historians concerned with the communication of history to the public. German history museums, especially those that deal with the Second World War, seek to challenge any myth-making that might exculpate the national community; instead they underline the implication of "ordinary" Germans in past crimes.⁴⁹ At the same time, however, the German AHD places a strong emphasis on the museum as a space in which citizens become active in the interpretation of historical evidence and arrive at independent conclusions,⁵⁰ without being shocked into accepting particular points of view by the presentation of emotionally overwhelming content. These principles characterize the German approach to historical and political education more broadly, as established in the so-called Beutelsbach Consensus of 1976.⁵¹ However, they also point to a potential contradiction between the desire to educate citizens about the dangers of anti-democratic regimes such as National Socialism and the risk of conveying that message in

such a way that the citizen, as democratic subject, is compelled to accept a specific interpretation of the past. In other words, heritage professionals and historians in Germany are wary of conveying a democratic message by non-democratic means.

In the Russian case, in contrast, we do not see a move towards a “culture of contrition” or a cosmopolitan discourse in the dominant memory regime. The Putin years, in particular, have been marked by a maintenance of a narrative that focuses on the Russian nation as both victim of and heroic resister to external aggression. James Wertsch,⁵² for example, has pointed to continuities in the “schematic narrative template” through which Russian history in general, and the Second World War in particular, are interpreted:

1. An initial situation in which Russia is peaceful and not interfering with others.
2. The initiation of trouble in which a foreign enemy treacherously and viciously attacks Russia without provocation.
3. Russia almost loses everything in total defeat as it suffers from the enemy’s attempts to destroy it as a civilization.
4. Through heroism, and against all odds, Russia triumphs and succeeds in expelling the foreign enemy, thus justifying its claims of exceptionalism and its status as a great nation.

This narrative template effectively excludes a close examination of the political or moral failings of the national community and its leaders, while also creating a clear divide between the heroic nation and outsiders, who are confined to the aggressor role. According to Dina Khapaeva, in the Putin era this myth has fed into a national biographical narrative that assigns Russia a central role in world history as “the messianic nation” that “sacrificed itself for the happiness of mankind.” In this context, “any crimes committed in the name of this global victory are considered justified.”⁵³ The internal promotion of this view of history through patriotic education programs and various forms of public commemorations has led, according to Nataliya Danilova, to the “re-introduction of a war-centered concept of national identity,”⁵⁴ which strengthens the link between the defense of the preferred war narrative and “mnemonic security” still further. As Khapaeva notes, in the first decade of the 2000s, Russia also engaged in various “memory wars” with neighboring states who challenged its narrative about the Soviet Union’s role in the Second World War.⁵⁵ This demonstrates the extent to which Russia regarded such foreign counter-narratives as a threat to its ontological security.

While Thomas Sherlock notes that the Russian state has more recently sought to distance itself somewhat from the legacy of Soviet period, as in the official recognition of Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre,⁵⁶ such modifications are undertaken within the framework of the fundamental narrative noted by Wertsch, in which the heroic suffering of the

people in defense of the Motherland continues to take center stage.⁵⁷ As Mark Edele (2017: 109) has proposed, this narrative has served the Putin regime as a means to justify its own nationalist-authoritarian stance, particularly in the wake of the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 and the subsequent Russian military intervention.⁵⁸ As a consequence, the regime has tended to provide patronage to historians who are proponents of this national-patriotic approach to the history of the Second World War.⁵⁹

In terms of the authorized heritage discourse to be found in the work of Russian heritage professionals and historians, Bogumil et al. point to a tendency towards continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras in terms of the presentation of war in the museum space.⁶⁰ In particular, they note continuity in the presentation of the wartime enemy as a de-humanized representative of evil, who is contrasted with the morally good Russian people. This amounts to a presentation of the museum as a “temple of heroic community,”⁶¹ an approach that is clearly congruent with the dominant memory regime in the national context. In terms of the representational strategies employed, this emphasis on the suffering of the national community is concomitant with a greater willingness to incorporate affectively charged content (for example, direct depictions of the enemy’s atrocities) that are rarer in the German context. This approach is expressed in the recent fashion in Russian museums for highly scenographic exhibitions that make extensive use of multimedia, and which are designed to appeal to the emotions of the visitors. In an interview Evgeny Artemov, one of the members of the AAC of the German-Russian Museum and director of the State Museum of Political History of Russia in St. Petersburg, described this type of historical exhibition a “total installation,” that “affects the feelings of the visitor” and produces a kind of “knowledge received through the soul.”⁶² This approach stands in stark contrast to the sober, documentary style predominant in most German museums dealing with the history of National Socialism and the Second World War.

In the following discussion of the development of the German-Russian Museum Karlshorst, we will analyze the process whereby German and Russian historians and heritage professionals have sought to create a museum of the Second World War that can be compatible both with the divergent memory regimes of the two countries, but also with their differing authorized heritage discourses. What is at stake for both sides is the possibility of using heritage as a form of “memorial diplomacy” to mark a new understanding between the two nations, as expressed in a new agreed interpretation of a conflict that plays a central role in their national memory regimes. In addition, as noted above, it also represents an opportunity to communicate that new understanding to both national publics, with the museum functioning as an institution of cultural diplomacy from that perspective. As we will show below, the necessary process of

negotiation, compromise and disagreement around this museum is unresolved and ongoing, which is symptomatic of the tensions between the diverging national approaches to the heritage of war.

The Development of the First Permanent Exhibition at the German-Russian Museum Karlshorst

As already noted, when the museum was established as a symbol of German-Russian reconciliation in 1994, its stated goal was to offer visitors “a common Russian-German view on twentieth century history.” However, reaching such a unified historical narrative required hard negotiations and considerable compromises from all parties. In the following we will reconstruct the exhibition-making process and the accompanying discussions and controversies within the curatorial team and the ACC. Focusing on the new permanent exhibition opened in 2013, we will also give some context on the establishment of the museum and its first permanent exhibition from 1995. Our research included an in-depth analysis of the current display. We also conducted research in the museum archive, consulting material that included minutes from the meetings of the ACC and the Board of Trustees of the Association, drafts of the exhibition scenario and written exchanges between the museum’s director and the members of the ACC, as well as press reviews of the new permanent exhibition. Unfortunately, there are no minutes from meetings of the exhibition curators. We also conducted interviews with the museum’s director, Jörg Morré, the then German head of the ACC, Reinhard Rürup, and two of its Russian members, Victor Skryabin and Evgeny Artemov. Finally, we also conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with Russian, German and international museum visitors.

After German reunification and the decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Germany it was clear that the Museum of Unconditional Surrender could not continue to exist in its current form. In an exchange of diplomatic notes between the German and Soviet/Russian governments and in reference to the Treaty of Good Neighborhood between Germany and Soviet Union from November 1990, it was decided that the German side should preserve the villa in Karlshorst as part of Russian tangible cultural heritage.

The initiative came from the Soviet side. In June 1990, *Pravda*, an official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, published an article quoting the director of the Capitulation Museum, Vladimir Lukin, who suggested that Karlshorst should be turned into an international institution dedicated to the joint Allied victory over Nazi Germany.⁶³ Lukin also considered other solutions, including the establishment of a bilateral German-Soviet Museum.

The German side took up this latter idea. However, during the first talks between the Berlin Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs and the envoy of the Embassy of the USSR to Berlin in October 1990, the German side already made it clear that the Karlshorst Museum would not be acceptable in its existing form, as it would be treated by German and international visitors as a “curiosity” and as a reflection of “a Stalinist interpretation of the history of the war.”⁶⁴ In order to be preserved, the museum had to undergo a thorough reconstruction. In particular, the Berlin Secretary of State underlined that the new exhibition should focus on the German crimes and the human and material losses of the Soviet Union during the war.

At the end of 1990 the German Historical Museum (GHM) was commissioned by the Federal Government to set up a joint German-Soviet Expert Commission (EC) to prepare a new concept for the Karlshorst Museum. Members of the EC were representatives of the GHM, the Museum of the Unconditional Surrender, the Soviet Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, the Bundeswehr and the Soviet Armed Forces, German and Soviet/Russian museums, research institutes and archives dealing with military history, such as the Military History Museum Rastatt, the Central Museum of the Soviet Armed Forces in Moscow, the Military Archive in Freiburg or the Moscow Institute for Military History, as well as some German historians who experts in the history of National Socialism, such as Rürup (as director of the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre/Berlin, 1989–2004) and Eberhard Jäckel, who was also one of the initiators of the construction of the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. In 1992, a special task force was established at the GHM consisting of four historians hired for the project by the GHM (including Peter Jahn, the later director of the Museum) and four members of the EC, two Russians and two Germans.

In parallel, the legal status of the new museum was discussed. After taking several other possibilities into consideration, in 1994 it was decided to set up a bilateral German-Russian non-profit association, composed of representatives of the German and Russian governments the Senate of Berlin, the GHM, the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, The Central Museum of Armed Forces and the State Historical Museum in Moscow. In 1998 the Board of Trustees was expanded to include the Foundation “Topography of Terror” and The Saxon Memorial Foundation, as well as by the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kiev and the State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk. In the early 1990s, however, the inclusion of Ukrainian, Belarusian or other representatives on the Board of Trustees was not taken into consideration. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Russian Federation was considered as its sole heir. The same applied to the EC and the AAC, where still today only Russian and German historians

and museums experts are represented. Shortly after being appointed director of the museum in 2009, Jörg Morré suggested the inclusion of Ukrainian and Belarussian representatives in the AAC.⁶⁵ However, his proposal was and is still rejected by the Russians on the basis that this would go against the statute of the Museum, which states that it is a solely German-Russian enterprise.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the new museum sought to arrive at a shared view of the war with the aim of reconciliation, the Russian partners, who did acknowledge the need for change, still hoped to keep some elements of the old narrative, stressing Soviet sacrifice and the USSR's contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. In line with this desire to maintain a focus on Soviet heroism, the first blueprints for the new exhibition proposed by the Russian members of the EC envisioned a military history museum, focusing predominantly on military engagements, battlefields and changing fronts, at the expense of a fuller consideration of German occupational policy and its victims.⁶⁷

For the Russians it was also unclear at this point how the new World War Two narrative of reunited Germany would develop. Although significant research had already been undertaken on German warfare and occupation policy in the Soviet Union, the brutal character of this campaign was not yet part of broader public awareness in Germany. Also, the term “war of annihilation” (*Vernichtungskrieg*) was not in common usage in the German public sphere until the opening of the highly controversial exhibition “Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944” (War of Annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944), which toured over 30 German and Austrian cities in the years 1995–1999.

However, before the second meeting of the EC in June 1991, the Soviet delegation did visit the exhibition “Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion” (The War against the Soviet Union) at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, curated by one of the members of the EC, Reinhard Rürup. Although this exhibition was not as controversial as the so-called “Wehrmacht exhibition” and did not have such an impact on the German public, it clearly showed the extremely brutal character of the war in the East, which was very different from the one conducted by the Germans in Western Europe. Only after seeing this exhibition was the Russian side reassured about Germans' self-critical approach to their own history.⁶⁸ In fact, two of the members of the above-mentioned task force, Gabriele Camphausen and Peter Jahn, had previously worked at the Topography of Terror, and it is evident that in its structure and the material used the first permanent exhibition at Karlshorst owed much to the exhibition “The War against the Soviet Union.”

Over several meetings, the EC agreed on a common concept for the new museum. The basis for the discussion was a concept paper elaborated by a German member of the

commission, which stressed the significance of the building as a historical site. The historical exhibition was to show the history of German-Soviet relations 1917–1990, but the main focus was to be placed on the German-Soviet war 1941–1945. Furthermore, the author stressed that this museum should not be treated as a pure military history museum, but should rather transmit an anti-war attitude and focus on the victims and their suffering.

Despite some divergences concerning the interpretation of the Soviet annexation of former Polish eastern territories in September 1939, the work on the first permanent exhibition of 1995 did not cause any major conflicts within the EC. One possible reason for this, as suggested by Reinhard Rürup in an interview, was that the Russian members of the EC were aware that the old Soviet interpretation of World War Two was outdated but had no clear idea yet of the future direction of Soviet/Russian historiography. As such, they were “very attentive, and approving” with regard to the ideas of their German colleagues.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Peter Jahn, who later became the museum’s director, has argued that the Russian scholars and heritage professionals were also aware that scholarship on the war had been much more open in the west, which left their German colleagues at an advantage in terms of their familiarity with key issues.⁷⁰

The development of the first permanent exhibition at Karlshorst was the product of a very specific set of historical circumstances. In different ways, the authorized heritage discourses in both post-unification Germany and post-Soviet Russia were in a state of transition during the period when the first exhibition was being conceived. Figures such as Rürup, Camphausen and Jahn on the German side were closely associated with the Topography of Terror, which itself had been a product of the German “Gedenkstättenbewegung” (memorial site movement) of the 1980s, a loose association of civil society initiatives that sought to uncover the hidden history of National Socialism, with a particular focus on forgotten victims of the Nazi regime.⁷¹ While the 1990s saw some conservative push-back against this focus on German crimes,⁷² ultimately this “culture of contrition,” as discussed above, was on its way to becoming the dominant feature of both heritage practice and state-mandated memory in Germany.

The focus on victimhood that the German experts brought to the project, particularly with regard to civilian populations under German occupation, was both a challenge to the authorized heritage discourse of the Russian side and a potentially reassuring element. While the Russian experts were pressed to modify an essentially heroic focus on military engagements in continuity with Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War, and to take the civilian experience into account more fully, the German side’s focus on German perpetration allowed the Russian

team to feel that the new exhibition would not call into question the status of the USSR as the victim of and resister to Nazi aggression. Given that the post-Soviet narrative was not yet fully formed, this position was a safe compromise: although it allowed for a new emphasis on Soviet victimhood, as opposed to the more heroicizing approach of the original Museum of Unconditional Surrender, it did not challenge fundamental aspects of the Russian/Soviet framing of the Second World War, which foregrounded the decisive Soviet contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Redesigning the Exhibition

The work on the scenario for the new exhibition started in 2009 with the arrival of the new museum director, Jörg Morré. After almost 15 years, the museum had to cope with changes in levels of visitor knowledge and the development of new visual habits in line with trends in exhibition design. In addition, the post-Cold War period had seen a significant boom in scholarship on the Second World War, and these new historical findings also called for changes in the permanent exhibition. However, what was initially described as merely a “rearrangement” or “repackaging” (*neue Verpackung*) of the old exhibit ultimately turned out to be a major overhaul.⁷³

These changes led to controversies of a much more heated character than in the early 1990s. The German exhibition curators proposed to introduce new topics not present in the 1995 exhibition in order to meet visitor expectations and keep pace with scholarship. The part of the display dealing with the interwar period was to be refocused, no longer solely giving an account of German-Soviet relations, but also providing a brief description of both the National Socialist and the Stalinist regime. The new exhibition was also to give more space to the Soviet experience of the war, which again brought in new themes not mentioned in the old display: for example, the Soviet deportations of 1941–1944 or the functioning of the Gulag system throughout the war. However, these changes were now proposed by the German side against the background of a new state-mandated memory under Putin. According to Rürup, who as chairman of the AAC had the task of mediating between its members, “[t]he struggle over the exhibition content was in this case much more protracted, intense and complicated than in the 90s. [...] There was the new self-confidence in Russia as a world power, which is very confident about its history, which is not necessarily critical.”⁷⁴

There was a consensus on the anti-war statement of the museum and there were also no controversies on how German crimes and the suffering of the Soviet soldiers (POWs) and

civilians should be displayed. What caused disagreement within the AAC was not the core, but rather what one might call the “fringes” of the story: the part of the exhibition dealing with Stalinism, the Soviet-German Alliance of 1939–1941, some elements in the section on “The Soviet Union at War,” the chapter on the Soviet Army entering Germany, and the section on the memory of war in the museum’s final room. Although the views of both the German and the Russian members of the AAC were not uniform, the most important line of conflict was at the national level.

As already mentioned, the biggest objections from the Russian AAC members concerned the decision to add more information on both National Socialism and Stalinism. The curators had clearly not expected such a reaction from the Russian side. In a radio interview, Morré described the Russian reaction as follows:

As a team we thought: well, we need to show what this country, this Soviet Union, was like when it was invaded in the summer of 1941. You need to understand that in 1917, 1918 there’s a big transition on account of the October Revolution, then there’s the collectivization of agriculture, the Great Terror, so the country had already been through a lot by 1941, and we thought this was just textbook stuff, let’s just quickly write something about it, and that’s where we really slipped up, because this discussion is still really controversial in Russia, a hot topic, and really not just textbook knowledge.⁷⁵

In fact, as confirmed by Victor Skryabin in an interview, the Russian members of the AAC saw in the initial scenario proposals made by the museum curators an attempt “to equate one system with the other through an excessive presentation of critical material on the Soviet Union of the 30s and 40s.”⁷⁶ This material potentially challenged the exclusively heroic narrative of Russian/Soviet history and the sense of ontological security attendant upon that narrative. For example, one of the Russian members of the Committee questioned why the Great Famine (1932–1934) was presented as a result of Stalinist collectivization policy. Although he admitted that policy might have exacerbated the famine, it was nevertheless caused, in his view, by “crop failure and the short-term foreign loans that the Soviet Union had to pay off” rather than being the “result of a deliberate policy.”⁷⁷

Similar controversies occurred when talking about the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal. One of the German historians wanted to add a sentence saying that the Canal had been “built with great propagandistic effort,” but that it had “proved to be economically useless,”⁷⁸ whereas Russian experts wanted to stress “the strategic role” of this investment.⁷⁹ They also suggested that a passage about the huge network of punishment and work camps established in the Soviet Union in the 1930s ought to be corrected “for reasons of objectivity.”⁸⁰ Further, the Great Purge, one of the Russian contributors claimed, should not be explained by

Stalin's lust for power, but rather as a response to a real threat to the Soviet Union caused by Hitler's coming to power.

As can be seen from the quoted examples, the Russian members of the AAC did not want to fully conceal the Stalinist terror, but they wanted to relativize it by presenting it as a "side effect" of the modernization and industrialization process. At least some of the German historians expressed concerns that, if this line was followed, the exhibition would generally "play down the dark sides of Soviet history."⁸¹ [Fig. 1]

Another major point of disagreement was how to speak about the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the annexation of Eastern Poland, the Baltic States and Bessarabia by the USSR, and the Soviet occupation policy of 1939–1941. While both the curators and the German AAC members tended to speak about an "annexation" of the former Polish eastern territories and about a "violent incorporation" of the Baltic States and Bessarabia,⁸² the Russians saw the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the subsequent territorial expansions as purely defensive measures, aimed at ensuring the Soviet Union a "security zone" in case of a German attack.⁸³ In the case of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia, they also claimed, the Soviet Union only regained former Russian territories lost during the Soviet-Polish war of 1919–1921. Perhaps most striking is that some Russian AAC members either fundamentally called into question the massacre of 22,000 Poles by Soviet security forces at Katyn in 1940 as a historical fact, or at least denied that its aim was to decimate Polish national elites.

A further controversy arose about how Stalinist policy and the Soviet society during the war were to be portrayed. While one of the German AAC members postulated that the exhibition should explain the reasons for the initial failure of Soviet Union in summer 1941 and show that Stalinist persecution continued during the war, the Russian delegates on the contrary tried to play down the Soviet Terror. For example, one of them questioned the mass character of Soviet deportations in 1941–1944. Individual incidents, he claimed, could be explained "by the severity of the conflict with Hitler's Germany."⁸⁴

The appropriate presentation of the partisan war in the German-occupied territories was also a matter of dispute. While some of the German experts stressed that, apart from the Soviet partisans, there was also a national Ukrainian and a Polish armed underground, and that nationalist and Soviet partisans had fought against each other "at least as vigorously as against the Germans,"⁸⁵ the Russian members of the AAC saw these forces as "stooges of the Nazi occupiers."⁸⁶

Finally, the Russian delegates were also critical about the way the conduct of the Red Army on German territory in 1945 was to be presented. They were afraid that presenting

misdeeds of members of the Red Army would, as Victor Skryabin put it, “diminish the heroic deeds of the Soviet soldier and disguise the fact that Red Army troops liberated the peoples of Europe from Nazi despotism.”⁸⁷ One of the points of discussion was whether the assaults and rapes committed by Red Army soldiers could be explained by the desire for revenge or whether they were a result of the Soviet hate propaganda.

The controversies within the AAC were so significant that some of its members proposed that in cases where it was not possible to find common ground the different viewpoints should be addressed in the exhibition. Another proposal was to inform the visitors at the end of the exhibition “that not everything was consensual and that there were some controversial issues.”⁸⁸ Years after the opening of the new exhibition Rürup claimed that he would have found it very appealing to include a room at the end of the display where the visitors would be shown a few examples of historical controversies that arose during the exhibition-making process. When asked if this might undermine the authority of the curators and members of the AAC, who are expected to present to the visitors with only reliable historical interpretations, he denied this: “Actually, they should be more worried when there are half a dozen points in a consensual exhibition where one side has had to accept something they are not comfortable with.”⁸⁹ Looking back at the creation of the exhibition, Victor Skryabin would also welcome the presentation of different historical interpretations, especially because, as he admitted, there are still parts of the display that satisfy neither party, despite long negotiations.⁹⁰ However, this idea has never been realized. When asked about the proposal in an interview, Morré stated that, from a museological perspective, he had found it attractive. One of the reasons it was not implemented was that the “diplomatic mission” of the Karlshorst museum aims to achieve “consensus” as a means to “reconciliation,” which demands a single narrative.⁹¹ Admittedly, however, the idea came up only very late in the exhibition-making process and its implementation would have required reworking the whole exhibition scenario.

The 2011–2012 controversy within the AAC led to a significant crisis in the exhibition-making process. Some of the German and Russian members of the AAC demanded major changes to be made in the exhibition texts, threatening to withdraw their support from the project. They asked the Board of Trustees for support, but the Board – probably in fear that the whole venture could collapse – decided that the AAC had only an advisory function and that it was the museum director’s responsibility to take final decisions on the design and content of the exhibition.

Despite the apparent severity of the conflict, the changes made to the subsequent drafts of the exhibition scenario were relatively small and concerned mostly the texts, not the structure

of the display or the exhibits. This may be partly explained by the position taken by the Board of Trustees. It also seems that in some cases the divergences between the viewpoints of the different AAC members were so large that it was impossible to reach an agreement anyway. In such instances the best solution may have been to keep the initial version proposed by the curators or introduce only cosmetic changes. However, this would not have been possible if the curators had not already been actively seeking to take Russian sensitivities into account and to create an exhibition that, as one of the curators put it in a press interview, “would not hurt anybody.”⁹²

The consensus reached in the mid-1990s was treated by both sides as a point of reference, or rather as the last resort. One of the Russian members of the AAC even suggested leaving the content as it was before and introducing only changes in the design. “The experience of working on the exhibition has shown,” he argued, “that there are different views and evaluations on the individual themes of the new exhibition. In 1995 a solution was found that satisfied all parties. How much time would be needed to again reach such a compromise?”⁹³

During the re-design of the exhibition, the German curators found themselves faced with a new situation. As noted above, it was certainly the case that their desire to bring in further contextual material about the Soviet Union both before and during the war created new potential for conflict with the Russian representatives. However, that potential was increased by the new dominance in Russia of a politics of historical memory that sought to preserve an image of the Second World War as a heroic struggle on the part of the Russian people against German fascism and celebrate the Soviet leadership as having acted always in the best interests of the nation. In this context, it was difficult to incorporate scholarly perspectives that threw light on questionable or even criminal aspects of Stalin’s rule, which were clearly perceived by Russian experts as a threat to Russian mnemonic security and a challenge to the authorized heritage discourse that predominates under Putin’s regime. While the dominant Russian memory regime of the mid-1990s had still been in state of flux, Russian representatives involved in the later re-design of the exhibition clearly felt that it was important to defend a now well-established Russian perspective, in which the Red Army’s contribution to freeing Europe from fascism should not be relativized by the inclusion of negative aspects of the Soviet regime that would encourage comparisons with National Socialism. In fact, in some cases the expectations of the Russian side corresponded with the German curators’ and AAC members’ fear of relativizing National Socialist crimes by comparing them with the Stalinist terror.

The controversies concerned not only the content but also the form of the exhibition. As mentioned above, the Russian ACC members, on the one hand, and the German curators and ACC members, on the other, come from different exhibition cultures. Although the new permanent exhibition is less sober than the previous exhibition from 1995, some of the Russian members of the AAC were still not fully satisfied with the final result. Evgeny Artemov noted in interview that the display was old-fashioned and not visitor-friendly.⁹⁴ He found some of the spaces dark and claustrophobic and the texts too long, and complained that the museum did not make full use of multimedia. [Fig. 2-3] On the contrary, Reinhard Rürup found the new exhibition design rather too “eye-catching” and simplistic (*plakativ*), in that it uses photographs as key objects to make general statements about history and plays with colors to build up contrasting atmospheres in the different exhibition rooms.⁹⁵ The discussions concerning the exhibition design can be exemplified on the case of the key object in section “German occupation rule,” namely a German photograph taken in 1942 in the Soviet Union and showing a woman wading through a river on a hot summer day – a very peaceful scene. Only the caption “Checking for mines,” which can be seen on the reverse of the photograph, reveals the horror of the situation. While one of the Russian AAC members appealed for a more explicitly violent image, arguing that there are “many other much more drastic pictures embedded in the social consciousness,” the German exhibition curators insisted that it was exactly the “apparent innocence” of the photograph that made it so “disturbing.”⁹⁶ [Fig. 4] The interviews also reveal different sensitivities of the curators, designers and ACC members. For example, Evgeny Artemov expressed his discontent with the fact that Soviet and German uniforms, medals and awards were presented side by side in one showcase, which he found “not very tactful.”⁹⁷ But all in all it seems that questions related to exhibition design did not occupy the members of the ACC as much as its textual content.

Although Morré had been given ultimate authority over the exhibition by the Board of Trustees, the desire of the curators to incorporate Russian and German views into a single narrative without undermining the integrity of the exhibit led to some notable compromises. For example, the chapter of the exhibition dealing with the Soviet Union in the interwar period stresses Soviet efforts to modernize the country, the industrialization process, women’s emancipation, the electrification and alphabetization campaigns, as well as the recognition of national minorities and their languages [Fig. 5]. Although it also mentions the violent character of Bolshevik rule, the selection of objects and images and their subtitling suggest that the mass terror was not a constitutive element of the Stalinist regime, but merely a side-effect of the modernization process. This can be clearly seen in the photograph chosen to illustrate the

collectivization campaign. The picture features women gathering cereal at a collective farm in Ukraine in summer 1933. In the foreground we see a propaganda truck accompanying the harvesters – an almost idyllic scene. Only in the subtitle, which is printed in very small type, can the visitor read that the collectivization campaign was “accompanied by force, repression, deportation, and finally starvation for five million people, many in Kazakhstan or Ukraine.” Apart from a propaganda poster from the time of the Great Purge the only image in this section that directly addresses the terror system and the forced labor camps is a photograph from the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.

When addressing the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the exhibition presents the front page of a German newspaper featuring a photograph of Stalin shaking hands with Ribbentrop and a facsimile in both German and Russian of the secret protocol that agreed to divide control of Eastern Europe between the two powers. However, the accompanying English text in the vitrine states that Russia signed the pact because it “wanted assurance after it failed to obtain a mutual assistance pact from Great Britain and France,” which stresses the defensive character of the pact and puts the blame on the French and British. Only in the next sentence does the visitor learn that “the secret protocol divided up east- central Europe between the two parties.” This statement is further weakened in the German and Russian versions of the same text, which only state that the additional protocol divided central and eastern Europe into German and Soviet “spheres of interest.”

Comparing the old and the new permanent exhibition we have the impression that although the current display introduces new topics, which turned out to be controversial for the Russian side, at the same time other contentious issues of Soviet history mentioned in the previous exhibition have been now smoothed over or simply overlooked. For example, while in the old exhibition there was one map showing “Territorial changes in Eastern Europe 1939–1941,” in the new exhibition there are two separate maps, one showing “Germany’s conquests 1939–1941” and the other entitled “Territorial changes of the Soviet Union 1939–1941.” This apparently minor change tends to stress that the German territorial gains were the result of aggression, which is entirely correct, while presenting Soviet gains more neutrally.

The reception of the new exhibition, although largely positive, also highlighted perceived failings. Berthold Seewald of German daily *Die Welt*, for example, noted a number of issues not addressed in the exhibition, including Stalin’s mistakes and miscalculations as well as the terror system in the Red Army, which were responsible for its initial defeat. He therefore concluded that the Karlshorst Museum was “evidence of current and long-lasting [German-Russian] sensitivities [...]”⁹⁸ Also the *Tagesspiegel* cultural editor Bernhard Schulz

remarked that the questions posed by Timothy Snyder in his book *Bloodlands* “(still) remain untouched in Karlshorst”.⁹⁹

The most radical critique, however, came from the Ukrainian historian, Alexander Gogun. In an article published in one of Ukraine’s most influential newspapers, the weekly *Zerkadlo Nedeli*, he called the exhibition “an export version [...] of neo-Soviet propaganda.”¹⁰⁰ While a whole showcase had been dedicated to the forced expulsions from the German annexed Polish territories 1939–1940, he argued, Soviet deportations from Ukraine, Belorussia and the Baltic States had not been presented at all. He also mentioned the fact that photographs in the exhibition depict only Nazi but not Stalinist crimes, and criticized the exhibition for tending to blame the violent excesses of the Red Army against German civilians on ordinary soldiers, thereby exculpating the Soviet leadership.

Conclusion

In his discussion of Putin’s mobilization of the historical memory of the Second World War, Mark Edele describes the Russian President as a “positive nationalist” in terms of his attitude to the interpretation of history. Whereas critical historians, Edele argues, can be understood as “negative nationalists,” in that they seek to highlight the nation’s past mistakes as a means of creating a better future, Putin celebrates a heroic mythology of the nation’s history that supports the status quo.¹⁰¹ This positive state-mandated memory was clearly expressed by the historians and museum professionals from the Russian side in the debate over the redesign of the German-Russian Museum in Karlshorst, whereas the German curators, steeped in a German memory regime that favors a self-critical “culture of contrition” at first did not understand that such an approach would be impossible for the Russian side, and then found that they had to down-play negative aspects of the Soviet regime and its prosecution of the war in order to maintain the semblance of a shared narrative. The commitment of German heritage professionals to a democratically open-ended presentation of history meant that they would potentially have been comfortable with a juxtaposition of differing interpretations of key issues within the exhibition, but again this would have presented both a challenge to the museum’s stated aim of reconciliation and consensus, on the one hand, and, on the other, would have represented a threat to Russian mnemonic security, which cannot currently accommodate such alternative perspectives.

Given the museum’s status as tool not only of international reconciliation, but also of cultural diplomacy in terms of its address to (non-Russian) visitors, it is clear that the

interaction between Russian and German historians and curators resulted in an exhibition that, while addressing problematic aspects of the Soviet regime in passing, tends not to dwell on these and therefore preserves an overall narrative of Soviet victimhood, even if this narrative is modified in comparison with the Soviet-era exhibit through a new focus on civilian suffering. Given that many visitors will not have the detailed knowledge of the historical debates available to historians like Gogun, for example, it may be difficult for them to challenge the consensual narrative presented in the museum.

Nevertheless, it is important to ask how effective the museum is from the Russian point-of-view in disseminating their preferred narrative of the war. An initial evaluation of visitor research conducted at Karlshorst shows that the blind spots of the exhibition are also noticed by the visitors.¹⁰² Although the museum was generally judged very positively, some of the Anglo-Saxon visitors in particular saw the museum as presenting a Soviet or Russian perspective on war. One Canadian interviewee, for example, found that the exhibition “was rather careful of Russian sensibilities or the Russian perspective” and she “wondered, if that was because it was produced in collaboration with the Russian government.”¹⁰³ However, this bias was not necessarily perceived as a shortcoming. Another respondent from the United States said it was exactly “the clear emphasis towards the Russian point of view” he found particularly interesting and unexpected in a German museum.¹⁰⁴ He then explained his opinion by saying that the Germans are shown in the exhibition as the only offenders while the Russians also did a lot of damage: “they did their fair share coming back this way. Poland, and Ukraine and everybody in-between were hurt in both directions.” “I’d say it’s very fair,” he summarized, “but the perspective is really closer to the Russian side. And I think it’s fine.”

The reactions of some visitors, who take a rather distanced view of the museum’s presentation of the Second World War, point to a potential pitfall of drawing on historical memory in the context of cultural diplomacy. As Thomas Just has observed, Russian public diplomacy in general, which can include cultural diplomacy, has had two salient weaknesses under Putin’s rule. Firstly, it has tended to mobilize nationalist narratives more suitable for the domestic public in the international context, despite the fact that such narratives are, by their very nature, exclusionary.¹⁰⁵ Here, however, as Reinhard Rürup recalled, the Russian members of the AAC often argued “as if the exhibition was to be presented in Moscow.”¹⁰⁶ Secondly, rather than appearing to offer a dialogue with others, Putin’s approach to soft power tends to emphasize the need to correct foreign perceptions of Russian history and culture.¹⁰⁷ In the case of the German-Russian Museum Karlshorst, dialogue was clearly only possible to the extent that the dominant Russian memory regime could, at the very least, go unchallenged in the

exhibition. In this sense, the example of the Karlshorst Museum shows Russian cultural diplomacy conforming to a unidirectional rather than a dialogic model of communication; a unidirectionality of which western audiences are increasingly suspicious.¹⁰⁸

The irony here, of course, is that, in the German context, it would have potentially been more persuasive for Russia to develop a more self-critical stance on the Soviet past in order to speak to the expectations of German partners and, ultimately, German and international visitors to the museum. Whereas the Russian historians involved in the museum perceived such self-criticism as a threat, in the context of German historical memory and of western Europe more widely it is generally acknowledged as a sign of moral strength and democratic credentials.

The museum has notable achievements and was in general well received in the German press, particularly in terms of its accommodation of the experiences of two national perspectives on the Second World War and its presentation of the experiences of Soviet citizens as more than simply passive victims of the German occupation.¹⁰⁹ There is also evidence that the current curation team is increasingly using temporary exhibitions at the site to focus on competing interpretations of aspects of the Second World War that would have been too sensitive to include in the permanent exhibition. For example, the exhibition “Different Wars,” which was prepared by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and shown at the Karlshorst Museum between January and March 2018, problematized the differences in narratives on World War Two in Czech, German, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian and Russian school textbooks. Nevertheless, the compromises that the permanent exhibition enacts make clear just how difficult it can be to jointly manage “sacred” sites of the extra-territorial heritage of war, especially where such sites are shared by nations in which the dominant memory regimes and their attendant heritage discourses are so difficult to reconcile.

The collaboration in the museum project offered Russia historians and heritage professionals an opportunity to engage with new foreign publics in terms of their presentation of the German war against Soviet Union, especially given that this is the only such permanent exhibition in Germany focusing on this aspect of the Second World War. However, their focus on defending a nationalist narrative, which was ill-suited to their potential audiences, meant that visitors tended to adopt a wary attitude to what they felt was the dominance of the Russian perspective. As Nye notes, “[s]oft power depends upon credibility,” and where information is perceived as one-sided or incomplete, such credibility is lost in the eyes of the audience, who may perceive the message as mere propaganda.¹¹⁰ This is equally the case, Beata Ociepka argues, where states attempt to impose particular framings of history onto foreign audiences.¹¹¹ The visitors in our interviews were not necessarily hostile to the Russian perspective, but they

did see it very much as a perspective that was partial or skewed. While some could respect that point-of-view as expressive of a specific historical experience, at least some non-Russian visitors did not feel they could fully identify with it. In this case, the need to maintain ontological security on the Russian side, the dominant Russian memory regime and its authorized heritage discourse, but also a particular conception of cultural diplomacy as a message-sending exercise, all fed into an approach to the negotiation of the new exhibition at Berlin-Karlshorst that has the potential to undermine some of the soft power benefits that might have accrued to Russia through its shared management of this site of extra-territorial heritage.

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³ Macdonald, "Museums," 1–2.

⁴ Wolfgang Kaiser, Stefan Krankenhagen and Kerstin Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe in Museums: Transnational Networks, Collections, Narratives, and Representations* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014).

⁵ Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, *Erinnerte Geschichte – Inszenierte Geschichte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2015).

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