

## **Military Historical Museum**

of the Bundeswehr (German Federal Armed Forces)

in Dresden / Germany, see [www.mhmbw.de](http://www.mhmbw.de)

Since 1877 the building at Olbrichtplace in Dresden has been used in turns as arsenal, and as an armament museum. After a major renovation it has been re-opened 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 as MHM (Military Historical Museum) of the Bundeswehr (the German Federal Armed Forces). Official goals of MHM are both, education of soldiers, and information of the public. It represents a deliberate attempt, to present the military history within an overall societal context. In the official concept, violence is seen as a last resort, and bad impacts of military actions are described in their horrible details. The innovation of viewpoints is underlined by the architecture as designed by Libeskind, including a huge black wedge, breaking up the old dignified building.

### **Limit war, broaden peace**

The MHM definitely cannot be understood as a traditional “peace museum”, which would oppose war in every form. Rather it does reveal essential features of a “museum for peace”. For instance there are numerous pictures showing the wounds inflicted by use of weapons, including horrible physical and mental injuries. Furthermore beyond immediate warfare destructions, also several ensuing consequences for economy and society are included. MHM does reveal divergences between goals before war, and results thereafter.

What will be the effect of the MHM? We might ask, for whom in society would a “peace museum” or a “museum for peace” be the most urgent education? The answer might include societal obstacles to peace, like Cold Warriors and “hot soldiers”. Another answer would focus on future oriented key persons. Optimal impact then might be upon modern soldiers in democratic structures, and upon schoolchildren. It shall be an effective feature of this MHM, that young and old soldiers shall use it extensively, as outlined in their standard education programs. And already during the first days after opening of the museum, many children, especially school classes, have been at the MHM.

Modern viewpoints might not have been possible, if the current German army had recently fought major wars, in a militaristic context. Instead, recently all intense warfare has been avoided politically, because since 1945 the German society is alert against almost any involvements in war. Even relatively low military expenditures, and low numbers of dead soldiers are considered with suspicion. It is before this background, that within MHM both purpose and impact of military weapons have been put into the overall societal context. The outcome is an unusually large museum, quite unthinkable of course for any “peace museum”: 62 million Euro have been spent, in order to comprise weapons since 1300 all the way until now, including recent experiences from Afghanistan.



Where the MHM does investigate weapons, it is mostly focussed on German armies before the Bundeswehr, and on their excessive warfare history. The few military actions of the Bundeswehr itself are reported in a comparatively positive way, as for instance the support of evacuations in Albania 1997 by the “heroes of Tirana”, while coincidental effects of collateral damage, such as destruction of hospitals, schools, churches etc. are treated rather as a minor matter.

### **Nuclear armament as utmost menace**

MHM does present several items related to nuclear weapons, like the “Honest John” and “Pershing” rockets as carriers, and it mentions the manifold public protests against the detailed preparation of atomic warfare in Germany. Given the courage of MHM, to display medical and further impacts of old as well as contemporary weapons in realistic form, there is one striking renunciation: The well documented impact of nuclear weapons is avoided almost completely. There is even a statement, in the catalogue (page 113), that the MHM has thought about the issue, but then decided intentionally to leave out “nuclear mushroom clouds”, and detailed impacts. The argument is based on the difficulty, that a nuclear disaster would be hard to describe in a realistic way – rather art than science might display the message. Accordingly, there is an art presentation, which intentionally does include the visitors: The exhibit “Hiroshima Thank You Instrument” of Ingo Guenther, an object of art, does apply a flash light right upon the visitors, whom their own shadows on a wall shall remember of the according shadows in Hiroshima, where persons had screened the wall behind them from the extremely intense nuclear flashlight.

MHM clearly argues, that the atomic bomb is the greatest menace to life. It does show some details, like an incense burner that had gone out of shape due to radiation of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, an item on loan from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. MHM describes the change in public perception and sense, for instance by displaying a toy with a clown right on top of an “atom rocket”, a toy from 1955 which of course is perceived nowadays as weird and “macabre”.

The broad spectrum of MHM is again evident, as civil defence measures as prepared for warfare are described. On the one hand, the fact that there can only be limited options for “protection” in view of nuclear warfare, is mentioned. On the other hand, what is missing is a damage assessment, where the dramatic vulnerability of the German society against impact of even very small parts of the nuclear arsenal would be made clear in some detail. For example: The common expectancy during Cold

War was a broad tank attack from the Soviet side, and a “necessity” to stop them with nuclear bombs. But, in a realistic scenario, already just one very first and single atom bomb, detonated on a bridge near the border between East and West Germany, might have endangered Wolfsburg by a radioactive cloud, a large town known for their production of Volkswagen. Already a few percent of the atomic arsenal at hand of military forces could have destroyed Germany beyond societal repair (in contrast to the recovery after World War II). A detailed demonstration of nuclear warfare scenarios would have made a major impression for the visitors, and thus would have contributed more to awareness for peace, much like the American film “The Day After”.

Distinct from nuclear warfare, many other aspects have been included at MHM, and well prepared for the visitors. For instance the firestorm of February 1945 in Dresden is vivid in the remembrances of the local people, and that of course is included – while leaving out those firestorms, which would be inflicted by atomic bombs.

### **Driving a wedge between habits of war**

Architecture has been considered as essential. Already the first impression shall be inspiring: Architect Libeskind had designed a huge black insert, added to the old dignified building.



The triangle with its “deconstructivistic” form shall remind of the bomber formation of the Royal Air Force, attacking Dresden February 1945. The form is directed immediately at the point in town, where the check mark had been set for the orientation of the bombing. The firestorm had destroyed Dresden completely. Thus the black wedge shall be a constant reminder of warfare impact: As a symbol it does cleave the old, traditional view of weapons and violence. In the light-colored, old building there are numerous old weapons, as had been used through the last seven centuries. These parts do include the historical environment, the common celebration of military traditions, but always immediately related to realistic presentation of contemporary weapon impacts, often inflicted exactly by those weapons worn by soldiers in gloryfying poses. Still unavoidingly, within the MHM altogether, several exhibits documenting former centuries will be a feast for weapon fetishists, for instance in connection with the reconstruction of the first German submarine, built in 1850.

Quite different, within the black wedge area, the systematic inclusion of all kinds of aspects regarding weapons and warfare has been put to the foreground: It includes

the interdependence of military tools with societal features, such as government, administration, law, culture, art, economy, science, technology, and social issues. The intended result is a cultural history of violence, in all its causes, intentions and impacts. It took a deliberate attempt to create such a military policy, guided by democratic power. The MHM has been designed to promote this as a due and urgent step towards a more peaceful mankind.

Nevertheless upcoming history will have to go a long way with new sufferings. MHM shows, how since 1999 the number of fugitive persons as a consequence of warfare is lower than the number due to other reasons, as hunger or environmental impact. Mere absence of war will not be feasible until there are major steps to solve urgent societal necessities. MHM mentions Wangari Muta Maathai in Kenia as an example for progress towards peace: She did win the Peace Nobel Price for her engagement in sustained environmental improvement and basic women's rights.

### **Obedience to what?**

For ages, soldiers have been made submissive. Any and every refusal of obedience has been considered as a crime. Now round the corner of the MHM there is a street named the "Stauffenberg Allee", in remembrance of Graf Stauffenberg, the leader of the famous attack on Hitler July 20<sup>th</sup> 1944. If that attack had been successful, millions of war victims might have been avoided. Later, in 1950 when the "Inner Guidance", was introduced by Wolf Graf von Baudissin, a new policy was established: A modern soldier shall be much more autonomous, also more self-consistent as a democrat, than ever before. As a result, today a modern soldier must be able to check situations fast and to act immediately on "well educated own intuition".

At the MHM, on one hand obedience is stressed as important for coordination of soldiers, but on the other hand it has gotten a new name, a more precise connotation, named "gewissenhafter Gehorsam" (a kind of conscientious, assiduous, attentive, painstaking form of obedience): The soldier shall recognize, when an order evidently is wrong, unlawful or against moral basics. The MHM includes such modern aspects, while it does not directly apply this wisdom regarding future dangers, like atomic warfare. It does mention public protests against nuclear armament.

### **Victims of what?**

Absence of peace causes victims under various circumstances. As far as non-nuclear disasters and horrors are concerned, MHM does not hesitate to outline both causes and consequences. For instance, it reports in detail the fact, that during World War II soldiers in many different cases contributed to murder, especially of Jewish people. MHM explains, how "Wehrmacht, SS, and police" were involved, and how a coordinated system of law and administration led to an unprecedented violation of human rights, and altogether to mass murder of people throughout Europe. Pogroms like in Lemberg, concentration camps like in Majdanek and the "industrial form" of mass murder are explained. MHM does realistically report the unique calamity, as intentionally caused by the Nazis.

As quite different MHM reports the overall context and impact of other innumerable inhuman military practices over centuries, where most consequences had rather not been intended. Weapons had been tools built to win a war, but mostly not built as tools for mass murder. The issue has to include impacts on the own soldiers. A

typical example are off odors, displaying to visitors the offensive smell of deathly men and animals, as has been experienced in trenches and dugouts, as had been suffered especially by soldiers during World War I. Another example, from times of Napoleonic warfare: Shoes were manufactured thriftily in just one standardized form for both the right and left foot, thus soldiers, who had to walk thousands of miles, got harming and painful foot ailments.

### **A limited, but powerful impulse towards peace**

The MHM does leave out essential issues, such as atomic warfare, weapons export, outer space, and cyber warfare. Nevertheless, weapons and violence are shown and explained in a realistic way, and within a societal awareness regarding the horrors of war, and the merits of peace. Thus MHM has been built to influence both soldiers and the broad public in a direction toward stepwise establishment of peace. It definitely has left the tradition of mere military glorification. So far it is a rare occurrence, that a museum established by the military might be called, and might even work in the direction of a museum for peace.

Explanations of the presented items are in German and English. The catalogue of the MHM so far is only at hand in German, but an English catalogue is in preparation. The catalogue ends with a statement, that "soldiers alone" can neither prevent nor solve the conflicts. Rather recognition of basic human needs, including dignity and freedom, are mentioned as a precondition for peace. Global networking is required. Consequentially a robe of the judge at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Den Haag is shown by MHM, as a forward-looking item.

Philipp Sonntag / [www.philipp-sonntag.de](http://www.philipp-sonntag.de)

*4 Pictures:* Black wedge cleaving the building + old canon + rockets from above + tradition.