SGI-JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES
VOLUME. 7
ISSUE. 3
SEPT., 2026

NAVIGATING TRAUMA NARRATIVES: THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN THE TRANSMISSION OF 'DIFFICULT' HERITAGE TO CHILDREN

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Abstract
War is among those topics that have always been present in the history of humanity and morally complex to tell in contemporary society. Parents, teachers and other agents of the educational community wonder whether or not it is appropriate to talk to children about conflicts. The reception of such stories fluctuates between the dimension of celebration and commemoration. Therefore, what was once seen as a sign of a country's power can later be reinterpreted as a cause for regret? Many explicit representations of colonialism are now considered a problematic and shameful legacy, which is why the museums that recount and exhibit historical traumas have special responsibilities.
Keywords: Children's Education, Cultural Healing, Cultural Significance, Difficult Heritage, Dissonant Heritage, Heritage Storytelling, Historical Trauma, Museums.

I. Introduction

War is a topic of perennial presence in human history, and the social sciences play an important role in recognising, shaping and mediating responses to war (MacDougall & Ender, 2003; Malešević, 2010). War events are not made up only of armed clashes but also of an altered everyday life, raising the question of how to tell and represent these massacres to children (Santa Barbara, 2006; Browder, 2015). This consideration emerged even more crucial in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, since many believed an event like that would not happen in the West in the twenty-first century (Deineko, 2022). Apart from news reports, little trace of these phenomenologies usually remains; thus, these events are of extreme sociological interest.

Visualising War in Children's Literature

War is among those morally complex topics that parents, teachers, and other agents of the educational community wonder whether it is appropriate to address with children. One of the areas of storytelling already most explored in the story of the war takes place in children's literature.

The representation of war (and its consequences) in children's books is potentially problematic for several reasons. Among them is the possibility of glorifying violence (when the protagonists are the antagonists of the story), as well as manifesting human cruelty without filters, presenting disturbing images to the eyes of readers unprepared for the reach of such material.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that children are unaware of the reality of armed conflicts. For example, many European school classes adopted Ukrainian pupils due to the war in that country. Therefore, the focus must be placed on how the stories we tell and the images we pass on of the concepts of war (and peace) influence children as individuals by shaping contemporary societies.

Images of violence and war are omnipresent: not just in the news but from TV series to video games. When taken out of context, this footage conveys a sense of despair; while storytelling about war can help young people impart a sense of urgency to such a complex topic. A concise, uncluttered storyline and language can encourage the exploration of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the stories allow readers (starting with the youngest) to identify with the protagonists as human beings in their self-determination, transmitting to young

readers the sense of their agency.

In children's literature, kids are generally the helpless victims of the adult world or the only ones able to save others and find life-saving solutions for the planet. In this sense, it is also useful to consider the agency of children not only as characters within a plot, but as readers: players and reviewers of stories.

In the context of children's books, representations of war are varied: the reasons why people fight; what war brings to people; and even how to stand up to it. As a result, it is not only relevant for children's authors and illustrators to approach the tough subject of war, but also to focus on the whys: the causes. An understanding of the texts that matches the awareness of the war's horrors requires empathic writing and visualisation.

The representations of war in children's tales deal with different aspects: from a focus on adults (soldiers, models of heroism and warfare) to a greater investigation of the experiences of the population involved in conflicts, in particular families and kids. In addition, there is a marked prevalence of stories set in the two world wars (particularly the second one) compared to more recent or current conflicts.

World War II suits the narrative from the perspective of young readers particularly well. Children's literature focusing on the war tends to privilege the child's point of view. Two well-known examples are 'When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit' (1971), an autobiographical children's novel by Judith Kerr, and 'The Diary of Anne Frank' (1947), the latter of which was also instrumental in shaping the way both children and adults understand aspects of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Slater, 2016).

While focusing on specific experiences of their time and space (evacuation, Nazi occupation, and concentration camps), the young characters of these stories ask powerful questions and make criticisms of the adult wartime. These works also often include contrasting views on children's resilience in the face of violence, gender roles and the rights and responsibilities of the child as a citizen (Galway, 2016).

The pro-war and pro-allied sentiment that dominated much of the English-speaking children's literature of the time has led to the assumption that the genre was generically uniform, and studies of children's books often focus on it as a form of wartime propaganda, recognising that proponents hoped to make young people understand that they were directly interested in their community and had an obligation to support the national ideology (Johnson, 2008).

The many ways in which writers approached the war theme reveal different perspectives on battles and various attitudes towards children, childhood and what was deemed appropriate literature for such audiences. For instance, some writers included fairly apparent descriptions of the destructive nature of war, while others softened the war by rendering its features glorified (Paris, 2004).

In early childhood (and pre-school) literature, there is a tendency to use animals as protagonists in stories. Animals can be a handy means of identification for young kids: a way to tell the story of the conflict in an accessible, stimulating and empathetic way. This is the recent case with the illustrated book 'The Cat Man of Aleppo' by Karim Shamsi-Basha (2020), set during the Syrian civil war. A true story that helps young readers grasp the terrible impacts of war. Or the example of the illustrated album entitled 'Why?' (1996) by Nikolai Popov, which asked why the fighting took place, proving difficult to find a comprehensive answer.

Given the most recent crises, which are being fought with increasingly technologically precise weapons, it is questionable what future trends will emerge when the children's book focuses on narrating such conflicts (e.g. drone warfare, cyber warfare, and so forth).

In contemporary society, violence has largely saturated many media formats: from films to video games and graphic novels, such representations usually emphasise entertainment rather than presenting the reality of conflict. Scholars such as Kem Knapp Sawyer (1991) argued that accurate depictions of war in children's literature could counterbalance the inherent simplifications of war in mass media culture.

How best to present the "morality of war" to young readers is still a matter of debate among scholars1: from emphasising the glory and courage of war to portraying it as an act of absolute evil or acknowledging the complexity of the subject. For example, Nobel Prize-winning writer Isaac Bashevis Singer (1985) extended the sense of justice and suffering, stating that children «often find it difficult to make peace with the idea that animals are slaughtered so that man can eat them. They are bewildered and frightened by death. They cannot accept the fact that the strong should rule the weak».

Scholar Kathleen Dale Colarusso (1986) remarked that children's texts dealing with wars could bring young and old alike to the realisation that everyone is called upon to contribute to the problems and solutions by acting in first person (also about climate change and planet conservation). Whatever the future has in store for us, the war stories children learn shape their understanding of the world, and the causes and consequences of conflicts.

When Heritage is Troublesome

Wars, clashes, conquests of foreigners, and plundering of assets from abroad concern most Western national histories. Today's reception usually fluctuates between the extent of celebration and commemoration; thus, what was once seen as a sign of a country's power can later be reinterpreted as a cause for regret (Logan & Reeves 2009). Colonialism, for example, which was once a national pride for colonising countries, has increasingly come to be seen as a difficult and shameful legacy: social and political issues that, depending on the relevant ideology, can be an example of cancel culture or of historical legitimisation and public reconciliation (Lehrer et al., 2011).

For example, this is the case of the Kingdom of Belgium, which began to take steps towards recognising past colonial crimes. In June 2022, the relics of Patrice Emery Lumumba (1925-1961), the first prime minister of the independent Congo, executed in the separatist province of Katanga following a coup d'état, were returned. It was a golden tooth, what remains of the tortured body of the revolutionary leader killed to stop his attempt at change in the African country. That tooth is currently the emblem of the heroes of the African liberation struggle (Gijs & Faris, 2022). Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said that several Belgian ministers in the early 1960s bore 'moral responsibility' for the circumstances that led to Lumumba's murder.

Great deals of explicit representations of colonialism are now lying in museum storerooms. In the case of museums, the legitimacy of the representation of actual events is culturally, politically, and socially relevant (Williams, 2007). They are repositories of knowledge and uphold the commitment to communicate the educational significance of heritage, even in the face of conflicting interpretations of history. Examples of this are war museums (or exhibitions commemorating conflicts), in which architecture and museography are responsible – jointly with educational design – for elaborating and transmitting learning content stemming from accounts of violence.

Museums and heritage sites turned into critical elements of place branding and strategic planning of territorial image and attractability (Neto, 2007); thus, cultural tourism expanded enormously, often bringing visitors worldwide to so-called 'lieu de mémoire' (Macdonald, 2013) and in spots renowned for being the location of dramatic events or mourning (Seaton, 1996).

A few decades ago, John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth (1996) proposed the concept of 'dissonant heritage', focusing on those (material and immaterial) legacies that question people's interpretation, recalling past events not easily reconciled with visitors' values. From these understandings stems the concept of 'difficult heritage' highlighted by Sharon Macdonald (2009), referring to that past that is recognised as significant in the contemporary world, but which is contested and inconvenient for public reconciliation with a positive and self-affirming modern identity.

War as a military fact and as an intrinsic facet of the history of societies and countries is a multi-layered issue to be investigated and represented in a holistic approach and in a critical context of cross-cutting knowledge (Lippard et al., 2018).

Narrating and Displaying Historical Traumas in Museums

Museums of war and weapons hold a tradition of institutions linked to the nation's rhetoric, hence the necessity of conflicts to safeguard selfness against otherness and, therefore, of the nation against its enemies. This applied to the Musée de l'Armée in Paris (where Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb is housed): one of its 'Rapport d'activité' (2010) explained how the museum is dedicated to the "awakening of military vocations and the development of the nation's spirit of defence".

Such museums have long been dedicated to celebrating armies and wars by presenting national military ordnance and relics, developing a storytelling in which the destructive nationalism operating from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century was reflected (Ostow, 2008).

Within museums with this focus, war and culture were often associated with being the vehicles for 'civilisation' imposed in class-based and colonialist terms. For instance, Peter McIsaac (2015) examined the attempts of the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, in Vienna (the world's oldest and largest purpose-built military history museum, founded in 1869) to bring Austria's violent past into a productive relationship with the present. Analysing the museum's approach, McIsaac (2011) argued that the exhibitions and didactics were still influenced by the museum's original mandate, which had arisen in the belligerent climate of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

At the time, the exhibition approach was concretely oriented towards the pursuit of a high aesthetic culture, both in terms of the architectural layout (with sumptuous spaces, decorations, frescos, and mosaics) and the exhibition design (centred on the 'display' of war artefacts of exceptional craft, military banners, and armouries).

Still today, in the field of museum communication, architecture is a highly distinctive element for identification as spatial storytelling of historical time (Ahmad et al., 2014). It creates symbols and conveys messages, both in terms of context and content, connecting empathetically with the consciousness of visitors. As an aesthetic practice of constructing meaningful spaces and forms, architecture is indispensable for creating representative places of memory, commemoration, and learning (Peressut, 2017).

The development of a different perception of the role and responsibilities that wars have played and continue to have in history dates to the events of the two world wars. A change has been founded, and a growing commitment has been seen to critically reinterpret a past of hostility and trauma that has marked the continent in a material and an intangible sense.

From that moment on, the representation of war events was no longer confined to conventional myths of the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) and the narrative of the dignity of war waged in the name of values seen as eternal (Rekdal, 2013). Consequently, the themes covered by museums extended to the concepts of cruelty, horror, genocide, atrocity, degradation, humiliation, pain, anguish, and rage. These terms are also found in accounts of the effects of wartime on populations (Mugglestone, 2016; D'Alessandro, 2022).

The result is a sad portrayal in which the names and faces of individuals form a mosaic outlining the magnitude of horrific events. The enormity of these acts is often addressed to the younger generations (Manna & Palumbo, 2018), whose responsibility is not to replicate such cruelties. Such is the case at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem (the State of Israel's National Holocaust Memorial Organisation), whose Hall of Names houses the most extensive collection of Holocaust-related photographs in the world (Lu, 2017). Showcasing people, places and events in visual form, its photographs hold immense historical, educational, and commemorative value (Bounia & Stylianou-Lambert, 2013).

This place also represents how historical traumas drive the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Mulligan, 2010). Actually, Yad Vashem is situated near Deir Yassin, a profoundly symbolic location representing the collective suffering of the Palestinian people (Feldman, 2007). That village, which had proclaimed its impartiality during the 1947-8 civil war in Palestine, was attacked by extreme right-wing Jewish paramilitary organisations,

resulting in the massacre of numerous inhabitants and the complete eradication of the village (Diab, 2023).

In the contemporary museography focused on wars, it is possible to witness the exposure of two kinds of violence (Winter, 2013): that of the battlefields (consisting of the brutality of combat, suffering, mutilation, etc.) and that perpetrated on defenceless civilians (on populations, ethnic and religious groups, and political opponents), also through systemic procedures of annihilation. This plight continues to affect the memories that belong to humanity as unhealed wounds.

This approach is partly the consequence of the proximity to the two world wars, which allows contact with real testimonies from those who lived that history. In this kind of museum, exhibition strategies are used to combine the spoken evidence of survivors with a series of objects that belonged to those people: personal effects that are so ordinary that visitors cannot help but identify with them and feel emotionally involved (Kjeldbaek, 2009). Moreover, in contrast to pre-twentieth-century conflicts, photo and footage documentation is available, contributing to the identification with a generation that now uses visuals daily to communicate.

Objects can also be used to evoke the memory of the bodies of the victims. This is the case with the display at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, which shows many shoes belonging to murdered Jews found at the Majdanek concentration camp, east of Lublin in Poland. The poignant image of that pile of shoes is accompanied by Yiddish poet Moses Schulstein's (1911-1981) poem:

We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses. We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers from Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam. And because we are only made of fabric and leather, and not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the hellfire.

The entire world is still afflicted by recent wars, which bear traces in the collective memory: Sharon MacDonald (2009) called those signs 'markers of the past'. Battle trenches, fortifications, bunkers, shelters, concentration and extermination camps, cemeteries, memorials, monuments, shrines, tombstones, and ruins of bombed buildings: all this mark the places where they are located. In these spaces, visitors enter a landscape of memories along paths that shape the relationship between the interior and exterior of the museum. The authenticity of the historical site makes the issue more sensitive and readily noticeable, offering a reliable idea of what happened and how people once lived and lost their lives (Peressut, 2017).

In the early 20th century, Polish-Jewish educator, and children's novelist Janusz Korczak (Lewin, 1997) advocated for the fundamental right of children to experience a joyful childhood. Accompanying this enlightening vision was Ellen Key (1909), who declared the 20th century as the era of the child. Key advocated for children's rights to unrestricted development. Sadly, however, the history of the contemporary world has appended a bleak postscript to these compassionate notions, entailing the involvement of children in violent conflicts and totalitarian regimes subjecting them to inconceivable levels of cruelty inflicted by adults.

Wars result from fracturing geopolitical, ethnic, and social contexts, so they no longer tend to constitute a single entity in museum exhibits. Instead, the exhibitions increasingly focus on the consequences of conflicts on new migrations and on their impact on certain social categories, such as childhood. It is precisely to focus on the point of view of children that the War Childhood Museum – a museum on infancy in wartime – has been established in Sarajevo (capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina) to represent the experiences of children who grew up during the war in Bosnia. This institution (officially opened in 2017) grew out of a bottom-up idea in 2010, when founder Jasminko Halilović (2017) decided to gather the evidence of those who, like him, had experienced the siege of Sarajevo as a child.

The main section of the WCM consists of the display of the personal belongings of children who lived through the war in Yugoslavia. Through the collection of objects, drawings, diaries, photographs, and toys, a permanent narrative is opened on the stories of

those who were children at the time to activate a work of awareness-raising on the perception of the youngest in the context of armed conflicts (Niksic, 2020). A second section is dedicated to video testimonies: an in-depth look at the personal experiences of the young witnesses, through which an alternative interpretation of war is provided.

Extensive pedagogical, educational, psychological, and sociological research is currently devoted to childhood. This discourse focuses on the contentious topic of 'child soldiers' who are involved with military organisations, including both state armed forces and non-state armed groups. These youngsters are taught and exploited for combat purposes or as human shields to gain tactical advantages. Another category includes children who are indirectly affected by the armed conflict, meaning they are unable to flee the war zone and are forced to endure their adolescent years without (international) protection, among the gunfire, grenade explosions, and mortar bombardment. Halilović (2017) addresses the topic by examining the collective experience of those who grew up in Sarajevo during the conflict.

II. Conclusion

This article aimed to capture the essence of practices in museums that deal with armed conflict by addressing the challenges of discussing war with children, the changing perspectives on historical conflicts, and the responsibilities of contemporary exhibits in presenting difficult and shameful legacies.

In exploring the intricate terrain of war narratives in the intersection of museum context and childhood didactics, the dynamic nature of the historical discourse on war and the moral intricacies inherent in its record stresses the significance of museums as pivotal agents in this educational process.

The deliberation on whether to broach the subject of war with children remains a pertinent concern for parents, educators, and society at large. This reasoning especially applies to privileged societies not directly affected by conflicts in their territories. The paper has underscored the fluctuating reception of war narratives, oscillating between celebration and commemoration, highlighting how the perception of historical events transforms over time. With the transition of societal values, what was once emblematic of a nation's power can be reframed as a source of collective remorse.

Central to this narrative evolution is the acknowledgement of colonialism as a troublesome and shameful legacy. The explicit representations of historical traumas housed in museums demand a nuanced approach, recognising the ethical responsibilities of such portrayals. Museums are pivotal in mediating difficult heritage for present and future generations in handling and communicating challenging or sensitive aspects. A comprehensive understanding considers the following essential elements:

Museums are mediators between historical events and the public. They do not merely showcase artefacts; they interpret, contextualise, and present historical narratives.

Museums serve not only the current generation but also future ones. They act as preservers of cultural memory, ensuring that subsequent generations remember essential and often challenging aspects of history.

Museums hold immense potential in shaping the education and engagement of our future generations. Children may struggle to grasp complex historical concepts, and museums are seen as environments designed to make these concepts accessible and age-appropriate.

In contemporary exhibits, the emphasis must extend beyond mere narration; it involves fostering critical thinking, empathy, and a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding armed conflicts. Museums must navigate a path that not only imparts historical facts but also prompts reflection on the moral dimensions of war.

The role of museums in transmitting a difficult heritage to children is a multifaceted endeavour, demanding a delicate balance between historical accuracy, ethical representation, and the cultivation of a socially responsible perspective. By navigating these narratives with sensitivity, museums contribute significantly to shaping an informed, empathetic, and critically engaged generation capable of confronting the challenges and responsibilities of the future.

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