

Exhibiting Second World War Technologies

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Exhibiting military technologies in museums is often seen a challenging working and research field for curators. It raises complex questions about what and how technological issues should be presented. Is it sufficient just showing the technological achievements? To what extent should these be contextualized historically and expose the scientific, social and political intentions lying behind their development? This question was discussed from various perspectives at the two-day conference „Remembering Second World War Technologies: Museums, Exhibitions, Technological Objects, and Visitors“ in Peenemünde, Germany, on March 22 and 23, 2018.

More than 70 years after the end of the Second World War, military technologies of Nazi Germany are still remembered with both fascination and unease. Focusing on the so-called „Wonder Weapons“ and other resource-intensive developments such as the jet fighter Messerschmitt 262, the Tiger Panzer (tank), or the A4 rocket („V-2“), the speakers at the conference highlighted the seemingly ambivalent interplay between fascination for technology and a critical assessment of the usage of war technology. For example, the A4 rocket, developed in Peenemünde, mass-produced at the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp, and fired towards Antwerp and London, have been regarded as a forerunner of nuclear missiles and space rockets during the Cold War era. Today, this uncertainty between fascination and unease often turns into discontent when exhibiting these highly advanced technological objects in museums in Germany and abroad. How can these equally important aspects be reconciled and commu-

nicated in an exhibition appropriately?

At the conference, historians and museums practitioners from various institutions from Germany, the U.S., Poland and France shared their experiences. They discussed local and international differences regarding the remembrance of wartime technologies, diverging cultures of memory, visitor expectations as well as challenges and opportunities in restoration, displaying and contextualizing technological objects. CONSTANZE SEIFERT-HARTZ (Braunschweig) and DANIEL BRANDAU (Braunschweig) of the research group „Meta-Peenemünde: Das Bild der rüstungstechnischen Versuchsanstalten im kulturellen Gedächtnis“¹ at the Historical Institute of Technische Universität Braunschweig, organized their first conference at the Historisch-Technisches Museum Peenemünde. There were ten presentations, organized in four panels, during which the various narratives as well as the mediation and remembrance of Second World War technologies were in discussion.

In his introduction, the curator of the Historisch-Technisches Museum Peenemünde, PHILIPP AUMANN (Peenemünde), presented the historical site Peenemünde and its museum. Peenemünde is a difficult place to understand. It is the site of the former „Heeresversuchsanstalt“, where the Nazis developed and tested long distance weapons such as the „V-2“ between 1936 and 1945. For decades, the place was remembered for its contributions to technological innovation and its spaceflight pioneers. Since the opening of the permanent exhibition in 2000/2001, however, the museum has also highlighted the Nazi armament aspects and the history of forced labour. Considering the high level of public interest, the museum grapples with questions relating to visitor reception, questions of how to deal with popular fascination appropriately and, especially, how to combine these factors with historical research. CHRISTIAN KEHRT (Braunschweig) emphasized the importance of memories in history, which are important for public perception as well. Working with memory cultures can be challenging, especially for

¹ Vgl. <https://www.ifg-braunschweig.de/metapeenemuende> (11.01.2019)

places like Peenemünde, but it is also an opportunity to discover already established narrations or local memories. According to Aleida Assmann², cultural memories need to be transformed into cultural heritage. But how can we deal with these memories, and how can we decide what to learn from these past experiences while concentrating on the future?

Discussing Peenemünde as being a fascinating and disturbing place at the same time, the first panel comprised of further information about the research project „Meta-Peenemünde“ and addressed how Peenemünde, as a historical site, should be exhibited in the future. Daniel Brandau gave insights into the ambivalent remembrance of Peenemünde in rural East in the 1980s and 1990s. The history of technology was often considered as „unpolitical“ history. The differences between East and West Germany regarding memories, narratives and knowledge had ramifications that are still felt today. When focusing on the technological remembrance in rural East Germany, the complex nature and the social function are still ongoing and pose questions about how to contextualize technological objects, and, in particular, Nazi weapons like the A4 rocket. Concentrating on public history and constructivist visitor and reception research, Constanze Seifert-Hartz examined the role of the Historisch-Technisches Museum Peenemünde as an actor and product of historical culture and the culture of remembrance. She showed how discourses of remembrance and the interests of visitors have influenced the museum. Her analysis of visitor books from the years 1991 to 2015 revealed a higher criticism of the culture of remembrance in the 1990s, and consequently showed how visitors became more and more aware of the moral dimensions regarding science and technology through the new permanent exhibition in the 2000s.

JENS WEHNER (Dresden), curator at the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr Dresden, spoke about the difficulties that arise when restructuring the permanent exhibition of the museum. Even though technological objects are not the focus of the exhibition, visitors show strong emotional reactions towards displays of military technolo-

gies. Wehner suspects that there is a clash between visitors' expectations and the museum's rather distanced approach. Visitor research also showed that there are differences between age groups and especially between genders. While men are usually more interested in military history and weapons, women seem to be more interested in cultural and social contexts. However, in the end they visit the same exhibitions, which is why museums have to offer various perspectives to meet different interests at the same time. MICHAEL J. NEUFELD (Washington, DC, USA) spoke about the different points of view in the U.S. and Germany towards the questions of exhibiting German weapons and his personal experiences with exhibiting the „V-2“. Since there are many science and space enthusiasts among museum visitors in the U.S., it is more difficult to talk about Werner von Braun or other German-American scientists' Nazi past. With this comparison, Neufeld tried to make it clear that it is not always just about the exhibition itself, but also about how the society is shaped. He pointed out that despite international cooperation in research, the national, political and social differences still have a deep impact on how museums and exhibitions operate. HEIKO TRIESCH (Berlin), curator of the Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, focused on the question of how technological objects should be presented, especially Second World War Technologies. There are various perspectives that need considering in the future, such as why technologies were constructed and possible consequences. Weapons, in that sense, usually prove much more complicated to evaluate than civilian technologies. At the same time, the field of vision needs expansion to a more international point of view.

On the second day of the conference, further analysis of public perceptions linked to exhibiting Second World War technologies, and especially the attempts at reinforcing remembrance and education at historical sites, were presented. STEFAN HÖRDLER (Nordhausen), director of the KZ-Gedenkstätte

² Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München 2006; Dies., *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention*, München 2013.

Mittelbau-Dora, emphasized the importance of research and education about Nazi forced labour. Even though mass production of the „V-2“ took place in Mittelbau-Dora, technology itself plays a minor role in the memorial site's concept as an educational institution. Rather, the various perspectives of society, such as those of forced labourers and civilian workers are illustrated in order to make the entire concentration camp system in Nazi Germany understandable. Hördler argued that precisely because of the many deportations from other European countries such as Poland, France and the Soviet Union, it is to be regarded as a European history. Connecting to that, LAURENT THIERY (Pas-de-Calais, France) director of Centre de documentation „Jaques Brun“ at Musée Bunker – La Coupole, agreed and offered a French perspective, highlighting the deportations of French forced labourers to Mittelbau-Dora. Displaying the individual fates of the deportees should help to increase the knowledge about the phenomenon of mass violence and educate future generations. WIESLAW JELEN (Blizna, Poland), director of the Park Historyczny Blizna, where a rocket testing ground was located during the Second World War, presented differences in conveying and presenting the history of the German „Vengeance Weapons“ in Poland. His main intention behind creating the park derived from his wish that history should not be forgotten. He emphasized the importance to teach future generations about the difficult history of this place, where outstanding technology was developed, while thousands of people have died. Jelen opened a Polish perspective in dealing with the Second World War, focusing on the role of the Polish Home Army. It was discussed how the popularity of historical reenactments to commemorate the liberation of Blizna, for example, contrast starkly with rather cautious and non-sensational approaches towards history in Germany. Consequently, the use of reenactment is more common in Poland and marks a variance in comparison to the German historical culture.

In Panel IV, RALF RATHS (Munster), director of the Deutsches Panzer Museum in Munster, talked about the challenges of sat-

isfying all visitors regarding the new exhibition in the „Deutsches Panzer Museum“ that will include a technological section as well as a socio-historical section about tank warfare. By coining the phrase „Stories convince. Academia doesn't“ (Raths), he outlined that it is significant to grab the visitors' attention, to convey important historical topics, and to get different people involved in the discussion. Raths also pointed out that in museums the truth must always be told through exhibition rather than relying on constructivism. Even a permanent exhibition needs permanent discussions. In this context, MARCUS MEYER (Bremen-Farge), co-head of the Denkort Bunker Valentin discussed the difficulties of meeting visitor expectations at the memorial. While the imposing bunker in Bremen-Farge has mostly been connected to the production of Type XXI submarines, the local history about forced labour and crimes against humanity on site were often neglected. He pointed out that telling stories about technologies must always include their particular relation to society. Since the Bunker Valentin has never been used to actually build submarines, the exhibition today mainly discusses the history of Nazi forced labour and the museum aspires to be an educational institution.

At the end of the conference, HANNAH FITSCH (Berlin) talked about gendered practices in museums of technology in her feature presentation. She emphasized that next to the narrative of the mere technological progress, the understanding of technological artefacts as socio-cultural objects should be more commonly accepted in exhibitions. She pointed out that especially museums of technology should think about the category of „class“. The category points to questions about the intentions and expectations of visitors, and their connection to the topics shown in the museum.

The conference highlighted ongoing questions and challenges of how to display and contextualize Second World War technologies in the future. The final discussion drew a lot of attention to the question „What is technology?“ Can we just exhibit the technological objects and the pure description of how it works, or is it more about the history of the

users of these technologies? It became clear that every exhibition needs its iconic objects of technology, like the „V-2“ for example, to meet the expectations of the visitors. In order to be taken seriously as an educational institution, museums need to contextualize every object. They need to give the link to users, victims, society and technological consequences. The conferences successfully continued this interdisciplinary discussion, adding experiences of various institutions, countries and their efforts at exhibiting Second World War technologies to it. Especially nowadays, when war and rearmament have become a very current topic again, historical and political education in museums are of particular relevance. It is important for future generations to be educated on these problems and to understand military technologies in the contexts of why and how these technologies were developed, produced, and what they were used for.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Exhibiting Peenemünde

Chair: Phillip Aumann (Peenemünde)

Daniel Bandau (Braunschweig): Technological Heritage and Remembrance in Rural East Germany

Constanze Seifert-Hartz (Braunschweig): What connects us? Visitor Expectations in Peenemünde

Panel II: Technology in War Museums – The War in Museums of Technology

§Chair: Christian Kehrt (Braunschweig)

Jens Wehner (Dresden): Military Technology and Cultural History: Experiences at the Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden

Michael J. Neufeld (Washington, DC): Exhibiting the V-2: Struggles with History in the U.S. and Germany since 1984

Heiko Triesch (Berlin): Present and Future: Air and Space Artifacts of World War II on Display at the Deutsches Technikmuseum in Berlin

Panel III: Remembrance and Education at Historical Sites

Chair: Constanze Seifert-Hartz (Braun-

schweig)

Stefan Hördler (Nordhausen): Research and Education on Nazi Forced Labor and Crimes in the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp

Laurent Thiery (La Coupole, Pas-de-Calais): Documentation Centre at La Coupole: Researching about 9 000 Deportees of France in the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp

Wiesław Jeleń (Blizna): Blizna: From Missile Testing Ground to Historical Park

Panel IV: Fascination with Technology as Chance and Challenge

Chair: Daniel Brandau (Braunschweig)

Ralf Raths (Munster): „Clenching the Fists of Dissent“: The Transformation of the German Tank Museum

Marcus Meyer (Bremen): Technology Attraction, Dark Place or Memorial: The Bunker „Valentin“ in Bremen-Farge

Feature Presentation

Chair: Christian Kehrt (Braunschweig)

Hannah Fitsch (Berlin): Why Technology Fascination is not Neutral: On Gendered Practices in Museums of Technology

Panel Discussion with Hannah Fitsch (Berlin) / Michael J. Neufeld (Washington, DC) / Christian Kehrt (Braunschweig)

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