

Semi-peripheries as a museum

Zbigniew Rykiel

gniew@poczta.onet.eu

1. The Gulag Museum

The only museum of Stalinist repression in Russia, located in Perm, in one of the most famous camps for political prisoners, was included in the list of foreign agents, which de facto meant its closure (Szoszyn 2015). In the 1980s, it was the only camp for high-level political prisoners in the entire Soviet Union (Cywiński 2016). The camp was closed in 1987.

In the 1990s, at the initiative of the Permian branch of the Memorial Association and former prisoners, a museum was created at the site of the camp – the only one in Russia founded in an authentic former camp. ‘The narrative of the museum depicted the history of the camp, its prisoners, but also a much broader context of the entire “GULAG archipelago”’ (Cywiński 2016). School trips and volunteers from Europe came there; conferences and other educational events were organised.

In 2013, the regional authorities launched a media discussion that maintained that the museum was biased because it relied solely on prisoners’ accounts, while ignoring the ‘the heroic story of the brave camp guards’ (Cywiński 2016). The area of the camp was taken away from the museum NGO. Instead, the creation of a new cultural institution was announced by merging the existing NGO with a special state institution established for this purpose, ensuring the presence of the guards’ narratives. Soon, however, it turned out that the formula of ‘merging’ was used to actually terminate the activity of the museum. The control over the whole infrastructure of the museum was taken over, and since May 2014 the museum has not accepted visitors. It was decided to completely change the exhibition of the museum, removing all references to the crimes of the Stalinist regime (Szoszyn 2015). The museum collections

were taken over, including the numerous items collected during the expedition in the footsteps of camps throughout the vast territory of the USSR (Cywiński 2016). A new museum is to be built instead to commemorate the Gulag employees rather than victims. In 2015, the museum was included in the list of agent organisations because of its funding by foreign foundations and other institutions.

This is related to the adoption of the law on foreign agents. On the basis of this law the Russian authorities took control of all independent non-governmental organisations, including the Memorial Association, which deals with the historical research of communist repression and the defence of human rights in the former Soviet Union (Szoszyn 2015). As it turned out later, the formula for the dismantling of politically inconvenient museums by their 'merging' with institutions existing exclusively in the minds of the rulers proved to be intellectually fruitful for governments who did not recognise the principles of liberal democracy and civil society as worthy of cultivating.

2. A museum of war

At the end of 2007, a project to build the Centre against Expulsions was set up in Berlin. Since the idea of commemorating the German 'expellees' (Heimatvertiebenen) always stirred negative emotions in Poland, a joint Polish-German project commemorating the war and post-war displacements of both Poles and Germans from their homelands was considered within the Polish-German reconciliation. The then Prime Minister of the Polish government, Donald Tusk, stated, however, in a press interview that he would rather commemorate expulsions within the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. He presented his assumptions to Chancellor Angela Merkel. Eventually, the German side did not join the project, yet the Centre for Expulsions was not created in Berlin (Katka 2016). After eight years, the Museum of the Second World War was opened in Gdańsk, however.

'In early 2017, Poland was supposed to unveil what is perhaps the most ambitious museum devoted to World War II in any country' (Snyder 2016). There are many museums telling about the Second World War (Bendyk 2017), but there is no other such museum in Europe (Pawlicki 2017) because the narrative of the exhibition

in Gdańsk 'completely changes the perception of war' (Stawikowska 2017). Although there are many museums devoted to particular aspects of the Second World War, there is no one that speaks about it comprehensively (ibidem). The 'Museum of the Second World War promised to tell the story of the 1930s and 1940s in an entirely new way. Unlike other museums devoted to history's most devastating war, which tend to begin and end with national history, the Gdańsk museum has set out to show the perspectives of societies around the world' (Snyder 2016). 'It is hard to think of a more fitting place for such a museum than Poland, whose citizens experienced the worst of the war' (ibidem). 'In the opinion of people both from and outside of Poland, this is the best museum, done with impetus, with the best intentions' (Donald..., 2017).

The Second World War 'remains the crucial conflict of the modern era, but until now no institution has attempted to present it as global public history. Unlike most comparable museums, the Gdańsk museum does not accept a conventional national history of the war, or follow a patriotic chronology of battle that is convenient for the elaboration of this or that official national memory' (Snyder 2016). The history of Poland and its inhabitants takes the most attention, but in this perspective it becomes a part of universal history, 'and this universalisation exposes the selectivity of the story of the war offered by its "real" political winners' (Bendyk 2017: 103).

It was decided, however, to change the end of the exposition because for the eight years since the decision to build was made a lot has changed in the outside world. Originally, the exhibition was to end with an optimistic accent of the fall of communist regimes. However, peace and democracy have been much less stable than assumed. War is not a closed card, and violence is 'around us and in ourselves' (Łupak 2017a). The wars in Ukraine and Syria are therefore the last scenes of the exhibition.

The exhibition in the museum is trying to show the full picture of the Second World War 'as a political, ideological and military conflict' (Łupak 2017a). Poland's historical experience has been inscribed in the European and world context. The Polish experience is unknown and unsettled in Western Europe and North America, because it is different. The German occupation was incomparably more brutal in Po-

land than in Western Europe. The museum's mission is to show the Second World War as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century. One of the main objectives is to show the experience of war in Poland and to emphasise that she was the victim of two aggressors. For the viewer it is clear who is responsible for the outbreak of the war and its terrible course, and that the first victim of the war was Poland. The spectator will find out that the Polish soldiers fought for the longest, and that 'the political results of the war were felt until the end of the 1980s' (Katka 2016). The exhibition thus allows to understand 'the uniqueness of Polish experience' (Zakrzewski 2017).

The museum is unique on a global scale. It is not a military museum, and narration is about the fate of individuals, communities and nations (Katka 2016). Although the exhibition is about war campaigns and the lives of soldiers, it presents above all the perspective of civilians who are victims of this war and are at the centre of the museum's attention (Łupak 2017a). This is particularly important from the Polish perspective – strongly verbalised, but actually not perceived in this context by the current government – because during the second World War II 5,300,000 Polish civilians and 300,000 soldiers were killed, while the United Kingdom lost 67,000 civilians and 384,000 soldiers (Sarzyński 2017). In Poland, the proportion of killed civilians in relation to the killed soldiers is 17.78: 1, while in the UK it is 0.17: 1. It is therefore no wonder that the museum 'dedicated to the suffering of the civilian population should [...] arise in Poland' (ibidem).

The Second World War was a 'total experience that directly and indirectly involved the whole world and especially affected the civilian population' (Bendyk 2017: 102). The exhibition's emphasis is therefore anti-war. The exhibition is not in fact about war, but about 'all those who stood with arms against each other as nations and states, but they were inflicting suffering and had to suffer as ordinary people' (ibidem). The exhibition shows the war as a global experience, showing what it was to the ordinary man. 'It was not supposed to be a story from the perspective of great politicians, generals and marshals' (Katka 2016).

The exhibition shows heroism and sacrifice, but it does not glorify war. It is about military history, but the dominant point is the perspective of civilians as the greatest victim of that time. 'It compares the fate of the soldiers on both sides of the

front' (Zakrzewski 2017). It speaks to the visitors with stories of people. 'This is a fascinating but terrible story' (ibidem), successfully passing 'from emotion games to precise arguments, from the power of great numbers to individual experiences, from momentum to intimacy, from concrete to symbolism' (Sarzyński 2017).

3. Poland in the global context

Poland is shown as one of several theatres of war and the scene of 'scary crimes - not only on Poles' (Paziński 2017), and 'the army is no fun, even to command' (ibidem), 'because the Second World War is primarily the unprecedented suffering' of civilians (ibidem). War appears as a monstrous cataclysm (Katka 2016) and absolute evil. The exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War 'was criticised by some historians and journalists [...] for its extraordinary misfortune, which the war is' (Jałowiecki 2017), and because the museum is not 'displaying patriotism, sacrifice, dedication or action in the interest higher than private' (ibidem). The authors were also accused of a lack of pride in military history. The 'positive aspects of war' are, however, talked about by people who 'have not lost the loved ones, their homes, not looked at ruined cities, not been touched by the war trauma' (ibidem). About 'the "positive characteristics of war" can [thus only] talk people devoid of not only empathy but also reason' (ibidem). War is an absolute, unjustifiable evil, 'and this must be repeated' (Jałowiecki 2017).

The museum talks about the experience of the human race in the twentieth century, about totalitarianisms and imperialisms (Łupak 2017a). It was assumed that history will never be a 'mirror for generations if it is an ideological history' (ibidem). 'Because history is an understanding for the illusions of previous generations' (ibidem) - Nazi, fascist, and communist illusions. The exhibition shows not only 'what totalitarianism leads to and what evil the war is' (Stawikowska 2017), but also how heroism, empathy, and sacrifice, despite all these sufferings, were triggered. The museum is a great warning 'against illusions, enemies of liberty and truth, against ideologies and populisms [...] which simplify the unsimplifiable reality. This is the response to the political infantilism of many politicians' (Łupak 2017a), which is important for the future of the museum.

The Museum of the Second World War 'is the answer of the Polish point of view on progressive historical amnesia in Europe and in the world' (Łupak 2017a). It presents a universal story 'about human fate during the Second World War' (ibidem). This is not contrary to the Polish point of view; on the contrary, it complements this view. In this way, 'Poland can finally come out of the hedges of provincialism, megalomania, post-romantic messianic gazing, and enter into a real dialogue with the nations of Europe and the world' (ibidem). Thanks to showing a wide world background, it was able to show a special Polish experience and a unique Polish fate (Łupak 2017a). The exhibition is universal because it talks about the fate of civilians all over the world, but at the same time it is very Polish because no any major events in Poland's wartime history are lacking. The war is told from the Polish perspective, 'but the simultaneous showing of the war in the world makes this story universal. Moreover, it allows to understand the uniqueness of the Polish experience' (Zakrzewski 2017). Thanks to the fact that the exhibition captures the war globally, it puts Poland and Gdańsk at the centre of the debate on the history of Second World War' (Stawikowska 2017). The essence of the exhibition is therefore 'to break the provincialism of the dominant narratives of war and its experience' (Bendyk 2017: 102).

The exhibition, although suggestive, is cool, the descriptions of the events are deprived of adjectives, while the authors 'do not hide the doubts that historians share' (Bendyk 2017: 103). It does not lose its clarity 'because it shows the whole complexity of matter that must be confronted by researchers investigating the truth about past events' (ibidem). 'In its impressively sober approach to the issue of collaboration, the Gda[ń]sk museum presents wartime societies as groups of individuals who had to make decisions, even when the range of possible choices was limited to bad ones' (Snyder 2016). 'One cannot have doubts [however,] about who was an executioner and who was a victim' (Bendyk 2017: 103).

4. A fight for memory

Importantly organisationally and politically, the museum was founded – as already mentioned – by the then Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, who decided to build it, assigned huge public funds for it, 'trusted in historians and never interfered in the

content of the exhibition' (Łupak 2017a). It is hard not to get the impression that the latter circumstance was important for the current conservative Polish government, and especially for the ruling party (Sarzyński 2017), who seem 'determined to cancel the museum, on the grounds that it does not express "the Polish point of view"' (Snyder 2016), first and foremost, however, it tries to create its own narrative of historical policy, i.e. where the current ruling party tries to maintain a monopoly (Sarzyński 2017).

One of the first aims of the present Minister of Culture was to take control of the museum. The basis was to be three reviews ordered by the ministry, critical of the concept of the exhibition (Katka 2016). Interestingly, however, the minister had known what reviews he would receive even before they were ordered (ibidem). It turned out that 90% of the reviewers' allegations were inaccurate as they resulted from ignorance or careless reading of the documents, and the reviewers' objections are contradictory (ibidem). They emphasize that the museum 'provides mainly the message of the extraordinary misfortune of war' (ibidem) while it does not 'expose positive characteristics' (Katka 2016), viz. patriotism and sacrifice. One reviewer accuses the exhibition that its collective hero has become 'a bad war and its results' (ibidem) while in the museum Poles as 'Catholics and patriots' were not presented (ibidem). Another reviewer accused the exhibition of 'deficiencies in showing "human hardening"' (ibidem) and insufficient emphasis on the influence of war 'on shaping [human] characters' (Zakrzewski 2017). For the ruling party and right-wing journalists the idea of the exhibition is 'not enough Polish' (ibidem), it too little exposures to the war heroism of Poles (ibidem), it is 'too much focused on presenting the suffering of the civilian population and not enough emphasizes the military issues' (Sarzyński 2017), and even is 'a tool for the disintegration of the Polish nation' (ibidem). The anticipated result of the 'merger' of the museums will therefore be 'Polonising' of the exhibition (Zakrzewski 2017).

On 6 September 2015 the Minister of Culture issued a decree on the merging of the Museum of the Second World War with the Museum of Westerplatte and the War of 1939 (Łupak 2017c). On 1 February 2017, the Minister of Culture set the date for the 'merger' of the museums (Łupak 2017a). This is a 'merger' of several 'hired,

almost empty rooms' (Pawlicki 2017) with a museum being constructed for eight years by a team of 'great historians, not only Polish but world' (ibidem) authorities in the field of the Second World War. This is to be mostly a military museum, primarily, however, the directorate is to be changed (Łupak 2017a). Meanwhile, the subsidy for the existing museum's activity has been reduced considerably. One may be afraid that nothing will stop the Minister of Culture and his party from effectively cutting off the museum 'from the association with Donald Tusk and the "Brussels whims"' (Sarzyński 2017), and after the museum's reboot by the current government 'a tinkering at the exhibition in the spirit of returning to national-patriotic-heroic-military narratives will begin' (ibidem).

The Minister stated that the new museum is to deal with the defence of Westerplatte, the 1939 defence war and the Poles' military resistance, i.e. only a minor part of the Second World War (Łupak 2017c). 'The new government's gambit has been to replace the nearly completed global museum with an obscure (and as yet entirely non-existent) local one, and then to claim that nothing has really changed. The substitute museum would chronicle the Battle of Westerplatte, where Polish forces resisted the German surprise attack on the Baltic coast for seven days in September 1939' (Snyder 2016). 'Heroic though it was, substituting this campaign for the entirety of [the second] World War [...] means eliminating the record of how Poles fought for their country and their fellow citizens over the succeeding five-and-a-half years' (ibidem). 'Such a move also means throwing away a historic opportunity to redefine the world's understanding of the war', [including] 'the underground resistance known as the Home Army, [...] the stunning contribution of Polish pilots to the defence of London from the Luftwaffe in 1940, and the work of Polish mathematicians to understand the German cryptography system known as Enigma' (Snyder 2016), poorly known by the Western general public. 'Perhaps for Poland's current leadership, this is the problem' (ibidem) because 'it is very difficult to divide European nations simply into perpetrators and victims' (ibidem) and it undermines 'the idea of Polish national innocence' (Snyder 2016).

Interestingly, the minister has never visited the museum, so he formulates his charges without knowing the content of the exhibition (Łupak 2017c). The minister

and his party do not like the Museum of the Second World War mainly because its idea was presented and realised by the prime minister from another political option, and, besides, the museum is too multinational and not enough Polish, and, especially, 'ours' (Pawlicki 2017). Historical policy has become an instrument of governance (ibidem). 'The exhibition has total momentum' (Bendyk 2017: 104), adequate to the totality of the Second World War; it is anti-war, universal in its recognition of human dignity and respect for suffering. And – paradoxically – 'that is precisely why the exhibition has become the subject of criticism' (ibidem) of the current ruling party, which after the election won in 2015 decided to take control of the museum and exhibition, recognizing that they do not express enough Polish point of view (ibidem).

The exhibition is patriotic, because it devotes much attention to events and objects of great emotional and even mythic importance, 'however in a broader global context, which – according to the present authorities – reduces the uniqueness of Poland and her sacrifice' (Pawlicki 2017). The current government would like to persuade 'there was no other such guerrilla army as the Home Army' (ibidem), thus ignoring the Yugoslav partisan army and the Greek partisans. If one ignores other countries, 'one can tell the Poles that Poland was the only and unique' (Pawlicki 2017).

The Museum of the Second World War is needed to show the tragedy of twentieth-century Poland in a broader context. 'The fate of a country that not only armed defensively against the German aggression in 1939, but yet been fighting for many years' (Dryjańska 2016). The decision of the Minister of Culture will, however, result in the fact that such an institution 'shall probably not arise' (ibidem).

Paradoxically, however, the museum became a legend before it was opened. It owes it to those who wanted to prevent it from opening, to reduce and detach from the universal humanistic message (Łupak 2017a). The decision of the Minister of Culture to merge the Museum of the Second World War with the Museum of Westplatte 'has been widely echoed in Poland and abroad' (Dryjańska 2016). More than 200 North American and European researchers wrote an open letter to the Minister of Culture, opposing his decision (ibidem). 'It is among the more than [10,000] objects

donated to the museum for display and safekeeping' (Snyder 2016). At present, dozens of families dissatisfied with the policy of the minister withdraw their war memorials from the museum (Swoboda 2017) 'in protest against possible government interference [...] in the already agreed shape of the exhibition' (Dryjańska 2016). 'It is certain that thousands of Polish families will remember that their precious gifts of family heirlooms were accepted and then refused' (Snyder 2016).

5. Historical policy

'Perhaps the greatest surprise in the Polish government's decision is the implicit alliance with current Russian memory policy' (Snyder 2016). 'Once the museum is out of the way, the Kremlin can be confident that no one else in Europe [...] will make the attempt to inscribe the Soviet aggression of 1939 and the occupation regime of 1939-1941 within the public history of the war' (ibidem). As thus can be seen on the examples of both Russia and Poland, the processing of 'history is not only [...] harmful, but also [...] ridiculous' (Pawlicki 2017). Historical policy has little to do with history as it is a pure politics.

In this context, it is not surprising that the views, published on Facebook, of the exhibition's visitors (Bendyk 2017: 104), of whom 7,434 visited the museum during its first week of its operation (Success ..., 2017), contrast sharply with the political activities of the current ruling party. 'The collapse of democracy, the museum's first theme, could hardly be more salient than it is right now. And the presentation of the conflict as a global tragedy could hardly be more instructive. The preemptive liquidation of the museum is nothing less than a violent blow to the world's cultural heritage' (Snyder 2016).

It is difficult to resist the impression that the Ministry of Culture acts dysfunctionally (Łupak 2017b) from the point of view of Polish national interest, to which the ruling party refers. The current ruling party 'leads small battles' (Pawlicki 2017) more with its own frustration than against its political opponent, neglecting the 'great battle for European memory' (ibidem).

6. The Museum of Nitwit

More interestingly, or perhaps more ridiculously, however, the Ministry of Culture under its current leadership, not without reason called by citizens the Ministry of the Destruction of Culture, refuses to support many cultural institutions, which do not support the current ideological line. In this context, the ministry refused the financial support for the International Festival of Children's Culture organised by the Koziółek Matółek (Billy-Goat Nitwit) European Centre for Fairy Tales (Mizerski 2017). The Billy-Goat Nitwit, created in 1933, is nice, naive, clumsy, laughable and not very bright – in many regards similar to other famous children stories characters (Koziółek..., n.d.), his stories having visible patriotic undertones, the comic has influenced many generations of Poles, and some of its phrases have penetrated into the vernacular Polish (ibidem).

As the press reported, the reason of the ministerial refusal may be that the current minister does not like Nitwit (Mizerski 2017). It is not known what causes of the dislike are, journalists suspect, however, that the minister, who is a professor, 'does not want to subsidise a person without a proper education' (ibidem). It cannot be precluded that the minister envies Nitwit that the latter 'is a more important figure in Polish culture' (Mizerski 2017) than the minister and that many children and adults treat Niwit seriously – in contrast to the minister (ibidem). The latter may well not like that 'this unshoed nitwit without scientific achievements' (ibidem), who would have no chance to join the current government, 'is popular, liked and has the centre of his name' (ibidem) – unlike the minister.

One should not lose hope, however, that the minister has personally nothing against Nitwit, and he refuses 'supporting the European Centre of Fairy Tales of Nitwit's name as a patriot of [merely] this reason that it is European' (Mizerski 2017). If this is the case, however, it would be much simpler to merge the Fairy Tales Centre with the Museum of the Second World War and Westerplatte (ibidem).

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Wpłynęło/received; 21.06.2017 poprawiono/revised 5.07.2017