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The Historicization of International Relations: Evolving a Museology of War and Peace

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MARTIN DUFFY, JAN 31 2022

International Relations, however imperative, inevitably transmogrify as contested histories lining glass cabinets, exhibiting the museological rhythms of war and peace. In IR we should think earnestly about the historicization of international events, and how we come to memorize and memorialize our past. War and peace are implicitly or explicitly preeminent content in national and international museums across the world. Cycles of conflict and concord, brutality, and humanity, punctuate our public exhibitions from tiny grassroots community museums to global brand galleries and accompanying digital extravaganzas. The anthesis of humanity is our resort to violence, our extremism and totalitarianism. From our first cave inscriptions, we have been exhibiting atrocities and sometimes also courageous efforts for peace.

We have hermetically categorized our exhibitions thereby demarcating our museology respectively as “war museum”, “human rights museum”, or in more recent years “peace museum”. We have fought academic trench-war over the nomenclature of long-established descriptors like “holocaust” and “genocide”, “humanitarianism” and “democracy” as to their solemn uniqueness or categorization. Recently this terrain has been uniformly labeled “dark heritage,” and consequently, this writer thinks there has seldom been a time more critical to exhibit peace. This article therefore comes with an explicit invitation to museum professionals to mutually embrace “peace education” at the heart of exhibiting. It matters little whether the museum is entitled “war” or “peace” or “holocaust” as long as the museum actively exhibits peace.

It is sometimes thought (erroneously) that war museums exist in glorification of war. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a frequent visitor to military museums, while endurance is oftentimes expressed in the display of sacrifice, the overwhelming message from professional armies is restraint i.e. the minimum force required to achieve a strategic military objective. Italy’s San Remo Institute of Humanitarian Law is considered Europe’s preeminent repository of the rules of war. There are few academies so overtly concerned with preservation of human life. Likewise, it may implausibly be thought that museums of the Federation, or the International Committee or of any of dozens of Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies across the world, must exhibit bloodshed, but the visitor will rarely find establishments so focused on life saving. This is hardly surprising for although it is not widely known, the first war museums were overtly anti-war, whereas it has taken over a half century for the popularization of our modern concept of “war museum” with their displays of military might. That concept is now very much in retreat.

Three of the world’s flagship war museums (the UK’s Imperial War Museum; Canada’s War Museum, and the USA’s Smithsonian militaria collection) are now overtly peace educators. The largest war museum in the world, Dresden’s Bundeswehr Military History Museum, since re-opening in 2011 focuses on human aspects of war. In truth “war museology” is becoming more akin to elementary anti-war museums opposing war. Among these are Carnegie’s Hague Peace Palace established at the start of the 1900s, Jan de Bloch’s International Museum in Lucerne, Ernst Friedrich’s anti-War Museum, the Anti-Kriegs museums in Berlin, and Saigon’s War Remnants Museum. The League of Nations and UN Organization hosted significant peace exhibitions. This marked a transition between anti-war and peace. World War Two itself produced the most affirmative anti-war response, in the development of what we might regard as the first modern peace museum. The Hiroshima Memorial Peace Museum which opened in 1955 heralds that convergence from the “anti-war exhibiting tradition” to what we now recognize as the “peace museum concept”.

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Some years ago, this writer defined four primary types of peace museums; self-described “peace museums”, “event” or “issue-based” museums, “rights museums”, and “peace galleries”. Analysts distinguish between sites with an overtly anti-war message (negative-peace) or pro-peace (positive-peace) leaning. Museologists of every field must surely educate for peace.

So, in 2022 we have anti-war museums, war museums, peace museums, resistance museums, genocide museums, holocaust museums – as well as museums of tolerance, democracy and rights among those who might enjoy the protection of the peace museum family. So many curators retain such a defensive grasp of their museology it may still be sacrilegious to assumptively group them under the collective of peace. While there is welcome evidence that museums of holocaust and genocide are increasingly appreciative of kindred museums, and that peace is surely the anti-dote to atrocity; the fault lines of demarcation remain obstinate as museologists guard the integrity of their mission, and fear museological contamination. Curators are always anxious about dilution of message.

Peace Museums Worldwide was published by the UN in 1995, reflecting the maturity of the “peace museums” concept. There are now about 150 museums for peace, about half of them in Japan. There are subtle differences of interpretation between western peace museums and Asian examples as in China, Korea, and Japan. Conflict resolution and peace history predominates in Western peace museums while Asian museums largely narrate war history. Specific museums were founded in China and Korea decrying Japan’s aggression. Japan’s museums mostly present the nation as victim not aggressor. A few public museums like the Osaka International Peace Centre and grassroots peacemakers in places like the Nagasaki Peace Museum and Grassroots House in Kochi, defy right wingers’ attacks to exhibit Japan’s aggression. There is a legal basis for this as Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution specifically renounces war and supports the peace movement.

An entity which has become Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum also opened in 1955. Okinawa, Japan’s only World War Two battlefield, only got its peace museum in 1975. By comparison, citizen peaceniks were more innovative. In Kochi an exhibition on U.S. air raids opened in 1979 and Grassroots House was founded in 1989. In the 1980s, exhibitions were held across Japan to mark the A Bombing, and the mood began to support a proliferation of prefecture-level peace museums. In the 1990s emerged Kawasaki Peace Museum, Kanagawa Plaza for Global Citizenship, Saitama Peace Museum, Osaka Peace Centre, Kyoto Museum for World Peace, Suita Peace Centre, Sakai City Peace and Human Rights Museum, Fukuyama City Human Rights & Peace Museum, and Takamatsu Civic Culture Centre. Then followed the Kagawa Peace Museum, Himeji Historical Peace Centre, and private peace museums such as Shizuoka Peace Centre, Grassroots House (in Kochi), Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum, and the Peace, Human Rights and Children Centre (in Sakai City). Lesser progress also proceeded in Europe and the USA.

This has created an exhibiting split between public museum reticence and the willingness of private curators to take risks in the portrayal of peace. Japan is now left with a stark contrast between the likes of the militaristic Yushukan museum at the Yasukuni Shrine (supported by the Japanese right), and innovative peace exhibiting at private facilities such as the Kyoto Museum for World Peace or Meiji University. In such exhibiting the war memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki departs from American perspectives that “lives of not only Americans but also Asians including Japanese were saved by the atomic bombing.” So “war memory” is very different in Hiroshima compared with American displays like the National Air and Space Museum in Virginia which lay little emphasis on “victims”. These historical bifurcations are also reflected in political behavior, such as the bitter controversies over visits of Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine which has antagonized Korea and China, among others.

Korea endured Japan’s colonial and military rule from 1910–1945, while China grieves over Nanjing and Manchuria. War memory is still polarized. Johan Galtung refers to war museums as “museums telling the story of war....(that may) inspire action supporting the next war.” Yet, all museums, whatever their purpose, should also consider promoting peace. One can remain an authentic holocaust museum, or genocide exhibition or national war monument and espouse a coherent demand for world peace. These ‘silo’ categorizations which so divide us from the grief of the holocaust, or the atrocity of genocide, should not discourage us from wider goals of peace.

We must look afresh at IR, and how museums have a genuine potential for peace. The International Network of

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Museums for Peace (INMP), possess precisely this eclecticism and dynamism. Nowadays we have a resilient group of museums whose collections are directly or indirectly concerned with exhibiting peace. In certain countries, Japan, Korea, and Costa Rica being notable, there are also municipalities who formally enshrine peace in governance. This writer (therefore) favors a highly inclusive definition of the concept of “peace museum” so that we incorporate under the umbrella heading the widest possible range of institutions including holocaust and genocide memorials. As in the aspirational words of the 1945 UNESCO Constitution, “building peace in the minds of men and women” should be our common objective.

INMP inspire the widest possible interpretation of peace culture without dereliction of catastrophic events such as war, holocaust, or genocide. This terrain extends beyond conventional museology to include peace gardens, memorial sites, and activist organizations. A non-governmental organization (NGO) recognized by the UN, INMP calls for unity of vision among museologists in support of peace. Many varieties of peace memorials have supported the UNESCO mission, “A peaceful way of living together”. They highlight the contribution of peace figures like Gandhi, King, Mandela, Allende, and the service of institutions like the Nobel Peace Centre, International Red Cross Museums, and the hundreds of peace museums. It is time to embrace the heroes and heroines of humanitarian action, the survivors of holocaust and genocide, and realize our strength together in exhibiting peace. Dark heritage will thereby be lightened by telling the shared history of peacemaking.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning and holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.