

Reviewers Unmasked

After meeting with Minister Piotr Gliński, I had repeatedly asked him publicly to disclose the reviews of our exhibitions that he commissioned. We really did invite the debate. It was worthwhile; we were open to criticism—I was speaking in June 2016, during the session of the Sejm Committee on Culture.

The appeals were ineffective, and the whole situation became increasingly reminiscent of the atmosphere of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Our exhibitions had been subjected to ruthless criticism for months, mostly from people who did not have any idea about them. There were four mythical reviews, but it was not known by whom they had been written or specifically what the criticism leveled against us was. One could only guess that the accusations were very serious, especially as the minister of culture formulated his opinion of the exhibitions based on the reviews. The parliamentary debate indicated their possible nature.

Once it became clear that Deputy Prime Minister Gliński did not intend to comply with the promise made to me and would not voluntarily reveal the reviews, the mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, requested them under the access-to-information law. At the beginning of July 2016, the Gdańsk authorities received three "declassified" reviews (the fourth "dissolved" somehow; it is not known whether it existed at all) and gave them to both the Museum and the media. The situation at that point was peculiar. The Ministry of Culture apparently did not warn the reviewers that they would have to face public opinion. Piotr Niwiński, asked by a journalist from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, denied that he had written a review at all: "And where did this information that I wrote such a review come from? You, Sir, surprise me and flatter me at the same time."¹⁹

I studied the reviews thoroughly and immediately placed them on the Museum's website. We were most amazed that the reviewers used only one short document from among the extremely extensive package that we had submitted to the Ministry of Culture in early January. The package included so-called intervention tables, on the basis of which it was possible to reconstruct every part of the exhibition, and a film about the exhibition (narrated by Maja Ostaszewska) showing numerous artifacts that visitors would see. One had to know how to use the intervention tables, but in a letter to Deputy Minister of Culture Jarosław Sellin, I declared that we would be happy to explain everything and answer any questions about the exhibitions. Nobody approached us, and the reviewers relied only on the seventy-five-page, richly illustrated "Outline of the Exhibitions."

¹⁹ Krzysztof Katka, "Znamy recenzje wystawy Muzeum II Wojny Światowej. Źle postawione akcenty," *Gazeta Wyborcza Trójmiasto*, July 11, 2016.

When, on behalf of Sellin, one of the officials asked me for materials on the subject of the exhibitions, he clearly indicated that in addition to other materials, we needed to provide the ministers with something short, a summary, so that they would have time to read it. So we did, but it did not even occur to us that the verdict on the Museum would be issued only on the basis of the short “Outline of the Exhibitions” (which was also provided to the members of the Committee on Culture) without an examination of the details of the exhibitions. On the first page of the outline the reviewers could read that the exhibitions “cannot be fully presented without proper technical documentation. When analyzing this document, one should therefore use the plans for the whole exhibition and its individual parts, technical sections, and the so-called intervention tables in which all the components of the design were described.”²⁰

This statement was completely ignored. The reviewers charged that the exhibition lacked many important threads from the wartime fate of Poland; meanwhile, these threads were there, but the reviewers could not or did not want to find them. Some of the threads were included even in the “Outline of the Exhibitions” on which they based the reviews, but apparently they did not carefully study even that. Therefore, the major part of each review consisted of a long litany of completely misguided allegations, listing the alleged deficiencies and omissions of the exhibition.

Jan Żaryn accused us of omitting, among others things, the bombings of Polish cities by the Germans in 1939, the defense of Warsaw, and the figure of Julien Bryan, an American correspondent who spent several weeks in the besieged Warsaw and whose pictures and films were later watched by the whole world. In fact, not only were these topics included but each of them had a dedicated room. In the case of Bryan, it was even a cinema room in which visitors watched fragments of his film *The Siege*. Also, they could admire an authentic film camera that belonged to the director, which, after several years of persuasion, was handed over to me by Sam Bryan, the son of the American documentary maker. I personally brought it to Gdańsk in a suitcase from New York.

Piotr Semka’s allegations were perhaps the most bizarre because he accused us of omitting topics that were mentioned in the documents that we provided and on which he based his review. Semka claimed that in the exhibitions “there is not a word about the massacre in Wola” during the Warsaw Uprising and also that we ignored the crimes committed against the Poles in Volhynia.

²⁰ Paweł Machcewicz et al., *Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsk. Program funkcjonalno- użytkowy wystawy głównej*, Gdańsk.pl, January 2016, <https://www.gdansk.pl/download/2016-04/71915.pdf>.

In fact, the exhibitions did show the slaughter in Wola and the extermination of Poles in Volhynia—the latter in a dedicated room. He did not notice that both topics were noted in the “Outline of the Exhibitions” in which we even included photos and descriptions of relevant artifacts: “a child’s shoe belonging to one of the victims of the slaughter of civilian residents of Warsaw during the Warsaw Uprising” and “medallions found in the graves of Poles murdered by the Ukraine Insurgent Army in Ostrówki and Wola Ostrowiecka.”

“Somehow, however, the Battle of Monte Cassino disappears,” Semka raged. “Yes! This is not a mistake—in the design of the exhibition of the Polish Museum of the Second World War there is no, unless I missed something, not a word about Monte Cassino.” Indeed, he did miss something. Monte Cassino and all other battles in which Polish soldiers participated were shown in the exhibition, and the II Corps, fighting on the Italian front, was mentioned in the said “Outline of the Exhibitions,” in which we posted pictures of personal objects of General Władysław Anders, its commander, illustrating this story.

In turn, Piotr Niwiński claimed that the exhibition was not modern. “The interactivity is practically nonexistent (I counted three stations, altogether).” A little further on, he wrote, “I appeal for interactivity once more.” It was very important to him, and he repeated this issue many times in what was not, after all, a long review. In fact, there were 240 interactive multimedia stations on display, and each of them was described in the materials we provided to the Ministry of Culture.

For us, after working so many years on the exhibitions, something else was striking: the reviewers’ complete misunderstanding of what a museum is, how its narrative is built, and the role of the artifacts. None of the three reviewers had any museum experience, and this was evident in almost every sentence they wrote. They treated the exhibition as a large book or even an encyclopedia; they demanded the inclusion of a huge amount of information, apparently not understanding that a museum story is built through examples, symbols, and objects.

More important were the allegations of a general nature, which reflected a real ideological dispute and a completely different understanding of both history and the role of museums. One of the most important was the allegation that we devoted too little attention to the fate of Poland, that Poland was apparently “obscured” by other nations. It was in fact the same thread that had figured already in the attacks on the Museum in 2008 (Semka and Żaryn also played a leading role then) and during the above-mentioned meeting of the Sejm’s Committee on Culture. Jan Żaryn concluded in his review, “The authors made a strategic choice, in my opinion, in which the Polish point of view on history was ‘buried’ in pseudo-universalism, a version of universal history.” These were essentially

the same charges he had hurled during the Sejm's committee hearing: a lack of sensitivity to and detachment from national tradition. "The authors, therefore, tried to send a signal that identification with the drama of the Second World War was possible if we approached this period on an individual level, without referring to national myths, the memory of the collective experience of Poles. Of course, no one proposes such an operation when analyzing the Holocaust, to which only Jews were subject. As if the Poles did not have their own experience (including memories and myths) and it was not worth showing this on Polish soil." The review ends with his own concept of what the museum should first of all show: "who we are today and why we are the way we are: freedom lovers, Catholics, patriots, etc., and above all proud of our history."

Piotr Semka also accused us of harmful "universalism" and sent us to Brussels, just as Jan Pospieszalski had done in his parliamentary speech:

One could understand this concept if it was a museum in Brussels about the fate of Europe. But this museum is to be created in a country that is often considered to be Hitler's helper in the Holocaust. Such a country should care about commemorating the glory of Polish arms and the martyrdom of Poles. Only when we make sure that a tourist from London or Vienna gets to know our contribution to the defeat of Nazism, will it be possible to expand the exhibition with more universal themes. It is also difficult to remain silent about the fact that presenting the Second World War as the anonymous suffering of all Europeans is beneficial to the Germans and the nations that collaborated with the Third Reich.

In the exhibition, Semka saw "intrusive reminders of Germans as victims at every step." He unequivocally defined the place of the Museum's creators on the ideological map of Poland: "The distrust of some of our elites toward the concept of historical policy proposed by the Warsaw Rising Museum seems almost absurd. The degree of suspicion about this concept is amazing." He ended his review with strong conclusions: "But let the authors of the concept not be surprised that there is an expectation that the fate of our lands and our ancestors will be clearly brought to the forefront... . The present concept meets the expectations of the Polish Second World War story only to a limited extent. The exhibition requires a significant remake."

I have always been impressed by the self-confidence of people who grant themselves the right to decide what is the "Polish point of view" (like Jarosław Kaczyński when he spoke about our Museum) and the "Polish story" and what is not. Others cannot present a different interpretation of Polish history or experience "Polishness" differently; they are simply excluded.

The reviewers also alleged that the exhibition was antiwar. As Niwiński wrote, "With the main emphasis placed on the horror of war, depicted through the fate of the civilian population, we get a rather one-sided picture. It has

shown in a rather selective manner ... the dark side of the war, but what arose out of it is far away in the background. You can specify this as the dominance of unhappiness over other traits. It would be most appropriate to summarize the whole message with the phrase from the Communist era: No more war.”

Both Niwiński and Semka demanded more military history. They reacted negatively to devoting so much attention to the sacrifice of the civilian population, by which the achievements of Polish soldiers were diminished, as was the notion that war “strengthens character.”²¹

Rafał Wnuk and I prepared a response to the reviews, published in an abbreviated version in a daily newspaper, *Rzeczpospolita*. We pointed out that the vast majority of the allegedly omitted topics were in fact included in the exhibitions, but we also referred to more general allegations and issues. We explained why, as one reviewer charged, ours was a “museum of martyrdom” in which so much space was devoted to the suffering of the civilian population:

During the war over 200,000 Polish citizens died fighting with weapons in hand; we recall their fate many times in the museum and we pay homage to them. Civilian losses were, however, incomparably greater. Over 5 million people were murdered: about 3 million Polish Jews and over 2 million ethnic Poles. They generally died a more terrible death than a soldier’s death: in gas chambers, concentration camps, executions as in Pomerania in 1939, in Palmiry, or in Wola during the Warsaw Uprising. It astounds us that the creators of the museum being built in Poland, the country that suffered such terrible losses in the war, must explain themselves for adopting this perspective in the creation of the exhibitions.

We also reminded readers that the message “No more war” was not formulated by Communist propagandists but in fact had a deeply Christian meaning. Pope Paul VI proclaimed it during his first visit to the United Nations in 1965, and then John Paul II repeated the message. We remembered the words on the war spoken by the Polish pope in 2003: “The size of the losses suffered, and even more so, the amount of suffering inflicted on people, families and environments, is really difficult to calculate.... . The war was not only on the front lines, but as a total war it struck whole societies. Whole communities were deported. Thousands of peo-

²¹ Piotr Niwiński, Kierownik Zakładu Nauki o Cywilizacji, *Recenzja programu funkcjonalno- użytkowego wystawy głównej przygotowanej przez Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku autorstwa Prof. Dr. Hab. Pawła Machciewicza, Dr. Hab. Piotra M. Majewskiego, Dr. Janusza Marszałka, Dr. Hab. Prof. KUL Rafała Wnuka, Stan na styczeń 2016; Piotr Semka, Recenzja dokumentu “Program funkcjonalno- użytkowy wystawy głównej” przygotowanej przez Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańskim przez zespół: Prof. Dr. Hab. Paweł Machciewicz, Dr. Hab. Piotr M. Majewski, Dr. Janusz Marszałek, Dr. Hab. Prof. KUL Rafał Wnuk. Dokument datowany na styczeń 2016; Jan Żaryn, Historyk, Recenzja wewnętrzna: Program funkcjonalno- użytkowy wystawy głównej. Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańskim, 2016.*

ple were victims of prisons, torture and executions. People who were beyond the theater of war died as victims of bombing and systematic terror, the organized means of which were concentration labor camps, which turned into death camps.” Wnuk and I declared, “This vision of war, which Piotr Niwiński would certainly consider as too ‘negative,’ and the fate of the civilian population is close to the hearts of the creators of the exhibitions of the Museum of the Second World War.”

We also pointed out that Piotr Semka and Jan Żaryn had fought the Museum of the Second World War from the very beginning, so the minister of culture had known in advance what the content of the commissioned reviews would be. These reviews had nothing to do with scholarly reliability, as Piotr Gliński, being a professor of sociology, had to know well; rather, they were an attempt to justify the planned steps against the Museum. At the end of our response we appealed to the minister of culture, though without any internal conviction, to allow us to open the museum as planned and to let public opinion be the judge.

We live in a country ruled indivisibly by one political option, which obviously has a mandate coming from democratic elections. It can create all the facilities it promises, which will shape the awareness of Poles: the Museum of Polish History, museums of cursed soldiers (there are already two established), western lands,²² and eastern borderlands.²³ Can there not be space in the museum landscape for the Museum of the Second World War in the form created by historians whose competence, regardless of the differences of views, no one has questioned?

If the current government will not allow the opening of the exhibitions, already practically complete, this will be the most intrusive interference, unprecedented in a free Poland, in the autonomy of cultural institutions and the sphere of public history. This type of preventive censorship has not taken place since 1989. Sooner or later it will ricochet onto other institutions, including those created by the current authorities. After all, nobody [from the previous Civic Platform government] changed the exhibitions of the Warsaw Rising Museum, the oeuvre of Lech Kaczyński, whose director was an MP and politician of the Law and Justice Party. We are also inquiring if Minister Gliński really considers forced administrative solutions, characteristic of authoritarian systems rather than a pluralistic democracy, as the best way to build Poles’ historical consciousness.²⁴

A statement by Minister Gliński’s in Sejm can be considered a response: “The content of the exhibition of such an important museum as the Museum of the

²² The territories that Poland took over from Germany in 1945.

²³ The territories that Poland lost to the Soviet Union in 1944 and 1945.

²⁴ Paweł Machcewicz and Rafał Wnuk, “Muzeum zwykłych ludzi,” *Rzeczpospolita*, August 7, 2016.

Second World War is not a matter of the tastes of even outstanding Polish and foreign historians or the tastes of ministers. The content of this exhibition should express the basic assumptions of historical policy in accordance with the Polish *raison d'état*... . The concept must articulate, in a deeper sense of this word, the position of these politicians who currently have a social mandate regarding historical politics.”²⁵

By this logic, those who win elections have the right to change the content of museum exhibitions and maybe also school textbooks. Such an understanding of the public role of history and museums deprives them of any autonomy from the world of politics. This autonomy, after all, is one of the important elements of the democratic state in which we have lived since 1989, distinguishing it from the times of the Communist dictatorship. Responding to arguments such as those presented in the Sejm by Minister Gliński, I repeatedly asked the rhetorical question, Do we want to live in a country where after each election, a new government, having a social mandate, changes the content of exhibitions and even removes uncomfortable museums? I also proposed an intellectual exercise for supporters of the merger of the museums. I asked them to imagine a situation in which the mayor of Warsaw, a politician of the Civic Platform, creates a “Museum of the 1944 Rising in Wola,” which undertakes no activities. After a few months, someone argues that it is not rational for two museums on the same subject to operate in one city. The newly created museum is to be merged with the Warsaw Rising Museum, associated by the general public with the Law and Justice Party. The director of the latter loses his job, and the exhibitions, criticized many times, are to be changed. This scenario elicited no reaction from supporters of the forced merger facing the Museum of the Second World War, perhaps because they were convinced that Law and Justice would rule forever and did not believe that the mechanism, once put in motion, could also be used in the future against them.

I invited the reviewers and also Minister Gliński to Gdańsk for a public debate about the exhibitions, sending them the newly published catalog and urging them to familiarize themselves with the actual content of the exhibitions: I reminded them of detailed materials that we had already forwarded to the Ministry of Culture and which evidently were not read by the reviewers. By the beginning of September, they had declined. This did not surprise me much. It was easier to pass covert judgments than to publicly confront the arguments of his-

²⁵ “Gliński: Wystawa Muzeum II Wojny Światowej musi być zgodna z polską racją stanu,” Polska Agencja Prasowa, September 14, 2016, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/gliinski-wystawa-muzeum-ii-wojny-musi-byc-zgodna-z-polska-racja-stanu>.

torians who had worked on the exhibitions for eight years, and to do that just before the opening of the Museum, which was now so uncertain. There was also no answer to my and Rafał Wnuk's article in *Rzeczpospolita*. The Ministry of Culture, however, stood by the reviewers and issued an official statement. It praised the research achievements of the reviewers; our answers were called "unreliable." It claimed, "Public statements that the reviewers did not use all the materials necessary for the review are untrue." The official statement was not without a warning: "The minister of culture and national heritage calls for the preservation of integrity in the debate about the Museum of the Second World War... . Offending recognized historians in public does not fall within the limits of such a debate."²⁶ This was yet another interesting contribution to what a "reliable" debate should look like and who should define its rules.

The revelation of the content of the reviews caused quite a stir in public opinion. Allegations that the Museum showed too much suffering, that it painted too "black" a picture of the war with too few "bright," "positive" sides, and that the war's "character-building" qualities were ignored, provoked numerous commentaries. In an article titled "Oh, How Pretty Is the War," renowned journalist Marcin Meller wrote,

For almost a decade I have described various wars, from the Caucasus through ex-Yugoslavia to Africa... . I never had the right words to describe the hell of war, the fate of people lost in the slaughter, murder, and extermination. And maybe that is why I am completely uninterested in various historical and war reenactments that seem to me infinitely infantile and mindless. And I cannot stand resolute and optimistic tales about the Warsaw Uprising. (Which didn't we almost win! Only, bad luck, some 200,000 people happened to die.) Because there is nothing beautiful in war. Because war is not *The Four Troopers from a Tank Division*²⁷ or even *Time of Honor*²⁸ but a dehumanizing hell. And now I read that the Law and Justice reviewers employed by the minister of culture, Piotr Gliński, muddle the idea of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk because "the museum carries mainly the message of the war as exceptional tragedy. No positive features are exhibited, such as pa-

²⁶ "Oświadczenie MKiDN w sprawie nierzetelnych zarzutów kierownictwa Muzeum II Wojny Światowej," MKiDN, July 18, 2016, <http://www.mkidn.gov.pl/pages/posts/oswiadczenie-mkidn-w-sprawie-nierzetelnych-zarzutow-kierownictwa-muzeum-ii-wojny-swiatowej-6456.php>; "MKiDN: Recenzenci wystawy Muzeum II Wojny – rzetelni i rzeczowi," Polska Agencja Prasowa, July 19, 2016, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/mkidn-recenzenci-wystawy-muzeum-ii-wojny-rzetelni-i-rzeczowi>.

²⁷ A Polish series about the wartime adventures of four young men and their dog, Szarik, serving in the 1st Polish Army in 1944 and 1945, which fought alongside the Red Army. The series, produced between 1966 and 1970, attained enormous popularity and was frequently shown in reruns until 1989.

²⁸ The series *Time of Honor*, shown between 2008 and 2013, told the story of Polish paratroopers who were trained in England and fought as part of Warsaw's underground resistance.

triotism and sacrifice.” How many times have I heard from ideologues and those inflicting slaughter in various corners of the world about these “positive traits” of war, the “hardening of man,” about which Niwiński, Semka, and Żaryn care so much.²⁹

Those of the generation that had survived the war also spoke. Joanna Muszkowska-Penson said,

This is a harmful sentence. I saw the entire Second World War in its worst acts... . As early as March 1941 I was arrested in my hometown of Warsaw for conspiracy in the Union of Armed Struggle. I went through interrogations and beating at Pawiak prison and Gestapo headquarters at Szucha Street. I came to the Ravensbrück camp, in one of the first transports, where I remained for four years until its liquidation. Most of my friends did not survive. War destroys everything. It is total destruction, including psychological. Why is one young man supposed to kill another whom he does not know and who did nothing to him? War is always deeply immoral and unjust. The best die, those most willing to sacrifice, those in the front line. There is nothing as bad as war.³⁰

Aleksander Tarnawski, aka “Upłaz,” the last Polish *Cichociemny*³¹ still alive, was blunter than Professor Joanna Penson. He encouraged Piotr Semka and Piotr Niwiński to go to Syria, join the troops of one of the fighting factions, and get to know what war was and how it “strengthens.”³²

Certainly not everyone agreed with such assessments, and the reviewers were not alone in their notion of what war was and how it should be shown. Over the preceding decade, renowned poet and writer Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz had become the bard of the Right. In his book on the Warsaw Uprising, he put forward the thesis that this massacre had cemented the Poles as a nation, allowing them to survive the postwar decades. Throughout Rymkiewicz’s book one can see the fascination with death, suffering, and sacrifice of life for the homeland.³³

Human losses and suffering were by no means central to the story of the Warsaw Rising Museum, visited annually by several hundred thousand people. Regardless of the message of its exhibitions, from the very beginning the museum conducted many promotional and educational activities that created the

²⁹ Marcin Meller, “Jak to na wojence ładnie,” *Newsweek*, July 18–24, 2016.

³⁰ “Nie macie prawa niszczyć Lecha. Z Joanną Muszkowską-Penson Rozmawia Marek Górlikowski,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 4–5, 2017.

³¹ The so-called *Cichociemni*, or “Silent Unseen,” were elite paratroopers of the Polish Army in Exile, trained in Great Britain during World War II to conduct special operations in Nazi-occupied Poland.

³² *Wojna o Muzeum Wojny*, TVN 24, July 29, 2017.

³³ See Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Kinderszenen* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2008).

image of the uprising as a joyous experience of young, beautiful people who should find imitators among contemporary youth. “For 11 years the museum has shown the uprising as a great adventure, and it will continue to show it as such over the next years,” wrote a journalist in the renowned Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* to mark an anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising.³⁴ One should add to this pop culture and even the commercialization of the memory of the uprising: a flood of coloring books, puzzles, mugs, T-shirts, and other ephemera with symbols of the uprising. Some of them are sold in the Warsaw Rising Museum. This certainly is not Tomasz Łubieński’s perspective in his book on the uprising: “Not belonging in this legend: the girls raped in Zieleniak concentration camp, the boys shot on Narutowicz Square, the wounded murdered in hospitals, the children, women, and elderly killed just because they could not hide from the bombs or, if they did manage to get to the basement, were buried alive there or torn apart by grenades that the enemy threw through basement windows.”³⁵

A separate phenomenon, one on a European scale, is the growing popularity of the historical reenactment movement in Poland. Thousands of people put on uniforms, take up dummy arms, and act out battle scenes from the war, often the Warsaw Uprising, or episodes from the history of the “cursed soldiers.” Thousands of others watch those television shows that generally depict war and struggle as something very attractive and spectacular, revealing the best human characteristics. In this very superficial image of the war, there is no room for reflection on the price that is paid for resistance and heroism; wounds and death are purely orchestrated and theatrical. There is room, however, for fascination with militaries, uniforms, and weapons.³⁶ Even the Catholic Church in Poland felt disturbed by the scale and the nature of this phenomenon. The Council for Social Affairs at the Polish Episcopate published a document on the Christian shape of patriotism, which among other things addressed the communities of historical reenactors: “When preparing such productions, one should remember the *mysteria* of human death and suffering, fear and heroism, whose dignity and mystery cannot always be properly portrayed in mass, open-air presentations.... . The staging, necessarily symbolically simplified, cannot express the whole

³⁴ Kalina Błażejowska, “Powstańcze przebieranki,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, August 14, 2016. See also the conversation with Jan Oldakowski in “Zakładanie opasek to nie hołd,” *Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn Stołeczny*, July 29, 2016.

³⁵ Tomasz Łubieński, *Ani triumf ani zgon* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 2004), 42–43.

³⁶ See Tomasz Szlendak, ed., *Dziedzictwo w akcji. Rekonstrukcja historyczna jako sposób uczestnictwa w kulturze* (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2012).

drama, and sometimes the cruelty of historical situations.” Another suggestion by the episcopate was much more universal and somewhat referred to the dispute about the depiction of the war in our Museum: “War, although it often reveals human greatness and heroism, is not a colorful tale or adventure, but a drama of suffering and evil that should always be prevented.”³⁷

On top of all this, there was the cult of the “cursed soldiers,” the main element of the historical policy of Law and Justice from the moment it took power in 2015, but which was also evident even earlier among the Right.³⁸ In every possible way, politicians of the ruling camp and the media they controlled promoted the soldiers of the postwar underground as a model for today’s young Poles, excluding all other, especially “civilian,” ways of serving the homeland. Countless concerts, festivals, and school assemblies were devoted to the “cursed.” Films were made about them; they became patrons of Territorial Defense units, voluntary training groups that support the regular army. All that seemed to remain of the complicated reality of the 1940s was the imperative that after the end of the war, one should have gone to the forest with weapons to fight against the invader.

This understanding and emotional perception of history must have clashed with the message of our Museum, with its nonmilitary perspective focused on the experience of the civilian population, showing the war above all as a terrible tragedy. Of course, we showed it also as a time of the highest heroism and dedication, which the reviewers and other critics did not want to or could not see. In essence, this dispute had much deeper roots and was embedded more in Polish tradition than in the ideological conflicts of the last dozen or so years. Maria Janion, an eminent Polish cultural historian, wrote about a romantic cult of struggles and uprisings that dominated Polish consciousness in the nineteenth century, characterizing it as “the conviction of the superiority of that which is ‘military,’ ‘heroic,’ and ‘poetic’ over that which is ‘civilian,’ ‘ordinary’ and ‘mundane.’” As Janion pointed out, “The deeply anticivilian and romantic orientation of public awareness worried those who during the partition of Poland in the nineteenth century chose antimilitary, cultural, and economic endeavor.”³⁹ However, this romantic cult of an armed struggle occupied a central place in the Pol-

³⁷ “Chrześcijański kształt patriotyzmu. Dokument Konferencji Episkopatu przygotowany przez Radę ds. Społecznych,” Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, April 27, 2017, <https://episkopat.pl/en/chrzescijanski-ksztalt-patriotyzmu-dokument-konferencji-episkopatu-polski-przygotowany-przez-rade-ds-społecznych>.

³⁸ See Rafał Wnuk, “Wokół mitu ‘żołnierzy wyklętych,’” *Przegląd Polityczny* 135 (2016): 184–187.

³⁹ Maria Janion, *Placz generała. Eseje o wojnie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1998), 25–27.

ish historical memory and understanding of patriotism, which the Second World War only strengthened.

Attempts to broaden this memory and this understanding to include the experiences of the civilian population have usually met with resistance, shock, and disappointment. Stefan Chwin has even written about the taboo of the “civil voice” in Polish culture and literature.⁴⁰ A telling example was the attacks on a poet, Miron Biały, after the publication of his *Diary of the Warsaw Uprising* in 1970. He was reprimanded for not fighting (in fact he volunteered but was not accepted into the Home Army), for trying to survive. He was ridiculed as an “outsider” and called “Mironek” (a diminutive of his first name), a little child who does not understand anything about the fight surrounding him and is only preoccupied with his own mundane matters. The testimony given by the author was irrelevant to his critics, Maria Janion noted. “Biały lived through the entire 63-day long Gehenna of the Warsaw residents. He was not spared much (for example, he was not used as a human shield by German tanks attacking the positions of insurgents, but he did hear a lot about that from those who were). It is impossible to enumerate all the martyrdoms of the population—the *Diary* mostly consists of them. In this doomsday world, a sobbing child is calmed down with the words, ‘Do not cry, you will not live anyway.’”⁴¹

Still, all this was too mundane, less valuable and patriotic than the armed struggle, in which the narrator and other heroes of the *Diary* did not participate, although they were in the middle of it, their lives threatened by it. A similar attitude could be found in those criticizing and even discounting our Museum as a “museum of martyrdom” or “Museum of the Fate of the Civilian Population During the Second World War,” as one reviewer wrote. Biały’s perspective was considered lesser and inferior, and Rymkiewicz’s vision appealed more to the imagination. In his book *Kinderszenen*, the latter warned Poles that they should be ready to fight, when the German Tiger tanks again, as in August 1944, appear in the Warsaw neighborhood of Krakowskie Przedmieście.⁴²

And what will happen if the Tiger tanks do not show up? Will we just wait for them, and will this readiness be the main measure of patriotism? In our Museum, one of the most extensive sections was the story of the Polish Underground State, a grassroots movement, a result of thousands of social initiatives conducted mainly by civilians. This phenomenon of self-organization—service for the common good, not necessarily with a weapon in hand—is still insuffi-

⁴⁰ Stefan Chwin, “Strefy chronione,” *Res Publica*, October 1995.

⁴¹ Janion, *Placz generala*, 127.

⁴² Rymkiewicz, *Kinderszenen*, 65.

ciently present in Polish historical memory, obscured by the story of military struggle. Nor is it a strong component of the contemporary dominant model of patriotism, in which mundane work for the community is not as highly valued as the hypothetical readiness to die for it.