Paradoxes of War Critique on Display: The Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History

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Paradoxes of War Critique on Display: The Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History

Deborah Ascher Barnstone*

Although the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History reopened in 2011, dedicated to a 'critical, differentiated and honest confrontation with military, war and violence', the conflicting readings of Daniel Libeskind's aggressive architectural addition, and the exhibitions installed within, call into question the ability of any museum to mount an effective critique of war.[1] The enormous perforated steel wedge penetrates the old neoclassical building, disrupting its traditional symmetry and adding open, light spaces by breaking through and splitting open the host structure. The transparent new building was intended as a symbolic foil to the opacity of the older one, which dates to Germany's authoritarian past, thereby signifying democratic openness and the new role of the military in contemporary, unified Germany.[2] In this way, the building plays upon familiar symbolic tropes active in West Germany since 1949 and in unified Germany since 1990 that set openness, accessibility, and transparency against exclusivity, closed plan, and opacity.[3] The addition intentionally deals in such oppositions, pitting the dynamic new architecture against the static existing structure. The tension between the aesthetically beautiful architectural gesture and the design's violent intentions highlights the challenges facing the museum: how to portray war and violence in the aestheticised museum environment, how to engage the museum-going public in contemplative responses to serious questions in an era of short attention spans, and how to create exhibitions that provoke thought rather than dictate opinion. The challenges are complicated by the decision to build a museum rather than a memorial.[4] While both deal with the past, the memorial commemorates past events and appeals to emotion, in contrast to the museum, which attempts to appeal to the intellect by preserving and presenting history through collections, archives, and exhibitions. There are memorial installations in the Dresden museum, but its larger function is museological. In the end, double readings

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Figure 1. The front facade of the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, showing Daniel Libeskind's intervention into the historic building. Photo: Hufton + Crow Photography.

proliferate in the project, making any single reading of the building and its contents ambiguous. This paper probes the contradictions and complexities at play in the Dresden museum's design and asks in what ways the aesthetics of architecture, as well as exhibitions, can elicit critical engagement with the subject of war (fig. 1).

History of Military and War Museums

Military and war museums are primarily descended from three kinds of collections: war trophies, armouries, and arsenals.[5] From the very first military conflicts, victorious soldiers have carried home loot, souvenirs, and trophies to display as proof of their military prowess. The ancient Greeks commemorated every victory by constructing a *tropaion* (root of the English word 'trophy'), a ritual memorial assembled on the battlefield with captured arms and standards. In contrast to the Greeks, the ancient Romans created their memorials, the *tropaea*, in prominent locations in the city, where they would be seen by Roman citizens. In addition to weapons, the Romans displayed cultural objects that they had looted and even, on occasion, the body parts of vanquished enemies. Such exhibits were more like those of a celebratory memorial than a museum, but the practice underscores how primal the exhibition of war paraphernalia and memorabilia is and how central memory structures have always been to the war experience.

By the Middle Ages, it was common practice for the European nobility to assemble private military collections in their castles. These first comprised family arms and armour and, later, the spoils of war, such as uniforms and banners. Such collections usually featured pieces that had artistic value because of the design and craft with which they were made—only such objects were deemed worthy of taking and displaying. Aristocratic collections did not include ordinary

armour worn by foot soldiers or these soldiers' more pedestrian weapons, objects that were later included in military museums. Royal armouries served as the foundations for the very first public museums concerned with warfare, such as the United Kingdom's Royal Armouries. The Royal Armouries was founded in 1423 in the Tower of London to manufacture armour and other weapons for the king; it was established as a public museum by the late 16th century. Similar armouries existed throughout Europe, including in Spain, Germany, and Austria.[6]

The armoury and the arsenal are similar types, and the words are often used interchangeably. However, some dictionaries do articulate a subtle difference between the two types that makes sense in the context of the history of the military museum. 'Armoury' describes a place of manufacture, collection, and exhibition of heraldic arms and armour, while 'arsenal' describes a place of manufacture, storage, development, testing, and repair of military equipment, ammunition, and war material used in modern warfare.

If the armoury museum type originated in the medieval castle and royal palace, the artillery museum type began in the arsenal. And, in fact, many of the first military museums were private collections in castles, armouries, and arsenals that were eventually opened up to the public and converted to museums in the way that the Royal Armouries was. Unsurprisingly, these first military museums were intimately tied to nation-building mythologies that arose with the evolution of the modern nation-state. They featured war implements, uniforms, and other military paraphernalia, recounted war stories, glorified soldiers who were national heroes, and celebrated battles and wars that were considered central to the national myths of the country where the museum was located.[7] According to Frederick Todd, these museums were dusty and dark repositories ill-suited to exhibition, which is not surprising given their genesis as private collections. He offers an evocative image of 'dust-collecting halls of faded trophies, cases of outdated firearms, cabinets of medals, quaint uniforms, and dismal portraits'.[8] The systematically organised and scientifically curated military museum, like many other museum types, first appeared in the second half of the 19th century, but if Todd is correct, even by 1939 few had modernised.[9]

The intentionally created war museum is a more recent invention, dating to the First World War: the first one ever compiled was the Imperial War Museum in London, which was founded by the War Cabinet in 1917 during the prosecution of the war.[10] The British had suffered catastrophic losses at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Concerned about the demoralising effect of the losses, the cabinet decided to create a museum whose primary function was didactic: to remind the British people of the reasons for the ongoing conflict.[11] More importantly, this was the first military museum whose express purpose was to relate and explicate the horrors of war rather than glorify conflict. At the same time, the museum was to engage both history and science while serving as a memorial. From the start, therefore, it included scientifically structured collections of all manner of objects related to the military and to war, from newspaper clippings and public notices to art, as well as rooms for display and a research library holding archival material

133 intended for scholarly research.[12] The breadth of material collected responded to
134 the challenges of collecting for a museum dedicated to contemporary events. The
135 museum was designed to tell the story of the Great War in a neutral way; accord-
136 ing to the prospectus, 'no attempt is made to glorify war or to emphasise victory
137 over the enemy'.[13] The mixed functions adopted by the Imperial War Museum
138 marked an innovative approach to the military museum and a new departure in
139 the field.[14] As several writers have noted, the Imperial War Museum was as much
140 a 'museum of peace' as it was of war, making it an early model for military muse-
141 ums such as the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History.[15]
142 Although the collections at the Imperial War Museum were intentionally
143 amassed from the start, the collection has never had a purpose-designed building.
144 The museum was established on a shoestring budget, which meant that it had to
145 use the spaces that were offered to it regardless of their suitability. The museum
146 spent years in inadequate, even inappropriate, quarters; for example, at the all-
147 glass Crystal Palace, where climatic issues threatened the material in the collection;
148 then at the cramped Imperial Institute, where it was impossible to exhibit much of
149 the holdings; before relocating to the Bethlehem Hospital building on Lambeth
150 Road, site of the former Bedlam psychiatric hospital. Relocation to the former asy-
151 lum is an unintentionally ironic comment on the insanity of war.
152 The Imperial War Museum was only the first of a series of military museums
153 founded around the world in the aftermath of the war, as far afield as the New
154 Zealand Memorial Museum in Auckland and as close to former battlefields as the
155 Historial de la Grande Guerre in France, near the sites of the battles of the
156 Somme.[16] In Germany, the industrialist Richard Franck inspired the founding of
157 the Stuttgart Kriegsbibliothek (War Library), now the Library for Contemporary
158 History, while the director of the Frankfurt Historical Museum assembled another
159 collection related to the First World War.[17] These museums shared a curatorial
160 interest in presenting the human consequences of war, whether at home or on the
161 front—a novel approach.
162 The historian Jay Winter documents another shift in museology in the latter
163 half of the 20th century, when exhibitions shifted from focusing on the military
164 side of conflict to including the perspective of non-combatant victims.[18] Winter
165 traces the shift in exhibition content to the emergence of Holocaust museums,
166 firstly, and then other museums dedicated to victims, such as the Armenian
167 Genocide Museum in Yerevan and the museum recounting Nazi war crimes in
168 Lidice, Czechoslovakia. Germany is awash with memorials and museums to vic-
169 tims, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Memorial to
170 Homosexuals Persecuted by the Nazis, the Berlin Wall Memorial, the many GDR
171 museums around the country, and the Berlin Topography of Terror, to name just
172 a few—the results of years of coming to terms with the violent National Socialist
173 and German Democratic Republic pasts. Because of the fierce ongoing debates
174 about memory, memorialising, and trauma, Germany was well poised to commis-
175 sion innovative architectural and exhibition solutions for its reconceived national
176 military history museum.

[4]

Figure 2. The front facade of the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, showing Daniel Libeskind's intervention into the historic building. Photo: Hufton + Crow Photography.

History of the the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History Building

The original building was an arsenal for the Royal Saxon Army, commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm I to commemorate the 1871 Prussian triumph in the Franco-Prussian War. The war was a critical turning point in the European geopolitics of the day since it marked the end of French hegemony and the rise of the German state. Not only did the victory in 1871 trigger German unification but it confirmed Germany's superior military prowess. After the war, the Kaiser commissioned Gottfried Semper's successor at the Berlin Bauakademie (Academy of Building), Georg Hermann Nicolai, to design and construct an arsenal on a hill above Dresden's Albertstadt (Albert City), using money from French war reparations paid after the Franco-Prussian War to finance the costs of building. Thus, with the construction of the new arsenal, Germany simultaneously celebrated its military success and thumbed its nose at the French. Albertstadt was a military city on the fringes of the Saxon capital of Dresden. It was named after King Albert the First of Saxony, who was crown prince during the Franco-Prussian War and commander of the German 4th Army, the Army of the Meuse. Albertstadt was also the seat of one of the largest and most important Prussian garrisons, while the city of Dresden was the historic home of the electors of Saxony and the third-largest city in Prussia at the time, after Berlin and Leipzig.[19]

The arsenal was one part of a larger complex of buildings set atop a hill on a plinth, just north of the city. The site included artillery workshops, remises, a storage building, hospitals, an administration building, guardhouses, a garrison church, and 'part of the largest contiguous barracks area in Germany'.[20] The arsenal building commands the centre of the complex, symmetrically placed between the other structures. It is the building with the most architectural merit in the ensemble—and the only one with an ornamental program on the exterior (fig. 2).

Erected between 1873 and 1877, the arsenal is a typical structure of its time, executed in a refined neoclassical style. Its central location, neoclassical ornament, height, and locally sourced pinkish-yellow Elbe sandstone give the arsenal an imposing presence in the compound. The facades have a clear tripartite order. Horizontal divisions in the stone base recall classical rustication, and an articulated *piano nobile* decorated with pilasters occupies the middle section. Modest pediments sit atop the side wings, and a triumphal arch marks the entry. Ornament is minimal and sparse: a bas-relief of a hussar mounted on a galloping horse decorates each of the two pediments, signalling the building's original function, the frieze is a simple horizontal stone band, and the facade is divided into bays by a series of pilasters that mirror the internal plan divisions.

The central entry portal is the facade's focal point and the most ornate aspect of the composition. The entry arch rests on several pairs of composite columns in a double reference to France and French architecture. These paired composite columns recall Claude Perrault's design for the east facade of the Louvre palace, while the arch evokes both the Parisian Arc de Triomphe and Constantine's Arch in Rome. The proportions and surface treatment of Nicolai's arch differ from those of its precedents; nevertheless, its inclusion gives a pointed, though subtle, rebuke to the French. The Parisian arch was erected to honour those who fought for France. One of its famous reliefs, 'The Resistance' of 1814 by Antoine Étex, depicts a triumphant French soldier, nude (as was the classical tradition), in a protective stance in front of an elderly man, a woman, and a child. He is combatting an anguished-looking bearded enemy, likely a Prussian hussar, who sits atop a horse just behind. Hussars were soldiers renowned for their horsemanship. The scene personifies Napoleon Bonaparte's struggles and eventual loss to the other European powers. Nicolai's entrance is actually more reminiscent of Constantine's Arch than the Arc de Triomphe. This arch was erected by the Roman Senate to memorialise Constantine's tenth anniversary as Roman emperor and his victory over his rival, Emperor Maxentius. Constantine's Arch uses the composite column on its facades in an undulating rhythm, which Nicolai adapted for his portal. By using the arch as the main entrance to the building, Nicolai signalled the arsenal's symbolic function as a monument to military success and an answer to French military and political dominance in the Napoleonic era. By the time the arsenal was erected, Germany was the preeminent military power in Europe.

The arsenal has a symmetrical E-shaped plan with two major wings on either side and a smaller one in the middle. Its floor layouts are highly functional. Most of each E-shaped floor area is comprised of contiguous open plan exhibition space.[21] At the rear of each wing are service spaces, elevators, and a stair. The small central wing contains the primary vertical circulation—a monumental stair adorned with portraits of important German military figures of the past, which was preserved in the renovation and addition. The original structure features sandstone columns on the main floor and steel ones on the second and third floors. This sea of columns is laid out on a regular 5-metre by 5-metre square grid,

265 with the sandstone columns supporting the steel beams above. The floors and roof
266 are all made of wood, the walls and facades of sandstone.[22]
267   When it opened in 1877, the building housed the Royal Arsenal Collection and
268 extensive barracks.[23] The building soon outgrew its usefulness as a weapons
269 depot, so in 1897 it was transformed into a war museum, the Royal Saxon Army
270 Museum, celebrating German military culture. After 1923, it was renamed the
271 Saxon Army Museum, then renamed again by the Nazis in 1939 as the Army
272 Museum of the Wehrmacht. In 1942 the name was simplified to the Dresden
273 Army Museum.[24] For a period after the Second World War, the building was used
274 for everything but a museum: the city hall, the annual Christmas markets, trade
275 shows, dance performances, and exhibitions—even the first General Exhibition of
276 German Art.[25] In 1972, it returned to its function as a military museum and reop-
277 ened as the Museum of the National Folk Army of the GDR.[26] Just before unifica-
278 tion in 1989, the name changed once again, this time to the current one. In all of
279 these incarnations until the present, the building has served as a site of propa-
280 ganda in support of the military and war. In 2001, the museum convened a panel
281 of experts to consider what its exhibition profile should be after unification; there
282 was general uncertainty about the proper function of such an institution in a
283 newly unified, democratic Germany.[27] Questions about the appropriate architec-
284 tural expression for any addition and the appropriate exhibition program were
285 particularly fraught given Germany's role in both world wars, its National
286 Socialist past, and 60 years of division.
287   The choice of Dresden to house a military museum added yet another layer of
288 complexity to the project because the Allied justification for bombing Dresden is
289 contentious; disagreement about the military and moral arguments for such a cam-
290 paign began in the 1940s and continues today. Some argue that the city had little
291 military significance, although the evidence for this view is controversial since
292 Dresden was a major transport hub. According to this argument, Dresden was tar-
293 geted as a way of imposing maximum pain on German civilians in order to
294 foment political pressure and hasten the end of the war.[28] The bombing campaign
295 killed an estimated 22,700–25,000 residents and caused tremendous physical dam-
296 age to the inner city. Much of the reconstruction work, such as the rebuilding of
297 the Frauenkirche, was only done after unification in 1990. For some Germans, the
298 destruction of Dresden complicates German guilt in the Second World War by
299 allowing the perception that Germans were victims and not just perpetrators. In
300 this reading, the meaning of Dresden's history is difficult to see clearly—its guilt
301 and responsibility as part of the National Socialist state questionable. Dresden is
302 either a symbol of German martyrdom or of culpability, depending on the
303 interpretation.
304
305 **The Libeskind Addition**
306 In 2002, Dresden launched an international competition for the expansion, refur-
307 bishment, and repurposing of the existing historic museum building. Libeskind
308 took a unique approach to the challenge: unlike other entrants, who proposed to

309   construct a traditional addition adjacent to the old structure, Libeskind put for-
310   ward a design that was an insertion into the old museum.[29] 'I wanted to create a
311   bold interruption, a fundamental dislocation, to penetrate the arsenal and create a
312   new experience', he said.[30] The addition was designed to mark a symbolic break
313   with the past while asserting the possibility of a new future. (Figs 1 and 2)
314   Like his earlier proposal for the Jewish Museum addition in Berlin, Libeskind's
315   design is highly symbolic on several levels: it has been described variously as a
316   'V' for 'victory', an 'arrow, hand axe, or rocket', a 'blitz', and a 'wedge'. The build-
317   ing points towards Ostragehege stadium in Dresden's west, the area where the
318   Allies dropped target indicators at the start of the firebombing in 1945. In this
319   way, it connects history with the present, wartime with peace. The arrow or hand-
320   axe form also refers to weaponry, albeit arcane types. The 'blitz', or 'lightning
321   bolt', carries a violent connotation as well as associations with Germanic and
322   Norse gods who threw lightning bolts when angered. It also recalls the Second
323   World War Blitzkrieg that was so damaging to Dresden. When interpreted as a
324   wedge, the addition signifies its cut into and through the fabric of the old building
325   as well as a cut through time. As a 'V', it may be 'a symbol of Dresden's resurrec-
326   tion from the ashes'.[31] In another reading, the addition is described as an abstract
327   fighter plane whose presence 'symbolises a warning against using violence as a
328   solution to violence'.[32] Or, it could suggest German democracy's victory over
329   totalitarianism or the victory of a new understanding of the military museum as a
330   site for cultural history in relationship to the old understanding of it as a place to
331   celebrate war.
332   Libeskind set up a series of symbolic dichotomies with the design as well: old
333   versus new, neoclassical versus modern, regular versus irregular, static versus
334   dynamic, and opaque versus transparent. This last opposition has played a special
335   role in German state architectural discourse and design since the 1920s, when
336   Hannes Meyer proposed a transparent glass building for the League of Nations
337   Headquarters because transparent glass was see-through and open and therefore
338   supposedly more democratic. After the Second World War, Hans Schwippert used
339   Meyer's logic when he designed the first West German federal parliament house
340   in Bonn. By the 1990s, when Germany sought to design a new parliament house
341   for the unified nation, the symbolism was so deeply embedded in the national
342   consciousness that members of parliament mandated a transparent building for
343   their new home in Berlin. One of the bitter sources of controversy at the time con-
344   cerned whether to renovate the former parliament house, the Reichstag, or con-
345   struct a totally contemporary new building. One group argued that transparent
346   modern architecture was inherently democratic and that opaque neoclassical archi-
347   tecture was by its nature totalitarian. The insertion of transparency into the
348   Reichstag was therefore supposed to mitigate the anti-democratic aspects of the
349   historic building. The transparency motif is therefore central to the symbolic ten-
350   sion between the architecture of totalitarian oppression and the architecture of
351   democracy in German discourse.[33] Furthermore, in Germany since the Second
352   World War, militarism has been associated with the totalitarian regimes of the

Kaisers and Hitler, whereas pacifism has been associated with post-war democracy. Libeskind therefore cleverly situated his project within a long-standing German architectural debate.

Looming 30 metres over the ground below, the addition is made of glass, concrete, and steel clad with steel mesh. Both the choice of materials and their physical properties stand in direct contrast with the older building, reinforcing the conceptual dichotomies Libeskind was playing with. The addition pierces the old building like a knife; it is oriented on an angle, moving diagonally through the old building's centre to create an opposition between the regular orthogonal geometries in the neoclassical structure and the irregular geometries of the new. The plan organisation mirrors the building volumetrics so that irregular spaces slice through regular ones, creating spatial tension between old and new as well as constantly shifting perspectives.[34] The spatial development is an analogy for the conceptual journey the museum invites the visitor to take, one of ever-changing perspectives on violence and war. The visitor moves back and forth between familiar, orthogonal rooms and unfamiliar, irregular rooms with sloping walls and disorienting vistas. In this way, the promenade through the building constantly shifts from comfortable to destabilising in a spatial mirroring of the intellectual journey the museum curators have set up. The highest spot in the museum is the pointed end of the addition, which towers above the historic building below, offering views to the outside and the western part of Dresden beyond. The gesture has been interpreted as a double symbol of violence, due to its disruptive nature and the way that the upward gesture suggests the possibility of overcoming violence since it points hopefully skyward in a triumphal fashion.

The Dresden Military History Museum's Exhibitions

The museum's stated mission is to encourage serious reflection on German military history and the concept of war through architectural expression coupled with curatorial approach.[35] The burden of Germany's long military tradition and its role in two catastrophic world wars made for a difficult curatorial challenge from the start. Indeed, the decision to create a 'site of reflection' rather than one simply of exhibition has been contentious; critics underscore the irony of putting the national military in charge of a museum that criticises war, the military's primary occupation, while others have questioned any museum's ability to deal effectively with a subject such as war.[36] Gone are traditional exhibitions that require little or no intellectual engagement, such as collections of war gear and battle maquettes glorifying conflict and celebrating national myths. Instead, the permanent display mirrors the architecture and is divided into two parts: one exhibition offers a chronological account of German military history within the European context since the Middle Ages, while the other is a thematic exhibition of concepts related to war and warfare coloured by individual experience.[37] Furthermore, the exhibitions do not treat their subjects as pure military history but rather as part of cultural history in all its social, political, and psychological dimensions. They are curated to pose questions to the viewer rather than provide answers, which is one

397   way that the museum is a site of reflection. The juxtaposition of the two exhibi-
398   tions, with contrasting narratives, is another way that the museum is designed to
399   provoke thought. In addition, the curators have carefully placed differing objects
400   next to one another in order to extract deeper contemplation. One typical example
401   is the placement of two paintings opposite one another in the section on politics
402   and war: Gustav Albert Mueller's *Self-destruction* (1928–29) and Louis de Silvestre's
403   *Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony, King of Poland* (18th century). De Silvestre
404   painted a typical full-length portrait of the elector, standing erect, in full dress
405   with body armour just showing beneath an ermine-ringed cloak, and bedecked
406   with the insignia of a ruler and emblems of Saxon and Polish orders. Augustus
407   holds a general's baton in his right hand and wears a sword at his waist. This is
408   the image of absolute power and military might. On the other hand, Mueller's can-
409   vas depicts the victims of war: a fallen soldier, bandaged, bloodied, mouth open
410   in a shriek, beneath several other bloody and ghostly figures. Above, the city is in
411   flames with smoke billowing upward. In contrast to the erect, vertical, and static
412   portrait of Augustus, this image is comprised of diagonals shooting across the can-
413   vas, which animate the scene. Blood red leaps off the surface. It is a savage por-
414   trayal of the horrors of everyday war experience, starkly different from the serene
415   figure projected by the celebrated warrior king. Thus, the two paintings represent
416   two different realities: glorification of combat versus the ugly reality, power and
417   privilege incarnate versus the vulnerable. By placing them opposite one another,
418   the curators hope to elicit reflection on how fate affects war experience and how
419   attitudes towards war may be determined by class and power.
420   Writing about the museum, Christian Cercel situated the project between a
421   'forum and a temple'; that is, straddling the space of debate historically associated
422   with the ancient forum and the sacred contemplation space of the temple.[38] The
423   neoclassical architecture of the old building features the requisite signs of a tem-
424   ple: the pediments over the side wings and the triumphal entryway, together with
425   grand spaces. These sit firmly in the Enlightenment architectural tradition in
426   which the museum was a shrine to national identity and a war museum was a
427   sacred memorial to the nation's fallen soldiers. On the other hand, it is the cur-
428   ation that creates the forum, the space for intellectual debate.
429   The symmetrical and regularly planned older building houses the traditional
430   chronological exhibition, while Libeskind's wedge-shaped addition contains the
431   thematic exhibition that probes the societal and human origins of violent conflict.
432   The promenade through the museum is a piece of intertwined choreography that
433   allows the viewer to weave back and forth between the two sections, thereby
434   enhancing the contrast between the two curatorial strategies.
435   In another highly symbolic gesture, the curators have placed a copy of Carl
436   von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832) at the beginning of the exhibition promenade.
437   Not only is Clausewitz's book a classic in the literature on war, but it was the first
438   to theorise war as the result of economic, social, and political forces as well as
439   examine psychological and moral factors that affect the prosecution of war.[39]
440   Clausewitz's holistic theory extended the understanding of war in a way that is

Figure 3. View of the war toys exhibition in the addition to the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History. Photo: Bitter Bredt, courtesy of Holzer Kobler Architecture.

paralleled in the exhibition approach taken by the Dresden museum. Equally, as the historian Peter Paret has pointed out, reading and comprehending Clausewitz demands an open and flexible intellect, which is exactly what the exhibitions at the Dresden museum demand. Of course, the display of Clausewitz's book is a subtle introduction to what follows and can only be fully understood by those who are 'in the know', who have read Clausewitz and therefore understand the book's significance (fig. 3).

Exhibits confront the visitor with unusual juxtapositions of war stories, violence, and everyday life, photographs of war atrocities, and difficult questions such as 'Why does war exist?' and 'What does war do to human beings?' For instance, one installation comprises a collection of war toys from many different eras and of many different types, ranging from nineteenth-century lead-cast horsemen to plastic Lego and Playmobil, that are assembled in a very long glass vitrine (Fig. 3). Included are medieval knights atop siege towers, modern soldiers, Transformers, fantasy figures, and an assortment of tanks from different periods in history. At the very end of the collection sits a lone tank that is missing parts and is corroded and covered with dirt. My guide explained that this toy was discovered buried under rubble in the centre of Dresden after the war, so it simultaneously represents the 'toys' of war and war's destructive power. Unfortunately, the accompanying written explanation does not include the story, so the lone museum-goer will not understand the powerful message embedded in this object.

An Effective Critique of War?

Although Libeskind's design has been described as 'violent', 'sudden', and 'brutal', it is still regarded by many critics as evidence of German ambivalence to war.[40] What seems to be a linguistic contradiction is the direct result of the formal and spatial oppositions with which Libeskind worked, the curatorial dichotomies put in place by the museum curators, and the inherent difficulty of representing war, violence, and the military in a rarefied museum setting. Indeed, as Jay Winter has pointed out, making war the subject of a museum is by its very nature problematic.[41] The challenges of representation are evident: the moment that subjects such as war and violence become the foundations for a museum exhibition, there is a danger of fetishising and aestheticising them, which can diminish their intrinsic power. The well-documented desensitisation to media violence common in contemporary society is the result of a similar phenomenon: overexposure to, and aestheticising of, violent images in the popular press.[42] Furthermore, war museum attendance is driven by many diverse interests. While there is certainly a museum-going public eager for intellectual engagement, many museum-goers are drawn by voyeurism and the desire to 'experience' war rather than by an interest in confronting the hard questions about violence and human conflict.[43] According to literature on war museums, the sites that restage battles and use sensational representational techniques such as interactive displays, immersive environments, and film are wildly popular (fig. 4).

It is not surprising that Germany would erect a military museum with mixed and even anti-war messages. Many West Germans were notoriously anti-war in the Cold War period, a sentiment that is still strong in unified Germany, if not universally held.[44] As numerous scholars of museum history have asserted, the museum is fundamentally an institution created to construct and affirm national identity.[45] The modern museum 'selects certain cultural products for official safe-keeping, for posterity and public display–a process which recognises and affirms some identities, and omits to recognise and affirm others. This is typically presented in a language–through architecture, spatial arrangements, and forms of display as well as in discursive commentary–of fact, objectivity, superior taste, and authoritative knowledge'.[46] As art historian Donald Preziosi asserts, the modern museum developed in concert with the nation-state. The museum was conceived as a site that visualised constructions of national identity, the 'object-lessons of aesthetic, ethical, political and historical worth: no museum object is mute, but is already entailed with a legend and an address in cultural and historical space–-time. Museums render what is visible legible.'[47] Preziosi's point about 'object-lessons' in the museum is also true for museum architecture and exhibitions—they render the visible legible and are deeply implicated in constructions of nation and culture. As the curators of the Dresden Military History Museum affirm, since warfare is part of human culture, any museum about the military and war will reflect the cultural attitudes towards these subjects at the time that it is assembled.

The question is, to what degree are these messages legible to the public? And to what degree are they effective? The dichotomous nature, possibility of multiple

Figure 4. View of missiles display hanging from the ceiling in the addition to the Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History. Photo: Bitter Bredt, courtesy of Holzer Kobler Architecture.

readings, and challenges of representation at every level in the Dresden project, from architecture and space to exhibition design and specific objects, belie the possibility of a truly effective critical evaluation of war, violence, and the military.

The pointed steel architecture of the addition, read by some as 'violent', is only violent in a metaphorical sense. In actuality, it is a supremely elegant and refined piece of expensive construction. The wedge is made of a welded steel supporting structure whose joints are smoothed to give the illusion of seamless continuity, not of the messiness of violence and brutality. Similarly, the steel grate walkways and steel grate facades are pristinely constructed. The energy of

573 violence is only suggested by the act of insertion, the diagonal orientation of struc-
574 tural elements, and the sloping surfaces of outer and inner walls and some floors.
575 But these invoke disorientation or destabilisation more than violence. Furthermore,
576 the architectural gesture operates as an expressive sign for the museum, a sign
577 whose references to war are symbolic rather than material. Similar to earlier proj-
578 ects such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim in New York City, Mies van der
579 Rohe's New National Gallery in Berlin, and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao,
580 Spain, to name just a few examples, the new addition creates an unforgettable
581 image, a memorable advertisement for the project, which renders the form-making
582 a powerful commercial decision—but not necessarily an effective emotional
583 statement.[48]
584   Any reading of the act of cutting the old building in two is similarly meta-
585 phorical. The addition bisects the old building in a highly sanitised manner—all
586 the places where the cut occurs are clean and neat junctions between old and new
587 without a visual indication of cutting. That is, there are no voids, no jagged edges,
588 no broken pieces; in short, none of the by-products of a violent cutting action.
589 This is true of both the new and old parts, even in places that are sites of unusual
590 intersections, such as windows in the historic building. Where the new diagonal
591 wall bisects the historic vaulted ceilings, the architects have inserted an elegant
592 reveal to mark the juncture between old and new. It is more accurate to say that
593 the historic building is subsumed by parts of the addition than cut by it since in
594 most places the metal structure covers over the old architecture (fig. 5).
595   Disjunctions in interpretation extend beyond metaphor to the actual experience
596 of the architectural space and exhibition contents. The dynamic and unusual
597 exhibition spaces inside may be disorienting to some visitors because of the slant-
598 ing bannisters, walls, and ceilings and the irregular-shaped spaces and openings,
599 but they are energising to others. Similarly, exhibitions with disturbing content are
600 beautiful because of the ways in which the objects are displayed, such as the gor-
601 geous modern vitrine, with its smooth surfaces and seamless joints, containing an
602 array of missiles; the military helicopter suspended from an exposed concrete
603 wall; and the 'Ghost Rider', a First World War soldier shown in full battle regalia,
604 including gas mask, suspended against a magnificent blood-red background. In
605 each instance, the displays create stunning visual experiences that are so aesthetic-
606 ally powerful that they diminish, or compete with, the underlying message about
607 the horrors associated with the objects themselves.
608   As in all museums, visitors can choose to engage with the material in the exhi-
609 bitions as they desire, which means that they can ignore or gloss over the difficult
610 and challenging aspects of the museum. Indeed, no museum can control the recep-
611 tion of its contents. This is a central challenge at the Dresden museum—the clever
612 and sensitive curation demands a knowledgeable public, but the majority of
613 museum-goers do not fall into this category. As the young historian who took me
614 through the building admitted, when the exhibitions are experienced with a guide,
615 they are much easier to understand and provoke many of the desired responses.
616 But when experienced alone, visitors often do not understand the intention behind

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Figure 5.   The 'Ghost Rider', a First World War horseman, Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History. Photo: Bitter Bredt, courtesy of Holzer Kobler Architecture.

the exhibits. Thus, the museum's effectiveness is contingent on the level of know-ledge possessed by visitors; the better-educated ones are far more likely to under-stand what they are meant to understand and to reflect on the many messages embedded in both architecture and exhibition.

Ultimately, the aesthetics of the museum and its exhibitions have a limited effect on critical engagement with the subject of war. Aesthetics are still import-ant, however. The bold and beautiful architectural intervention has made the building a popular destination, when before it was not. Furthermore, the stun-ning exhibition installations function as powerful memorial sites that elicit

strong reactions from the public: one only need stand in front of the 'Ghost Rider' for several minutes to witness its emotional force acting on those who stop to look at it, their reactions moving from curiosity to shock. A final paradox, then, is the disjunction between the emotive and intellectual forces of the aesthetic program. Museum architecture and display may be imperfect vehicles for a 'critical confrontation with war, the military and violence', but they are still powerful instruments.[49]

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Matthias Rogg, 'Der historische Ort', in *Das Militärhistorische Museum der Bundeswehr. Ausstellungsführer*, ed. Gorch Pieken and Matthias Rogg (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2011), 13; Elizabeth Zach, 'Military Museum Confronts Past', *The New York Times*, 30 January 2014; https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/30/arts/international/military-museum-confronts-past.html; Burkhard Müller, 'Reliquien der Gewalt, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 October 2011; https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/militaerhistorisches-museum-der-bundeswehr-von-zinnsoldaten-und-anderen-reliquien-der-gewalt-1.1165470; Lucius Teidelbaum and Thomas Mickan, 'Das Militärhistorische Museum in Dresden–zwei Blickwinkel', *Informationsstelle Militärisierung*, http://www.imi-online.de/2012/01/26/das-militarhistorische-museum-in-dresden-–-zwei-blickwinkel.
2. The building's symbolic language is consistent with over 70 years of transparent projects in West Germany. See Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (London; Routledge, 2005).
3. See, for example, Michael Wise, *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998); Heinrich Wefing, *Parlamentsarchitektur: Zur Selbstdarstellung der Demokratie in ihren Bauwerken* (Berlin: Ducker & Humbolt, 1995); Barnstone, *Transparent State*.
4. The Dresden museum could arguably conform to the category of 'memorial museums' described by Amy Sodaro in 'Memorial Museums: Emergence of a New Form', *Exhibiting Atrocity; Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 12–30.
5. Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining, 'Military Museums and Social History', in *Does War Belong in Museums?* ed. Wolfgang Muchitsch (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), 41–60; Frederick P. Todd, 'The Military Museum in Europe', *Military Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1948): 36–45.
6. For a history of the military museum, see: Todd, 'The Military Museum'; Muchitsch, ed., *Does War Belong in Museums?* 1–63; Jennifer Wellington, *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada and Australia* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2017).
7. Todd, 'The Military Museum', 39.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 38.
10. Imperial War Museum, *Annual Reports*, 1917–1918, through to 1939 (London: 1918–1939), cited in Todd, 'The Military Museum', 40.
11. Paul Cornish, 'Sacred Relics: Objects in the Imperial War Museum, 1917–1939', in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory, and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (London: Routledge, 2004), 36.
12. Alys Cundy, 'Thresholds of Memory: Representing Function Through Space and Object at the Imperial War Museum, London, 1918–2014', *Museum History Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 2015): 247–48.
13. Todd, 'The Military Museum', 40.
14. Cornish, 'Sacred Relics', 37–38.
15. Todd, 'The Military Museum', 40.
16. Jay Winter, 'Museums and the Representation of War', *Does War Belong in Museums?* 25–26.
17. Ibid.,; and Detlef Hoffmann, 'Die Weltkriegssammlung des Historischen Museums Frankfurt', *Ein Krieg wird Ausgestellt. Die Weltkriegssammlung des Historischen Museums (1914–1918)*, Inventarkatalog (Frankfurt: Historisches Museum Frankfurt, 1976), n.p.
18. Winter, 'Museums and the Representation of War', 29.
19. Militärhistorisches Museum als Leitmuseum der Bundeswehr (Heer, Luftwaffe und

Marine) Nachdenken über Krieg und Frieden; https://www.das-neue-dresden.de/bundeswehr museum-dresden.html.

20. Gorch Pieken and Matthias Rogg, eds, *Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden* (Dresden: Sandstein, 2012), 8; Michael Kasiske, 'Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr: Im Käffig der Symbolik', *Bauwelt* 43 (2011); https://www.bauwelt.de/themen/bauten/Militaerhistorisches-Museum-der-Bundeswehr-Barbara-Holzer-HG-Merz-Daniel-Libeskind-Dresden-2159286.html

21. Robert L. Reid, 'V-Shaped Extension Soars through and over Dresden Military Museum', *Civil Engineering News* (September 2007): 28.

22. Ibid., 26–30. The name change to the The Dresden Bundeswehr Museum of Military History reflects part of the eventual direction that the curators chose. Rather than the narrowness of a war museum, they wanted a broader mandate—to create a museum that engaged the entire scope of military history.

23. Kasiske, 'Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr'; https://www.bauwelt.de/themen/bauten/Militaerhistorisches-Museum-der-Bundeswehr-Barbara-Holzer-HG-Merz-Daniel-Libeskind-Dresden-2159286.html

24. Pieken and Rogg, eds, *Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden*, 10.

25. 'Militärhistorisches Museum', *StadtWiki Dresden*, https://www.stadtwikidd.de/wiki/Militärhistorisches_Museum.

26. Gorch Pieken, 'Contents and Space: New Concept and New Building of the Militärhistorisches Museum of the Bundeswehr', *Does War Belong in Museums?*, 63–83.

27. See Teidelbaum and Mickan; http://www.imi-online.de/2012/01/26/das-militarhistorische-museum-in-dresden–zwei-blickwinkel. Conservative right-wing authors attacked the project. See, for example, Johannes Meyer, 'Keine Sympathie für das Militär," *Junge Freiheit*, 6 Jan 2012, 6.

28. See, for example, Charles Hawley, 'Post-war Myths: The Logic Behind the Destruction of Dresden', *Der Spiegel*, https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/post-war-myths-the-logic-behind-the-destruction-of-dresden-a-607524.html; and Dominic Selwood, 'Dresden Was a Civilian Town with No Military Significance. Why Did We Burn Its People?, *The Telegraph*, 13 February 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-two/11410633/Dresden-was-a-civilian-town-with-no-military-significance.-Why-did-we-burn-its-people.html.

29. 'The Military Museum in Dresden', *Design/Build Network*, https://www.designbuild-network.com/projects/dresden-military/.

30. 'Dresden's Museum for Military History', *Detail Magazine*, 18 October 2011, https://www.detail-online.com/blog-article/libeskinds-museum-of-military-history-25647/.

31. Ibid.

32. 'The Military Museum in Dresden'.

33. Wise, *Capital Dilemma*; Wefing, *Parlament sarchitektur*; and Barnstone, *Transparent State*.

34. Pieken and Rogg, eds, *Militärhistorisches Museum Dresden,* 15–19.

35. Cristian Cercel, 'The Military History Museum in Dresden: Between Forum and Temple', *History & Memory* 30, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 3–40.

36. Muchitsch, ed., *Does War Belong in Museums?*

37. The two approaches represent two poles of museum curating. See Rosemarie Beier-de Haan, 'Re-staging Histories and Identities', *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London: Wiley, 2011), 417–18.

38. Cercel, 'The Military History Museum in Dresden', 3–40.

39. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

40. Falk Jaeger, 'Keil der Wahrheit', *Tagesspiegel*, 12 October 2011, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/keil-der-wahrheit/4747822.html; 'No Guts, No Glory', *The Economist*, 401/8755, 15 October 2011; https://www.economist.com/europe/2011/10/15/no-guts-no-glory; Maximilian Popp, 'Vom Kriege', *Der Spiegel*, 1/2011, 7 December 2011; www.spiegel.de.

41. Winter, 'Museums and Representation of War', 33–38.

42. The literature on this subject is vast—see, for example, Barbara Krahé et al., 'Desensitization to Media Violence: Links with Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior', *Journal of Personal Social Psychology* 100, no. 4 (April 2011): 630–46.

43. Winter, 'Museums and Representation of War', 34; 'Krieg ausstellen: Die Dauerausstellung im Libeskind-Bau in Dresden', *Baunetz*, 17 Oct 2011, https://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen-Die_Dauerausstellung_im_Libeskind-Bau_in_Dresden_2345471.html.

44. See, for example, S. Elizabeth Snyder, 'Possibilities for Peace: Germany's Transformation of a Culture of War', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 38, no. 181 (2011): 183–85.

45. Sharon Macdonald, 'Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction', in *A Companion to Museums Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (London: Wiley, 2009), 51.

46. Ibid., 49.

47. Donald Preziosi, 'Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible', in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Macdonald, 145.

48. Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, 'Insight versus Entertainment: Untimely Meditations on the Architecture of Twentieth Century Art Museums', in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Macdonald, 537.

49. Matthias Rogg, 'Der historische Ort', 13.