

対立から理解へ：日本とドイツの博物館が子どもたちに戦争を教える戦略

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From Conflict to Comprehension: Japanese and German Museums' Strategies in Educating Children about War

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Abstract

This paper examines how museums in Japan and Germany represent war and peace, with a specific focus on exhibitions designed for children and youth. While the memorial cultures of both countries differ due to their distinct historical experiences of the Second World War, a shared commitment to peace education underscores their approaches to teaching younger audiences about conflict. Based on fieldwork conducted in six museums—three in Japan (the National Museum of Japanese History, the National Shōwa Memorial Museum, and the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum) and three in Germany (the Deutsches Historisches Museum, the Deutschlandmuseum, and the Anti-War Museum)—this study explores how exhibitions make war-related themes comprehensible for children. Using a qualitative approach, the analysis considers exhibition content, curatorial strategies, spatial design, and accessibility. As an abbreviated account of fieldwork rather than a fully developed theoretical study, this paper presents preliminary findings and suggests directions for further research on the role of museums in peace education. It contests that apart from the reflection of nationally diverging memorial politics, the investigated museums differ strongly depending on whether they are private or public institutions. Specifically, the influence of concepts of peace education appears strongly represented in the investigated private museums of both countries.

1. Introduction

The representation of peace and war in museums shapes public understanding of historical conflicts and their aftermath. The memorial cultures of Japan and Germany vary with regard to the experiences of the Second World War, and Germany has in the past been repeatedly pointed out as a good example for a memory politics fostering reconciliation and shaped by the critical recognition of war responsibility. However, a commonality of both Japan and Germany is the development of peace education as a way of teaching children and youth about war experiences.

The current paper investigates the role of museums that address youth and children and asks how they communicate and mediate the topics of peace and war. The paper approaches museums as places of interaction, education and critical discourse. Specifically, history museums not only narrate national or global historical events, but can encourage visitors to reflect on these events critically

and show the connections of the past to the present and legacies of earlier events or political structures. History museums moreover provide insights into historical research, and into the scholarly interpretations of historical events from a contemporary point of view. The thematization of war and peace is an important, but particularly difficult task of history museums (see e.g. Messner/Pirker 2021). By trying to convey the historical background of military conflicts and the supposed lessons learned from them, museums take on a great responsibility in society and play an important role in providing guidelines for understanding war and peace.

Presenting complex historical issues in understandable and approachable ways, which is necessary for addressing children and youth as part of museums' general audiences, poses a challenge to museums. The ability to chronicle historical events is only learned over time, and is often still underdeveloped in children of primary school age, who think in terms of concrete operations and have not yet internalized the abstract categories of chronological time. Also, teenagers, for whom chronological events may be easier to grasp, approach museums in ways that differ from adults; they may be more drawn to interactive exhibits, digital media, or personal narratives rather than traditional text-heavy displays. Their engagement is often influenced by prior exposure to historical topics through school curricula, shaping their expectations and level of interest in museum content. Even young children often already have some abstract ideas regarding peace and war and are subjected to these topics also through news or social media and popular culture, which is even more so the case for teenagers. Given that young audiences are already exposed to narratives of war and peace through various media, museums must consider how their presentations reinforce, challenge, or expand these existing understandings.

For the current paper I investigated six museums in both Japan and Germany, to compare the way in which these museums thematise war and peace generally, and address young audiences such as children and youth specifically. The museums are: The National Museum of Japanese History, the National Showa Memorial Museum (Shōwakan) and the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum in Japan; and the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) in Berlin, the Deutschlandmuseum (Germany Museum), and the Antikriegsmuseum (Anti-War Museum) in Germany.¹

In the following sections, I ask how peace education as a concept emerges in the museums' exhibitions, what curatorial means are used to make exhibits accessible to young audiences, and what aspects of thematization are foregrounded or lost when children are considered as target audiences. However, I want to point out that this paper is not a scientific study in the strict sense but rather an abbreviated account of recent fieldwork activities, it therefore only offers a condensed overview of key observations, and some preliminary reflections gathered during my visit to different museums. Rather than presenting a fully developed theoretical framework or exhaustive analysis, my aim is to indicate potential directions for further research.

¹ Basic information on the museums referenced in the article can be found on their websites, which will be listed below.

2. Methodology

During my fieldwork in Japanese and German history museums, I systematically analysed **exhibition content** by focusing on thematic emphasis, historical depth, and contextualization. I examined how narratives were structured, which events or perspectives were highlighted, and how historical complexity was conveyed through artefacts, texts, and multimedia. Particular attention was given to war- and peace-related messages, assessing nuances in representation, implicit or explicit messaging, and the framing of conflict and reconciliation.

In addition to exhibition content, I paid close attention to **curatorial decisions** regarding spatial design, material selection, and accessibility. I examined how museum layouts influenced visitor engagement, considering the placement of key artefacts, pathways through exhibitions, and the use of lighting and sound. Accessibility for children and diverse audiences was also a focus, including the availability of age-appropriate explanations, hands-on activities, and the use of easy language. Furthermore, I analysed the use of affective and interactive elements, such as immersive installations, personal testimonies, and digital interfaces, to understand how museums sought to evoke emotional responses or encourage active participation. By integrating these aspects into my analysis, I aimed to assess how curatorial choices shape the visitor experience of young audiences and how they were guided to an interpretation of historical narratives.

My methods included detailed observation, note-taking, and photographic documentation of displays, as well as reviewing accompanying publications and visitor materials. Where possible, I conducted interviews with curators or examined institutional statements to gain further insight into exhibition design choices. This comparative approach allowed me to evaluate how different museums construct and communicate historical narratives.

The museums I was able to visit belong to different categories of museums, that can broadly be differentiated as public museums, private museums and, for the Deutschlandmuseum exclusively, commercial museums. Since my analysis has shown specific similarities that concern these categories rather than just the differentiation between memorial politics in Japan and Germany, I will present my findings based on this categorisation.

3. Public Museums

The three public museums I was able to visit during my fieldwork were the National Museum of Japanese History and National Showa Memorial Museum (Shōwakan) in Japan, and the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum).

The first museum I visited is the National Museum of Japanese History, which is located in Sakura City, Chiba Prefecture. The National Museum of Japanese History was established in 1981 and operates under the Inter-University Research Institute Corporation. Situated on the former site of Sakura Castle, the museum spans 130,000 square meters and houses approximately 230,000 historical and folkloric artefacts. Its six galleries present different periods of Japanese history through different types of material including even reconstructed architectural models, with additional special exhibitions held periodically. Generally, the National Museum of Japanese History

emphasizes accessibility and historical research, making it a key institution for understanding Japan's cultural and historical developments. It is overall well researched and provides visitors with detailed information on not only historical events, but sociological trends, politically active groups, individuals, parties and associations that shaped these trends.

This is also true for the explanations concerning the period of the Second World War, where original artefacts and detailed replicas were used to give insights into the developments leading up to the war, the organisation of propaganda, involvement of civilians and activities of soldiers. Noteworthy is the consideration of Japan's imperial expansion, and acknowledgement of war crimes, which has been shown to be absent in other famous Japanese museums (see e.g. Takahashi 2006, Kal 2011). Whereas some of the curational choices, such as the inclusion of colourful large-scale maps, the exhibition of clothing items and posters show that visual materials are apparently considered important elements for making history approachable, their presentation often takes the form of illustrating the contents that were otherwise conveyed through text. Due to the complexity and detailed nature of information conveyed in the sections exploring the history of the war, it is likely that older youth and adults were considered the primary audiences of this section of the museum, whereas other parts of the museum appear more geared towards children, which for example contain more hands-on exhibits.

This stands in contrast with the second public museum in Japan I visited, the National Showa Memorial Museum (Shōwakan). Opened in 1999 and located in Chiyoda district of Tokyo, “at the urging of the War Bereaved Families Association” (Shibuya 2024: 387), this museum is a government-run institution under the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. It focuses on the experiences of ordinary Japanese citizens during and after the Second World War, particularly from the 1920s to the 1950s. The museum exhibits personal belongings, photographs, and testimonies of children who lived during the war in particular, offering insight into their daily life during wartime and Japan's post-war recovery through highlighting and explaining vernacular objects from children's toys to repurposed military items. Moreover, it provides information material in easy language for children, offers tours for children from primary school age onwards, and provides immersive experiences through which children and youth can relieve some of the aspects of life at the “homefront”.

Many of the curational elements thus appeal to children, while they also make the museum attractive to international visitors with little prior knowledge of Japanese history or limited Japanese language skills, including foreign families with children. The museum is also, as Kerry Smith critically noted, characterised by the exclusion of the experiences of non-Japanese (Smith 2002). Despite this neglect, Shibuya Momoyo notes that “the message of the National Showa Memorial Museum highlights the lives of ordinary people in the wartime period, which anticipates a common response regardless of the viewer's background and makes it relatively easy to find clues to a dialogue (2024: 387). The main strategy of incorporating peace education taken by this museum appears to be to shifting the focus from abstract political and military strategies to individual human experiences and help audiences connect emotionally to the themes. Since children can often relate to the experiences

of others their age, showcasing wartime stories is a way of thematising historical realities in ways that resonate with them.

Finally, the third public museum which I want to compare to the former two is the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, housed in the historic Zeughaus, which normally presents German history from the early Middle Ages to the present. Its collection of around a million objects includes artefacts from various historical periods, such as Napoleon's hat and relics from the World Wars. In the past 25 years, it regularly hosted exhibitions explicitly thematising Germany's fascist past and the period of National Socialism, whereas war or peace were tangential but often not exclusively addressed topics. The institution is funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, reflecting its role in historical education and research.

As the museum is currently under reconstruction, I was only able to visit the special exhibition "The Road Not Taken", which explored 14 key moments in German history, posing questions about how events might have unfolded differently. While war and peace were not the primary focus, they remained central themes in the exhibition, concerning many of the 14 key historical moments. The exhibition was designed with partial accessibility for children and youth since many explored themes were abstract and complex, but the curation included easy language options, and emphasized interaction and gamification to engage young visitors. However, the exhibition's section which explored elements of National Socialist politics appears to have targeted older audiences, it contained fewer interactive elements than other parts of the exhibition and no simplified explanations.

All of the public museums I visited situate the narration of war and peace primarily within a national framework, yet, in the special exhibition of the German museum, there were more references to global events including war experiences of other countries, explicitly referencing key historical events in Japan, China and Korea. The strong focus on the use of digital interactive media in installations and through the provision of tablets also differentiated the curation from those in the other investigated museums. Another difference was a focus on rethinking individual responsibilities – for example through various media and games, children and youth were encouraged to imagine themselves in the position of individual historical characters, and were given choices for how they could have reacted in different ways had they been in the place of these individuals.

4. Private Museums

A commonality of all three public museums was the seemingly "neutral" presentation of historical events in academic or simple, but usually not emotional language, with facts being foregrounded, artefacts used as a gateway for understanding history, and spatial designs matching the sombre themes presented. In some of these aspects, private museum curators made different choices. Two private museums I investigated during my research were the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum in Japan and the Antikriegsmuseum in Germany.

Founded in 2002 in Koto, Tokyo, the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum is managed by the non-profit Tokyo Raids & War Damage Resource Center. It focuses on the firebombing of Tokyo during the World War and its devastating effects on civilians. The museum presents personal testimonies, wartime photographs, and artifacts to highlight the human impact of the bombings. Dedicated to historical awareness and peace education, it seeks to preserve the memories of those affected while fostering discussions on war and its consequences. This museum clearly addresses youth in particular, and also cooperates with local schools. Despite its focus on war victims in Tokyo, the museum manages to combine and connect information on local events with more general, well researched information on air warfare as used by different countries, including Japan, over the course of the 20th century. Like the National Showa Memorial Museum, the recreation of wartime reality is one the museums' strategies, and includes amongst other a small room with darkened windows to provide glimpses into the atmosphere felt during air raids. Among the sources used in the curation are also oral history accounts of air raid victims, and graphic photographs of victims, which point to the addressing of audiences older than primary school age. In its focus on war victims and comparatively more explicit peace messages, the museum shares many aspects with the second visited private museum in Germany, the Antikriegsmuseum.

Founded by pacifist Ernst Friedrich in 1925, the Antikriegsmuseum in Berlin (for details, see Spree 2015) focuses on the consequences of war and the importance of peace. Its exhibitions include photographs, personal testimonies, and wartime artefacts, illustrating the destruction caused by armed conflicts. Originally shut down by the Nazi regime, the museum was re-established in the late 20th century in a new location which includes an original air raid bunker that is integrated into the museum and is particularly popular among young audiences. The museum is today run by the grandson of the original founder and serves as both a historical archive and an educational space, encouraging critical reflection on war and violence. This museum too uses toys and other items such as gas masks for babies to help young audiences relate to the experiences of children as victims of war. Somewhat eclectically, graphic photographs of war injuries by soldiers during the First World War are juxtaposed with information and mostly vernacular objects that often highlight the involuntary involvement of civilians into war efforts and their exposure to war propaganda at different times and places. Concerning the history of the Second World War, references to the lives and experiences of victims of the Shoah were added the exhibition. Prominent aspects of the museum are the accentuation of pre- and post-war peace movements, and the consideration of war as a global phenomenon. Another commonality between this museum and the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum is that both thematize specific kinds of warfare and, more prominently in the Antikriegsmuseum, arms production as a condition of warfare. These topics are integrated into the broader discussion on war as a modern phenomenon. Both private museums incorporate peace education methods through a focus on individual victim narratives, but also provide incentives to consider systemic issues.

5. Commercial Museums

Finally, the Deutschlandmuseum in Berlin presents a condensed but interactive overview of 2,000 years of German history. The exhibition is structured to engage visitors through dioramas, multimedia elements, and immersive storytelling techniques. The museum emphasizes accessibility and experiential learning, aiming to provide an introduction to key historical events in an engaging format – yet, it often lacks the historical depths of other museum types introduced earlier. The exhibition places an emphasis on National Socialism as shaping the overarching narrative of Germany's wartime history. Its heavy reliance on affective display techniques, such as dark lighting and unsettling music, appears designed to evoke emotional reactions rather than encourage deeper analytical engagement and in the thematization of this time period, complex issues are distilled into simple, easily digestible messages that prioritize clarity over nuance. The representation of the Second World War is limited to the listing war dead on a digital screen, de-emphasizing personal war-experience, whereas a display of the destruction of German cities can be read in the framework of national suffering. That there is no explicit anti-war message foregrounded in the museum is indicated by the parallel playful curation of the period of the First World War with walk-through reconstructed trenches in this museum, but also by the neglect of thematising the stories of victims of both the Nazi regime in Germany and of victims of war more generally. While the museum's approach to combine historical narratives with modern museum technologies to make historical developments tangible for a broad audience appears effective, these curatorial decisions stand in contrast to peace education's emphasis on the importance of balanced victimhood narratives and a more comprehensive exploration of war experiences and their political backgrounds.

6. General Observations

As indicated above, the current paper can only superficially touch upon most of the investigated aspects, and will therefore focus on highlighting observations from individual museums and exhibitions to map out some similarities and differences that concern the above described questions. The number of museums and time spend researching them does not allow for general distinction to be made between museum culture in both countries.

Some aspects concerning the exhibition content of various museums confirm the observations that have been made elsewhere regarding the memorial culture in both countries. Namely, there is a stronger focus on the role of ideology in the German museums, which see the period of the Second World War as intimately connected with the rise of fascism. However, this aspect was less strongly pronounced in cases where children were addressed as audiences. The exhibition of the Germany Museum further shows that a focus on National Socialism does not always go hand in hand with a nuanced representation of history, and that it can be integrated in a curation which is not necessarily able to convey historical complexities or is guided by principles of peace education. On the other hand, the Antikriegsmuseum, although its focus was not on the historical exploration of National Socialism specifically, encouraged a critical engagement of young audiences with the regime in the broader context of war and violence.

In contrast to public and private museums in Germany which considered effects of war on diverse victim groups, a commonality of the Japanese museums was a comparatively stronger focus on the experiences of Japanese civilians. This included a focus on the experiences of children and youth during the wartime period, making the exhibitions more approachable for younger audiences. Overall, the visited Japanese museums show and, to varying degrees, critically reflect civilians' integration into war efforts and exposure to propaganda, but primarily show them as victims of the war. As mentioned, this aspect stood sometimes in a questionable relation to the missing thematization of other, non-Japanese war victims. However, particularly the Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum also managed to encompass a wider framework of empathic relations through making non-Japanese victims visible both in and outside of Japan as part of its exhibition.

These observations have directed my attention to the importance of private museums and initiatives of both countries in giving impulses for a reconsideration of and further development of peace education beyond the national framework. I thank the Yamaoka Foundation for the possibility to investigate this interesting topic and hope that it can inspire future, more in-depth research endeavours.

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List of Museum Websites:

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National Showa Memorial Museum (Shōwakan): www.showakan.go.jp

Tokyo Air Raid and War Devastation Museum: www.tokyo-sensai.net

Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum): www.dhm.de

Deutschlandmuseum (Germany Museum): www.deutschlandmuseum.de

Antikriegsmuseum (Anti-War Museum): www.antikriegsmuseum.de