Museal Games and Emotional Truths:
Creating Polish National Identity at the Warsaw Rising Museum

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The Warsaw Rising Museum (WRM), opened in Warsaw in 2004 to commemorate the 1944 rebellion by Polish citizen-soldiers against Nazi occupiers, is considered the first modern historical museum in Poland. During the ten years since its opening, it has had a significant influence not only on public imaginations of the Rising but also subsequent museum trends in Poland. Using Anna Wieczorkiewicz’s concept of the “museal game” in which meaning is produced jointly by the museum institution and its visitors, we address the following questions: what meanings does the WRM have for its various audiences, and how has it come to have these meanings? Drawing on analysis of the museum’s founding documents and press coverage of the museum, interviews with visitors, and a review of scholarly literature, we seek to understand the universe of meanings within which the WRM has become a sociocultural phenomenon. We argue that the strategies employed by the museum encompass interconnected political and poetical dimensions. Specifically, we discuss how the museum attempts to foster Polish national identity by evoking personal identification among visitors by appealing to their emotions. We examine the range of meanings the WRM has been given by various participants in the museal game—museum originators, “public voices” including scholars and journalists, visitors, and ourselves as researchers. In doing so, we give special attention to the notion of nostalgia—how it has been operationalized by the museum planners, and how it is received by the audience, in the service of promoting personal and emotional identification.

Keywords: national identity; collective memory; politics of memory; Warsaw Rising Museum; nostalgia

Introduction: The Warsaw Rising and Its Museum

Since the political transformation of 1989, Poland has experienced a revival of memory. Issues of commemoration—often laden with tension and sometimes resulting in open conflicts—have come to the forefront. The opening of the Warsaw
Rising Museum (WRM, Polish: Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego) in 2004, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Rising, is a fascinating case in point. The story of the Warsaw Rising of 1944 was until recent years not widely known outside Poland, and it is still frequently confused there with the Ghetto Uprising of 1943.

After five years of occupation by the Nazis, and with Soviet troops approaching from the East, the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), an underground army of citizen-soldiers, led a rebellion to liberate the city. At five in the afternoon on 1 August 1944—a time still commemorated each year by sirens ringing out in the city and people standing still for one minute—the Home Army put their plan into action, attacking Nazi installations around the city. The fighters, consisting of civilians armed with captured and improvised weapons, fought off the Nazi army with little outside support for sixty-three days before signing a capitulation order on 2 October. After the Rising, Hitler ordered the destruction of the city, and by January 1945, eighty-five percent of Warsaw’s buildings were destroyed, and only a few thousand people, hiding amid the ruins, remained.

Considered in terms of destruction and loss of human life, the Warsaw Rising—with nearly two hundred thousand insurgents and civilians killed, almost as many others injured or sent to concentration and forced labor camps, and the city of Warsaw turned into rubble—was a tragedy. The large number of books and movies inspired by and dedicated to the Warsaw Rising serves as evidence of how great an impact this historical event has had on the Polish collective imagination. According to historian Marcin Kula, “No society would be able to accept the fact that so many people perished and the city was almost completely destroyed, in vain. There was a need to acknowledge the value of this sacrifice.”

As we shall demonstrate in greater detail, the Rising has taken on layers of meaning in the Polish collective imagination far beyond that of a tragic loss of life. For one thing, to commemorate the Rising, the losses that followed it had to be given meaning in order for the Rising to be legitimated in collective memory. The contemporary story of the Rising is also incomplete without an account of how its memory has been shaped and reshaped, and often distorted, over time. As John Bodnar writes in Remaking America, “Public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” The story of the Rising displayed in the museum arises in large part from the vernacular stories that were maintained in private contexts throughout the communist period, in opposition to the compromised official memory, but also takes into account the official distortions that characterized history throughout this time.

The WRM represents the most visible public memorial of the Rising, and as such, it shapes the memory of the event. The museum is modern and interactive and, as we shall demonstrate, it tells the story of the Rising in an emotionally compelling, but also controversial, manner because of the version of the past it popularizes, the mythologies and symbols it draws on, and their potential implications for Poland’s present and future national identity. In the ten years since it opened, the museum has...
come to represent a transformation in both the way history is presented to the public in Poland and the touristic landscape of Warsaw. It is promoted as a “must-see” and as “one of Poland’s best museums” in many guidebooks and websites introducing Warsaw to Polish and foreign tourists (see Figure 1).

Clearly, people have been taking this advice—by the museum’s own measure, it has had nearly 4.6 million visitors in the ten years it has been open, including more than 240,000 students who have taken part in its workshops, and it has been covered in more than ten thousand press articles. It has also been influential in shaping ideas of what a contemporary museum should look like and include. From academic and popular media perspectives, the WRM represents a caesura in the landscape of contemporary historical museums in Poland. It is cited in many publications as the first major “multimedia” museum in Poland, inaugurating a new era of Polish historical museums—setting a precedent and creating a point of comparison for other such institutions. Given its strong influence, we intend to explore what kinds of meanings the WRM produces, and through what kinds of processes this occurs.

Playing the Museal Game: Making Sense of the Museum

In this article we address, on one hand, Maurice Halbwachs’s thesis that representations of the past are shaped by the conditions of the present as they reflect the contemporary society’s norms and values, and, on the other, the vantage point of the new museum studies that suggests that researchers should consider the active roles
of museum institutions as well as visitors in the processes of creating representations of the past and solidifying the meanings of memories. In order to understand the WRM as a sociocultural phenomenon, we focus our attention on the interaction between the exhibition and the viewers. This is based on the concept that meaning is produced in the performative action of visiting the museum from the perspective of the present sociocultural and historical context.

A number of authors have theorized the nature of the museum–visitor interaction and the process by which meaning is produced in this interaction. Roman Ingarden began formulating a model of the production of meaning in “art works” broadly conceived, including, by extension, museums, as early as the 1930s in Poland. For Ingarden, an art work cannot be reduced to its material aspects but nor does it exist purely in the realm of ideas, as we experience it through its physical reality. The work can only be apprehended through specific, dynamic processes of concretization in which the viewer individually experiences the work as an aesthetic object rather than a material one, ceasing to perceive subjectively the otherwise present gaps, areas of indeterminacy, and imperfections in the work. The viewer, with his or her unique traits and experiences, “fills in” the meaning in interaction with the work, and only thus does an object take on significance.

Umberto Eco, in The Limits of Interpretation, addresses the possibilities for interpretation of a work on one hand, and the constraints placed upon it on the other, by the respective “intentions” of author, reader, and text. A text is conceived by an author, who contributes his or her intentions, but the text may also convey things the author is not aware of. Interpretation relies on the actual reader who, based on their
own competence and experience, makes conjectures about what the text might mean. Interpretation is channeled in particular directions, as one can only respond to what is presented, but it is an open process on each side, leaving the possibility for unexpected and idiosyncratic interpretations.

In the context of museums specifically, Anna Wieczorkiewicz has used the term “museal game” to describe a similar process to what Ingarden and Eco describe. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea that a work of art comes into being through a game whose essential components are the reactions of the audience, Wieczorkiewicz proposes to study the dialogical relationship between the exhibition and its viewers.16 As she explains,

> The conception of sense is imprinted in the museum script and manifests itself in the claims that the museum exhibition puts forward towards the audience. But a conception of sense is not yet the sense per se. The sense will only come into being when a viewer or a participant appears . . . for as Gadamer put it “viewing is a certain type of participation.”17

Although, as we have seen, Wieczorkiewicz is neither the first nor the only author to theorize an interactive model of meaning-making between object and viewer, we use her “museal game” terminology throughout the paper, as it applies these ideas most explicitly to the museum context. What these theories have in common is that they address the idea that meaning is not wholly given in the display or narrative put forth by the museum’s originators and curators, but nor is it entirely dependent on the visitor. The museum’s display delimits a range of “correct” interpretations, but the “success” of the museum’s argument relies on visitors’ imaginations and a shared set

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**Figure 3**

Rising participants appear in large-scale photographs on the wall of the museum, emphasizing the individual lives sacrificed in the service of the Rising
of cultural assumptions between museum creators and visitors. For although curators are endowed with the power of creating museum exhibitions and determining the scope of visitors’ activity, visitors interpret and respond to the exhibitions intellectually and emotionally according to their own life experiences, knowledge, and social position, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Meanwhile, the conception of sense put forward by the curators may be very different.18

In this article, we analyze the museal game as an interactive process of meaning-making that has taken place between the WRM and several distinct groups of visitors and commenters—an approach that makes evident the cultural, generational, and mediated dimensions of specific concretizations of meaning. We also include an analysis of public discussions of the WRM as it has appeared in popular and academic press articles, since journalists and social researchers, by engaging in the museal game and by quoting others who participate in the museal game, create and disseminate new interpretations of the museum through their writing.

Scope of the Paper

In order to trace the ways in which the WRM’s museal game plays out in practice, we have organized our paper to reflect the sets of meanings the museum is given by its various stakeholders. While we do so to distinguish these aspects of the museal game analytically, we recognize that these sets of meanings are interrelated and mutually influential, and so there is some thematic overlap among sections. We discuss the museum’s intended meanings, public commentary on the museum, our own interpretations of the museum and its contemporary significance, and the meanings attributed to the museum by various groups of visitors.
Analysis of Archival Documents and Statements by the WRM Directors

Our study is, to a large extent, based on research conducted by Monika Żychlińska in the years 2005 and 2006. She first perused the WRM’s archives to reconstruct the structure and meaning of the museal narrative, as intended by the museum’s originators. An analysis of programmatic and statutory documents, minutes from meetings of museum staff, promotional materials, and information directed at the media helped to identify the museum’s mission, its vision of history, and the representations of the Rising it popularizes, as well as the social functions of memory it addresses. An additional question was how the exhibition contents were translated into the museum’s visual language and the architectural–visual plan of its permanent exhibition.

This body of research on the museum’s intended meanings was complemented by an October 2004 interview published in Gazeta Stołeczna with museum director Jan Oldakowski and an interview we conducted in August 2013 with vice director Paweł Ukielski. We asked him about the planning, strategic decisions, and political significance surrounding the development of the WRM. Our questions dealt with, among other topics, the reasons behind the museum’s English name (“Rising” vs. “Uprising”), the political significance of the Rising for contemporary Polish collective identity, the museum’s narrative strategy, and the museum’s intended meanings for local, national, and international visitors. We also discussed the nine years of the WRM’s activity, including the influence it has had on reshaping the memory of the Warsaw Rising and the commemorative practices around it, as well as the museum’s agenda and plans for the future.
Second, we have examined the news media coverage surrounding the WRM, particularly during the time of its building, leading up to its opening. Museums, like media, offer accounts of a particular topic or event that translate the otherwise inaccessible into something familiar and comprehensible. In doing so, they present themselves as authoritative; however, the account is itself ideologically inflected. As museums come to present themselves as entertainment institutions in addition to educational, archival, cultural, and scientific spaces, there is an increasing emphasis on marketing and attracting visitors.

Media, especially local media, may thus promote and publicize the content and narratives of museum exhibitions. Accordingly, news coverage of a museum helps to construct an image of it for the public before it is opened, building visitors’ enthusiasm and marking it as a particular kind of space. The agenda-setting theory posits, first, that what the media portray as important tends to become salient in the minds of the public, and second, that what the media portray positively takes on a positive valence in public opinion. Zyglidopoulos et al. found that both high media visibility of museums and positive coverage contributed to higher visitor turnout. We thus incorporate an examination of the content of media representation of the WRM into our ethnographic analysis, examining the ways in which visitors’ idea of the museum is constructed ideologically before they experience it directly, providing further context for their interpretations of it.

We analyzed the content of the national and Warsaw editions of the three most popular daily newspapers in Poland at that time, Gazeta Wyborcza (Gazeta Stołeczna), Rzeczpospolita (Warszawa), and Życie (Życie w Stolicy), as well as the weekly national news magazines Polityka and Tygodnik Powszechny, published between 1
July and 5 October 2004. We are interested in the connections the media made between the museum’s opening and themes related to history as well as collective memory concerning the Rising. Specifically, we ask the following questions: how much press attention did the building and the opening of the WRM receive and what was the dominant tone of reporting? How was the museum portrayed in terms of its mission, message, form, and reception? And, in what ways did this information influence the narrative of the sixtieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Rising?

An additional interpretive layer in the museal game is provided by the academic analyses of the WRM as a social and cultural phenomenon that we also address in this section. The archival primary sources reflect planning of the future. The press coverage and interviews provide a “time capsule,” covering the museum during its development and opening. Finally, the academic articles by sociologists, anthropologists, and memory studies scholars addressing the WRM incorporate several years’ worth of analytic and critical distance from the museum’s immediate opening to reflect on its social and cultural role. Additionally, the audiences and purposes of the articles are different—whereas press articles are meant to inform a general audience and promote the museum, academic articles take a more critical stance.

Meta–Meaning Making

Researchers, ourselves included, are also participants in the museal game. Like museum visitors and popular press authors, we interpret the museum based on our own cultural identities, life experiences, and educational training (in our case as memory studies researchers). By analyzing archival documents, as well as academic
and popular discussions, drawing on relevant theories and offering our own perspective, we not only participate in the museal game, but also analyze the operation of the game itself. In presenting both our interpretations and those of others, we show that the museal game takes place not only between the museum and the visitor but within a broader hermeneutic universe of meaning. Within this universe, a variety of interpretations circulates and provides a context for new interpretations. Different museum visitors create their own interpretations by responding to, interacting with, and building upon the preexisting interpretations. Particular ways of interpreting the WRM, and the WRM’s status as an ongoing social and cultural phenomenon, can only be understood with an awareness of this broader context.

Therefore, we follow this section with our own interpretations of the WRM, focusing on the interplay between poetics and politics and on the museum’s use of nostalgia. From our perspective, although we distinguish them analytically, the interpretation of the museum’s political dimension—the ways in which traumatic past experience is refigured in order to reshape contemporary Polish identity—is inseparable from that of its poetical dimension, which concerns the ways in which meaning and emotional experience are produced through curators’ decisions regarding the ordering, composition, and choice of museal elements. To make apparent the connections between them, we use the concept of nostalgia, which in the WRM is used both to produce personal emotional investment and to shape patriotic citizens.

Interviews with Visitor Groups

Finally, to study the museum’s reception, Monika Żychlińska conducted interviews with three different visitor groups: former insurgents, students, and general visitors. Although the conversations varied—that is, the former insurgents shared their memories of the Warsaw Rising, whereas students referred to the museum class they attended—all informants talked about their assessment of the museum exhibition. More specifically, they were asked about the content and the form of the display—what they learnt from and how they felt about the history presented there, on what grounds they could relate to the Warsaw Rising and what this historical event meant to them, whether they liked the modern and interactive display techniques employed in the museum, and whether they were planning to return there, and if yes, with whom and on what occasion.

Memory of the Warsaw Rising in Historical Context

The opening of the WRM and its re-narrativizing of the events of the Warsaw Rising must be understood within a specific historical context—that of a democratic and post-communist Poland that became part of the European Union (EU) in 2004, and which was in need of new foundational mythologies for the nation. For Poland, as a new
member of the EU, communicating a sense of national pride and patriotism, and an image of Polish history that was their own, were especially important. The Warsaw Rising, already prominent in Polish historical consciousness as a fight for freedom associated with a democratic organization (the Polish Underground State), provided an excellent example of an event that could represent such a myth, as it could be framed as a universal fight for freedom in the face of threats from occupying powers.

It must be emphasized that under communist rule, the official history of the Warsaw Rising was subjected to distortion and censorship. The Soviet Union’s inaction in the face of Warsaw’s destruction called into question images of Polish–Soviet friendship. Thus, to account for this situation, official histories characterized the Rising as a crime on the part of the “bourgeois” government-in-exile. Some accounts even described the Home Army as a “fascist enterprise” that collaborated with the Germans, and the Warsaw Rising and its participants as a “criminal organization’ aimed at the “fraternal” Soviet Union.”

Accounts from the communist period, described in the WRM’s archive, emphasized a distinction between insurgents—the “tragic heroes” of the Rising, and the government-in-exile whose allegedly irresponsible decisions were claimed as the cause of the Rising.

Privately preserved memories of the Rising and other instances of resistance to authorities in Eastern Europe—cultivated unofficially among families and friends and in spaces such as churches that were outside government control—contributed to a complex and multifaceted public historical record following the opening of discussion. Few people outside Poland had, or have today, detailed knowledge of the Rising, although it was and is considered a defining event in the nation’s history by many within Poland.

Following the end of communism and the first partially free Polish elections in 1989, a more open atmosphere for the discussion of historical events prevailed. However, the process of accounting with historical controversies did not take place immediately. Around the year 2000, a number of heated public debates concerning history—its significance for the symbolic construction of the Polish state and national Polish identity, reached their peak. Among the most salient and controversial of these discussions were the ones concerning “historical policy” (polityka historyczna)—a term often used in Polish media and public discourse to refer to a particular set of political programs concerning government policy toward the writing and dissemination of history. The role of government in producing and publicizing history, and the specifics of the histories that should be promoted, remains a contentious topic.

The Museum’s Intended Meanings: The Rhetoric of Transformation

Information about the WRM’s mission, the character and form of its exhibition, and interpretations of history that are presented there can be found in the museum’s
statutory documents, along with opinions written by historians, art critics, and other experts the museum directors consulted in the process of developing the museum. It is important to note that those documents do not explicitly address the notions of museal “politics” and “poetics” that we employ in this article, they do not state explicitly that a visit to the museum is supposed to be a nostalgic experience, and they explain what the museum should look like aesthetically and technologically only in very general terms.

During the weekly progress meetings, attended by the museum’s team of originators and curators, surprisingly little attention was devoted to discussing the ideological aspects of the museum’s mission and the exhibitionary strategies. This might be explained by the fact that the team was working under extreme time constraints to meet the deadline. The decision to build the museum was made by the then Mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński, only a year before the sixtieth anniversary of the Rising. The minutes from those meetings document the team’s sense of urgency to make decisions about technical and logistical, rather than political and aesthetical, choices.

The museum is referred to as a long-overdue “homage to the insurgents,” but at the same time, its main target group is identified as primary school, high school, and university students, followed by the insurgents and their families, Polish and foreign tourists, researchers, and active military personnel.33 Identifying young people as the primary target group emphasizes the educational role of the museum. The creators of the museum decided that the exhibition should provide a message and a range of information and activities directed at each target group of visitors; however, it should be especially appealing to the youngsters’ sense of aesthetics, making the museum an attractive place that they would often revisit.34

Before starting to work on creating the WRM, its originators visited several museums world famous for their innovative, interactive, and narrative manners of presenting history that confront the visitors with reconstructions and engage them emotionally with exhibition content. These included the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Imperial War Museum in London, and Terror Háza in Budapest.35 Contrary to many traditional museums, the WRM was planned as a complex educational, cultural, and even recreational center. The programmatic documents specify that the museum should be accompanied by a park and a plaza where commemorative events, photographic exhibitions, and concerts could be organized; a chapel; a cinema; restaurants and cafes; a viewing terrace; and a museum shop that would have a license for selling memorabilia connected with the Rising.36

The documents state that the WRM should “above all, and from the very beginning, avoid museal boredom.”37 To make the museum more appealing to the viewers, the curators decided that the architecture and the décor of the museum should be exciting and immersive, and should resemble the landscape of fighting Warsaw. The museum’s efforts to convey history through emotion and experience are apparent from a description of the competition to decide the permanent exhibit’s design: “the exhibition should appeal to the emotions of young people and make them understand
(feel) the situation of the people of Warsaw during the Rising.\textsuperscript{38} The blurring of cognitive understanding and emotional identification reveals that a visit to the museum is supposed to be an emotional lesson of patriotism directed at young people—a theme we discuss in greater detail below.

Still, the programmatic documents address the format of the WRM only in very general terms. Perhaps the creators of the museum could intuitively decide which of the exhibition projects, submitted in an open competition,\textsuperscript{39} matched their vision of the museum. It is also likely that they were expecting similar exhibitionary strategies and solutions to the ones employed in the museums they had visited. The format of the WRM was most explicitly addressed in an interview by Gazeta Stołeczna with the WRM’s director, Jan Ołdakowski. He explained the intentions of the museum’s creators by comparing the narrative of the museum to a script of an American movie: “We present history like in an American movie. We go through the introduction, the development of the plot, the culmination point and the ending. At the beginning we can talk with an insurgent on the phone, next we go through the German occupation, etc. We use first and foremost images. Texts, in Polish and in English, are only supplements.”\textsuperscript{40}

In terms of the scope and emphasis of its exhibition design, the originators of the museum decided that the exhibition should present the Rising in a broad historical context: from the onset of World War II and the German occupation of Poland, through the outbreak of the Rising, its course and consequences, to the postwar reality of Stalinist repressions against the insurgents and the falsifications of history under communism.\textsuperscript{41} The originators decided that the focus of the exhibition should be on ordinary insurgents rather than the Rising’s political or military leaders. Their pursuits, hopes, and anxieties are shown against the backdrop of the history of World War II in Poland, linking the two themes. As one of the museum’s founding documents phrased it, “it is important to present the interweaving of the fate of individual insurgents with the fate of the nation and the state—the moment of making an individual decision to participate in the Rising which implied taking the risk of dying.”\textsuperscript{42} The emphasis on individuals whose particular fates are bound up with that of the nation personalizes the story, creating a history that is relatable and emotional. It thereby eliminates the perceived distance between the past world of the Rising-era Warsaw and the life-world of the contemporary visitors (see Figure 5).

Among the documents collected in the WRM’s archive, one is especially important from the point of view of the politics of the museum. Stolica wolności (Capital of Freedom), an expert opinion, commissioned by the WRM and written by historian Andrzej Krzysztof Kunert, sets the museum’s ideological perspective. The author explicitly reconfigures the events of the Rising with an eye toward making it into a representation of the universal human ideals of liberty, dignity, and the right to self-determination. The document addresses a set of rhetorical questions: “Should in the history of nations and states only the victories and successes matter? Should the place of a particular historical event in the national memory be determined only by its immediate results? And the most important issue—what perspective is sufficient
to address those questions?" The above passage rhetorically reframes the discourse about the Rising, shifting it from pragmatic discussions of its causes, the likelihood of its success, and its political, social, and historical consequences to an axiological level that addresses the values and ideals the Rising represents.

In the archival documents, the Rising is defined as an exceptional event not only within the history of Poland but also within human history generally—neither because of its scale nor because of its success or lack thereof but because of its symbolic value. It is taken to represent a decision to fight for freedom—the highest human ideal—in insurmountable circumstances. In the museum’s founding documents, the Rising is described as “a moral phenomenon on a great scale.” Warsaw is referred to as “the Capital of Freedom,” since “it was the last time before 1989 that Poland enjoyed freedom, during this short period of time Warsaw was one of the very few free places in the European continent.” To support this thesis, the museum’s originators reference the tradition of fighting for the liberation of the Polish nation expressed in the statement “For Your Freedom and Ours.”

The Rising is described by Kunert as “a national tragedy and the bloodiest battle in the history of Poland.” This statement is elaborated in the following way: “the costs of the unconditional love of freedom proved to be extremely high, with many people paying the highest price.” It is, however, explained that this was the price for “the right to self-determination and the imperative to resist any kind of attack.” Further on, it is suggested that those ideals are of the utmost importance, and thus whatever the costs and consequences of the Rising, it was a necessary undertaking, since this was a moral obligation not only to Poland but to all of humanity. Hence, the Rising is defined as, on the one hand, an independent attempt at regaining the country’s freedom and, on the other, as a symbol of defense of universal human values endangered by evil’s triumph.

We believe that one of the most controversial theses of the museum’s narrative is that the Warsaw Rising was the result of “the acceptance of the unquestionable rule to fight for freedom and the integrity of the country until the end, a rule that was accepted by the whole nation” at the German invasion of Poland in 1939. This seems to be a rather arbitrary interpretation, since the documents do not specify under what framework this agreement was reached, nor whether there was any possibility to renegotiate this decision, had the political or military circumstances changed. In its uncritical assertion of the Rising, the museum shifts the responsibility for its outcome from its leaders to “the Polish nation” rather than specific individuals or groups, and thus no one in particular is accountable for the Rising’s lost effort.

Paweł Ukielski, the vice director of the museum, described the ultimate outcome of the Rising as a “victory postponed.” While its immediate results were tragic, the memory of having resisted totalitarianism sustained and strengthened people during communism as well as discouraged them from beginning another uprising prematurely. Real victory—informed by the memory of the Rising and the legacy of the Polish underground state—came about in 1989 with the end of communism in
Poland. The emergence of Poland as an independent and democratic country, Ukielski said, was ultimately a product of the Rising’s legacies. One way the museum conveys this is by displaying the symbols of the Rising that later became the icons of the anticommunist underground movement—the “V” sign and “Fighting Solidarity,” whose name contains a direct reference to “Fighting Poland”—the Polish resistance movement during World War II.

Discussions of the WRM in Popular and Academic Press

The WRM in the Popular Press

In the summer of 2004, the Polish media devoted considerable attention to the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Rising. The opening of the WRM was promoted with the slogan “The Only Such Anniversary, The Only Such Museum” (“Jedyna taka rocznica, jedyne takie muzeum”). Between 1 July and 5 October 2004, Gazeta Wyborcza published twenty-four entries about the WRM; Rzeczpospolita, twenty; and Życie, five. Polityka published one comprehensive feature article devoted to it, and Tygodnik Powszechny, among many articles on the history and memory of the Warsaw Rising, made a few references to the WRM. Information concerning the WRM—predominantly news updates on the progress of the construction work and the planned design of the museum exhibition, appeared predominantly in the local supplements to the national newspapers. Information about the opening of the WRM was presented only on 2 and 3 August in the national editions of the newspapers, which points to the local, more than the national, significance of this event.

The most distinctive feature of this collection of articles is their almost uniformly favorable attitude toward the upcoming anniversary celebrations and the WRM itself. Skepticism or criticism is rarely present. This tone is especially noticeable in the news articles from Gazeta Stołeczna, which published progress reports on the works in the museum on the first day of each month, beginning in July 2003 when the decision to build the WRM was announced.

The articles can be divided into two categories. The majority of them provide information about the technical aspects of the construction process at the WRM and are enthusiastic about the WRM’s modern and innovative design. Articles in the second category, of which there are only a few, discuss the WRM in terms of a commemorative site, underlining its potential to positively inform Varsovian identity and Polish national identity. A certain change of tone is noticeable after 1 August, when the anniversary celebrations reached their momentum and the opening of the WRM turned out to be an enormous success. The press discusses at length the spectacular, if somewhat unexpected, revival of memory, and the unique sense of solidarity and unity among the residents of Warsaw that permeated the sixty-three-day commemorative
period. Toward its end, the articles become more reflective, enquiring about reasons behind the apparent attractiveness of the story of the Rising to young generations of Poles.

The political aspect of the story of the Rising is discussed in tight connection with what was said during the commemorative ceremonies. This is best illustrated in the lead to a piece from *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 2 August: “For 60 years the Warsaw insurgents waited to see their museum and the recognition of the world, and the Chancellor of Germany in the place of ‘German shame and Polish glory’ ensured that the Warsaw Rising became a part of the European history.” The media’s relative lack of attention to the political dimension of the WRM can be partly explained by a then shared assumption about the WRM’s purpose as a long-due homage to the insurgents, most of whom were by then in their seventies and older and were passing away, as well as to the people and the city of Warsaw. There was a tacit consensus that the story of the Rising must be told in an uncensored way and that the insurgents deserved to be honored in a way that had not been possible under communism. Questions concerning the interpretations of the past that were to be popularized by the museum, the national mythologies and symbols the museum was to use, sentiments and attitudes it was to invoke in the viewers, or even how the employment of the new technologies in the museum was to inform the perception of the story of the Rising, are left aside.

*Polityka* notices that while “the Warsaw Rising lasted two months, the creation of this museum took over twenty years. . . . Sixty years after the outbreak of the Warsaw Rising and over twenty years after the idea to build the museum was conceived, Warsaw has finally lived to see it accomplished.” *Rzeczpospolita* describes the opening of the WRM as the event that the insurgents “waited for the most and the longest.” The article quotes Lech Kaczyński, who called the museum “the homage to the insurgents and 200,000 Warsaw civilians who fell victim to the German genocide,” and Marek Belka, then the Prime Minister of Poland, who said that “the museum should become a memorial. . . . For years the memory about the Rising was distorted and the merits of the Polish Underground State were dissembled.”

The press depicts the WRM as novel and contemporary, on one hand emphasizing its cutting-edge technology, and on the other hand pointing out the participatory community it encourages. According to the newspapers, the WRM is “the most modern museum in Poland”; “unconventional, multimedia, employing the most modern techniques, but not turning away from the older generations of visitors”; a place where “the real world intertwines with the virtual one . . . where real pavement and artefacts from the Rising are juxtaposed with fake ruins, plasma screens and telephones from which one can ‘call’ the participants of the fights from sixty years ago.” The newspapers also depict the WRM as an exciting and interesting place because it brings people together into a committed participatory community. *Rzeczpospolita/Warszawa* quotes the museum’s construction director who said, “This is not an ordinary construction site. Everybody leaves a piece of themselves
here.” Meanwhile, Gazeta Stołeczna put a profile of two volunteers at the museum who described it as a fascinating place they would like to remain connected with.

The portrayal of the WRM in the popular press as an interesting and exciting place to visit gained even greater prominence after the 31 July–1 August celebrations. On the first day, almost fifteen thousand people visited the museum. The news articles describe how visitors had to wait as long as two hours, sometimes in the pouring rain, to see a rather rudimentary version of the exhibition. The situation was repeated with the reopening of the WRM on 2 October, when thirteen thousand people visited the museum over the weekend. They expressed their favorable opinions as well as their satisfaction with the fact that the WRM was finally built. A student remarked that though the museum looks a bit empty, it has a special charm: “It is interesting to see the museum being built in front of our eyes. It was a great decision to present history in a non-standard way. For sure this will be a place with a special ambiance.”

Insurgents express their relief and gratitude with the fact that through the museum, the memory of the Rising will be continued. One of them, a ninety-seven-year-old woman quoted in Życie, said: “I have spent my whole life working with the youth, and I know the importance of such places for young people. They will pass the memory further on, to their children.”

Finally, the media commented on the special atmosphere of the sixtieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Rising. It seemed that Warsaw immersed itself in the memories of the Rising. Rzeczpospolita remarks that “there have never been festivities organized on such a grand scale . . . the atmosphere of the Rising could be felt everywhere . . . at homes, on the buses, and at social gatherings people were talking about the Rising.” Jerzy S. Majewski of Gazeta Stołeczna tries to account for the revival of collective memory with a quest for moral values. According to Majewski, the ethos of the Warsaw Rising is still alive, and the social mobilization around it is far more important for creating national Polish identity than the debate about the sense of the Rising and its outcomes. Meanwhile, Dariusz Karłowicz in Rzeczpospolita connects the revival of the Warsaw Rising memory with a crisis of the social contract established at the Round Table: “the collective affirmation of the values embodied by the insurgents does not write anyone off, and does not exclude anyone and thus creates a real foundation for a possible national reconciliation.”

The only critical opinion was voiced by Zdzisław Pietrasik in Polityka. The author called the first week of August 2004 “the most patriotic weekend for the Third Republic of Poland” and noted that everyone was expected to celebrate the Warsaw Rising. Pietrasik warned against unreflective worshipping of events like the Rising, whose symbolic significance is timeless, but whose historical, political, and military dimensions have not been discussed at all. “If so many people cultivate the insurgent traditions,” the author asked, “why is there so little evidence of them in everyday political and social life?”
Scholarly Discussions of the WRM

Much of the academic research on the WRM is focused on the completed core exhibition and its reception. Two major themes can be identified. First, researchers have discussed the museum’s contemporary design and use of cutting-edge multimedia technologies, emphasizing its innovative approach, and its status as the first major historical museum to be realized in the twenty-first century in Poland. Among the sources discussing this, most significantly, are the promotional materials put forth by the museum itself and many of the press articles published announcing the museum’s opening. The WRM acts as a caesura in the landscape of Polish museums and as a model for subsequently opened museums. This point is made by articles representing a variety of perspectives. Second, the political dimensions of the museum and its image of the Rising, and the uses of this image for Polish collective identity, have been addressed in the literature. To a lesser extent, academic research on the WRM also addresses the emotional and experiential content of its exhibition—what we refer to in the following section as its poetic dimension.

Several authors have noted that the museum’s format provides unique opportunities for visitors to “re-experience” memory for themselves while they are learning about history. Iwona Kurz argues that existing stories about the Rising are “rewritten” and rewoven using new media, allowing visitors—including those who did not personally live through it—to “relive” the Rising, and develop a sense of nostalgia. Zuzanna Bogumił acknowledges the technical sophistication of the museum’s “simulation” of the past, but is critical of the simulation’s encompassing nature in that visitors thus experience the interpretation of the Rising put forth by the curators. As this immersive context is meant to evoke emotional and experiential responses in visitors, Bogumił’s critique is relevant to the issue of museum poetics that we discuss in this paper.

Andrzej Kiciński explains how the museum’s multimedia and experiential design is important especially for its didactic goals, as can be seen in the children’s room, which is full of colorful drawings and films (see Figures 4 and 7). The multimedia presentations give it its reputation as “the first ‘modern’ historical museum in Poland,” and as a place that appeals to children and youth in particular. Erica Tucker, discussing the museum in the context of her interviews with long-time residents of the Żoliborz neighborhood, describes how youth and entertainment-oriented events are combined with more traditional commemorative ceremonies to forge identities among visitors, making the WRM the most popular museum in Warsaw among people under 30.

It is apparent from the literature that in terms of its format and use of technology, the WRM is considered a major turning point among Polish museums. But this must be distinguished from the content presented: does this, too, represent something new? The creation of the WRM attempts to draw together divergent, often highly individual, stories, legitimating them institutionally and creating a central meeting point.
space for handling the legacy of the Rising. However, in doing so, some researchers such as Bogumił and Żychlińska have argued, it legitimates certain experiences and perspectives and forecloses others.

Bogumił argues that while it is democratic in its form, drawing on multimedia and oral history and framing itself as a meeting place of sorts for commemorating the Warsaw Rising, the WRM is, following Duncan Cameron’s classification scheme, more like a “museum-temple” that presents its history as a more or less unified, objective truth than a “museum-forum” that may give a more polyphonic interpretation. Żychlińska discusses the way in which the museum, in presenting an image of the Rising as an exceptional event that emphasizes freedom and national pride by appealing to moral authority, omits certain concerns, such as the significance of the fact that the Rising was undertaken in an uncertain political situation between unbalanced opponents.

The political dimensions of the image the WRM puts forth have also represented a major point of discussion in the literature. While in some ways the WRM is dialogic and multivocal in that it draws its content from personal stories rather than grand narratives, in others it tells a more unified story meant to educate patriotic citizens. In doing so, it situates itself within heroic and often martyrological images of the Polish nation and thereby aligns the Warsaw Rising with a moral authority and forecloses certain dimensions of potential critique. Several authors comment on this framing of the Rising as heroic, and on the discussions that this may obscure. According to James Mark and Adam Ostolski, the Rising is framed as a timeless story of Polish resistance against invaders—in this case not only Nazis, but communists. The perspective that is displayed valorizes the deaths suffered in the Rising as heroic—as they have taken place in the context of fighting for the freedom of the Polish nation, they are shown as meaningful and sublime.

Both Żychlińska, in the article cited above, and Joanna Szczepanski argue that the WRM draws on the notion of “romantic martyrdom,” an image of the Polish nation that originated in the nineteenth century during the partitions of Poland, for its interpretation. They argue that the WRM also draws on this line of interpretation. Romantic martyrdom gives meaning to the Rising and other tragedies in Polish history, and in the WRM it immerses visitors in strongly emotional, experiential content. However, in doing so it creates a very particular, exclusionary image of the “Catholic Pole valiantly fighting for his nation.”

Adam Ostolski argues that museums that display a national trauma are a form of expressing community and a place of public intervention where the memory of trauma can be worked through. This process interpellates the visitor as a participant within it and regulates public knowledge about the trauma. The WRM, like all museums, according to Ostolski, provides visitors with a predefined “appropriate” interpretation of the Rising with which they are meant to identify. Visitors are encouraged to experience emotions accordingly—that is, pride and joy in taking part in the “heroic” Rising and thus resisting the occupiers—rather than leaving space for conflicting ideas and interests to be expressed.
Our Interpretation of the WRM: Politics, Poetics, and Nostalgia

Although the political dimension of the WRM has been thoroughly analyzed, its poetical dimension has been explored in far less depth. Like many of the authors discussed above, we view the museum as a ritual site where the interplay between authoritative knowledge, grounded in disciplinary expertise, and enchantment, carefully generated through architectural and aesthetic exhibitionary strategies, takes place. The political dimension of the WRM manifests itself in the power of refashioning traumatic past experiences and reshaping contemporary Polish collective identity, as intended by the museum’s originators. Museums produce a form of social knowledge—in this case, an official interpretation of the Rising and its meaning for Polish history, legitimated by the institutional power of the museum and by the resonance of this interpretation with visitors’ background understandings.

Much previous research that addresses these themes treats political and poetical concerns as two related strands of museological critique. However, the ways in which the political and poetical dimensions are inseparable, as they work to legitimize one another within the same exhibition, has been less commonly studied. Unlike in traditional museums, in narrative museums like the WRM, an immersive interpretive environment is created to convey an emotional and moral message.

The WRM’s poetical dimension—the ways in which meaning is produced through the ordering, composition, and choice of museal elements made by the museum’s creators—is apparent from the ways the museum fosters emotional identification with a community, and its capacity to sacralize spaces and artefacts and, through them, the narratives they convey. In particular, the museum’s aesthetic choices work to create feelings of nostalgia in visitors, which supports the shaping of patriotic citizens since national narratives gain their relevance and power from citizens’ emotional investment (see Figure 6). As we shall demonstrate, this aspect of nostalgia is recognized by the majority of the museum’s visitors.

The extent to which the museum fulfills its stated goals—as a central memory space for the Warsaw Rising and as an institution educating Polish young people and foreigners—is uneven. While in official documentation the museum’s main goal is identified as education, in practice it seems to have achieved greater success as a memory site. Many of our informants—including former Warsaw Rising participants—describe the museum’s layout as difficult to navigate, and visually and sensorily overwhelming. Without prior knowledge of the history of the Warsaw Rising, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the sequence of historical events that comprised it. As we shall demonstrate, in attempting to tell the Warsaw Rising participants’ stories in the “language of youth,” the museum’s voice often comes across as unclear and distorted.

The story of Warsaw’s people as it is presented in the museum raises many doubts, as it does not acknowledge the fact that for the majority of Varsovians, the experience of the Rising was not a matter of an individual decision, but rather enduring
the consequences of the decision made by the leaders of the Home Army. \textsuperscript{108} It is important to notice that in the museum the Rising is cast as a movement encompassing all of society with the civilian population spontaneously and devotedly supporting the insurgents. \textsuperscript{109} Visitors are thus encouraged to feel the same. Less clearly addressed is the other side of the story—the bitterness and sorrow that prevailed toward its end or the tension, sometimes resulting in open hostility, between the insurgents and the civilian population, most of whom wanted to surrender the Rising. \textsuperscript{110}

An important component of the image realized by the museum’s display is that the Warsaw Rising was primarily undertaken by young people at the threshold of adulthood, a group with which the museum’s main target audience can identify. In the museum, the insurgents are presented as young people who were making friends, falling in love, and trying to enjoy their time as much as they could, against the backdrop of the war. They are presented in large-scale photographs around the museum as stunningly beautiful people resembling retro movie stars (see Figure 3). The moment of their death is made invisible—there is little representation of the bodily suffering related to war. The insurgents are portrayed with their untouched bodies dying heroically according to the Latin dictum \textit{dulce et decorum est pro patria mori}. Through this mode of presentation, the museum’s participant-visitors see themselves in the idealized insurgents and “become” the romantic heroes who sacrificed their lives for freedom; they learn how to be patriotic citizens. Not only the physical realities of insurgents’ suffering but fundamental questions about the necessity and propriety of undertaking the Rising are elided.

The museum discourages visitors from considering whether there were any alternative scenarios of expressing patriotism other than fighting and dying for one’s country. By portraying the effort of the Rising as necessary regardless of the historical circumstances, the decision to do so remains unquestioned. Contrary to “memorial museums” \textsuperscript{111} commemorating tragic events of mass suffering—most paradigmatically seen through Holocaust museums—whose message is “never again,” the message of the WRM seems to be “always and ever again!” \textsuperscript{112}

In the WRM, the poetical enchantment constructed by the museum takes the form of nostalgia for the past. It operates on many levels, and visitors are subjected to its subtle influence from the moment they enter the museum grounds. Nostalgia (\textit{nostos}, “to return home,” and \textit{algia}, “a painful condition”; and thus a painful yearning to return home) is a social phenomenon whose symbolic content and code are socially produced and understood by members of the same community. \textsuperscript{113} Nostalgia, like memory, is a means of relating the past and the present in the continuous process of establishing, maintaining, and (re)structuring both individual and collective identities. \textsuperscript{114} It has been argued that nostalgia can serve as a powerful instrument to ensure a sense of continuity and belonging in times of social change. Nostalgia helps to cultivate appreciative stances toward former selves, as it screens out the unpleasant and shameful memories, romanticizing and simplifying the past. \textsuperscript{115} In the case of
Polish collective memory after the fall of communism, it is the Warsaw Rising that was made the locus of collective yearning and the object of nostalgia.

The presence of nostalgia should, however, make one wonder: in the name of what present is the past imagined as worth longing for? Svetlana Boym’s proposition to distinguish between restorative and reflective nostalgia, which traces the distinction between national and collective memory, may provide some insight into this question. Restorative nostalgia is focused on the nostos—the return to the truth and tradition, an attempt to restore the lost home and to promote the national identity. The WRM’s claim to a truthful historical account opposing past distortions can be understood within the notion of restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the algia—the ambivalences and contradictions of human longing. As a memory site commemorating the Rising’s tragic and heroic dimensions, the WRM also makes use of reflective nostalgia.

The Nostos—Restorative Nostalgia

Entering the museum, visitors travel back in time. The museum’s flooring is made of stone pavement, and the display forms a rather confusing labyrinth of partly reconstructed urban alleys, barricades, sewers, and ruins of the destroyed city. A cacophony of bombs, explosions, air alerts, sounds of fire, and insurgent songs fills the museum. The most striking sound is, however, the heartbeat. It is emitted by a steel construction called the Monolith that, connecting all levels of the museum, carries through sounds that emerge as an accelerated heartbeat. The Monolith is the symbolic heart of the fighting Warsaw as well as of the museum.

The beginning of the Rising is clearly marked—it is the brightest and the most upbeat fragment of the exhibition. The light is to represent the enthusiasm and hope of the insurgents. The battlelike atmosphere is emphasized by a popular insurgent song, “Hey Boys, Mount Your Bayonets,” played in the elevator. The exhibition on the upper floors—focused on specific themes of the Rising, such as everyday religious and cultural life—is, however, different. Visitors are confronted with a multitude of images of death and destruction: reconstructions of insurgent graves, exhumation protocols from the slaughter in Warsaw’s Wola district, ruins, and rubble. In this part of the exhibition, the narrative gets disrupted and the layout of the museum becomes confusing. Although calendar pages from the Rising attempt to create a sense of temporal continuity, the exhibit’s layout shifts from a timeline to a series of thematic exhibits, and visitors are likely to get lost in the re-created landscape of fighting Warsaw.

Although the Warsaw Rising had a definite time frame, in the museum’s narrative its end is blurred. This distortion in representing the Rising is significant since the capitulation of the Rising is an important caesura in the history of Poland. The “liberation” of Warsaw that followed in January 1945 marked the beginning of a
new country with shifted geographical borders, radically different ethnic and class structure, and a new political subordination to the Soviet Union. Through its open-ended structure and its strategy of encouraging visitors to personally “experience” the Rising via its immersive environment and identification with participants, the museum creates a sense that the effort of the Rising is still going on.

Instead of discussing the controversy of the Rising, the museum plays the roles of a “time machine” that enables visitors to deny the irreversibility of time and of a national shrine where the imagined community pays a ritualistic homage to itself. The visitor “re-experiences” the Rising, returning symbolically to the imagined homeland and coming to identify with the original insurgents’ experience as seen through the lens of a twenty-first-century museum. Emotional knowledge, since it is subjective, is felt in the body, and is thus difficult to verify or contest rhetorically, is often assumed in much everyday interaction to be more “real” or “natural” than cognitive understanding. The emotional identification that is produced in the visitor as an effect of performing the museal game thus creates feelings of pride and patriotism that are often more salient than the difficult questions about the facts and significance of the Rising.

The *Algja*—Reflective Nostalgia

Although the narrative of the museum is built around national emblems and the rhetoric of patriotism and continuity—elements characteristic of restorative nostalgia—a different kind of longing is also present there: a meditation on history, the passage of time, and human finitude. Perhaps the last segments of the exhibition, where the narrative loses its cohesiveness, represent the *algja*—the aspect of collective memory constituted by the shared longing for the past, the mourning over the loss caused by the Rising, the longing to provide it with a socially acceptable meaning, and a realization of the futility of this task. Here, as well as in the “Freedom Park” (*Park Wolności*) and remembrance wall behind the museum, the space of the museum transforms from an educational to a reflective one (see Figure 2). Visitors have autonomy to contemplate the artifacts on display, and the act of viewing—experiencing the artifacts in the reconstructed setting—is given priority over maintaining the museum’s narrative.

It seems that the scheme of representing the Rising as the great victory for Poland could not encompass the magnitude of human suffering and the almost total destruction of the city. In order to justify the Rising as a noble cause, the human tragedy, which is an integral part of the Rising’s story, would have to be bracketed off. The museum handles this contradiction by displacing these aspects of the Rising from the informational and experiential narrative. It creates reflective space for those aspects of the Rising that cannot be contained or narrativized within the scope of national mythology, but that nevertheless must be acknowledged.
Visitor Groups at the WRM

As we have discussed earlier, the museum’s mission is on one hand educational, engaged in shaping patriotic citizens through transforming the Rising into a source of pride, and on the other commemorative, as a tribute and memory site, especially for the more tragic dimensions of the Rising. Many people describe their visit to the WRM in terms of a nostalgic experience—a journey in time that connected them with their imagined community. Perhaps because of the extensive use of visual and sensory stimuli, the visitors seem to be fascinated with the reality re-created in the museum, despite the undeniable horrors of the Warsaw Rising as a historical event. The nostalgia-creating effort on the part of the museum’s organizers is well acknowledged and appreciated by visitors. The museal game that takes place here is, for the most part, a smooth one. The WRM is a site of nostalgia where the national and Varsovian communities pay tribute to themselves, strengthening their collective identities.

Monika Żychlińska, who conducted forty structured interviews with visitor groups between January and March 2006, found that although major aspects of the museum’s intended meaning are recognized by most visitors, different segments of the audience participate differently in the museal game, bringing their own social, national, and generational framings to engage emotionally and intellectually with various aspects of the WRM’s interpretation. The interviews were conducted with three different groups of visitors: (1) ten former insurgents; (2) eighteen junior and senior high school students from Warsaw, following a museum class; (3) twelve visitors on a Sunday afternoon when the entrance to the museum is free of charge. The sample did not include any foreigners. Three types of interview scripts were designed to capture the essence of the museum experience of each of these groups. The interviews were conducted within a few days after the informants’ visit to the museum so that their impressions and memories would still be vivid. The sample was nonprobabilistic, but purposive. In accordance with the concept of content saturation, the interviews were conducted up to the point where no new themes or information relevant to the data collection were found.122

The youngsters interpreted the story of the Rising in a simple and uncritical manner, did not question the validity of the museum’s narrative, and usually identified themselves with it. Students from junior high school classes in particular tended to see the Rising through nationally and metaphysically charged categories, as a battle between the Poles and the Germans, exemplifying the universal struggle between good and evil. One twelve-year-old boy said, “I’m leaving [the museum] with a sense of pride. In my mind there’s an image of the bravery of these people, of how wonderfully they fought.” His friend added, “There is pride that my fellow countrymen fought so bravely, and that they suffered and sacrificed their lives for the country. If it hadn’t been for them, we might live in the Third Reich now.” It should be noted that students tend to define Polish national identity through the struggle for the country’s freedom. One of the informants observed, “It [the museum] makes me
think that we Poles have always been fighting.” However, he was unable to explain how this readiness to fight could be realized in times of peace and democracy. While many students saw the Warsaw Rising as the symbol of the Polish struggle for independence, older visitors tended to interpret it beyond the nationalistic schema. They related to the Rising by asking questions concerning human fate and the meaning of suffering. Adult visitors were also more likely to see the Rising as a universal human tragedy, not just a tragedy for Poland. One woman from a small town in central Poland remarked that the Rising “is a tragedy for the Polish people, but at the same time, it is important to notice the tragedy of an individual—those myriads of individual tragedies. . . . I think they cannot be analytically distinguished. At least I, as a Pole, as pompous as it may sound, I cannot distinguish between those two tragedies [national and individual].”

Older visitors tended to stress the human dimension of the story of the Rising and to express their compassion and solidarity with the victims. Realizing the scale of loss affected their assessment of the Rising. However, despite recognizing the tragic outcome of the Rising, none of the informants criticized the decision to undertake it. Instead, visitors contemplated the fragility of life, as well as the absurdity of war. As one explained, “I feel pity. There is pride for sure, but also sorrow that so many people perished.” A man in his late sixties who came to the museum with his two teenage grandsons explained:

This was our terrible disaster, a terrible crime committed by our two greatest enemies, and an enormous sacrifice for our nation. And as always it was the best, the strongest, and the most valuable who perished. . . . And those pictures showing the Germans performing executions. . . . It is shocking that a human being is capable of committing such atrocities. One can only ask how all this could have possibly happened—that a human being could do this to another human being?

It is worth noticing the implicit reference (“as always”) to other unsuccessful historical attempts at regaining the country’s freedom. For the generation that was raised during World War II, the Warsaw Rising became the prism through which they assessed earlier risings.

What is more, some visitors suggested that the Warsaw Rising might become a transnational symbol of war cruelty, a kind of “memorial museum”: “this museum can also make people realize what is going on in the areas of armed conflicts—for instance in Iraq, where children have similar experiences to those of the children in World War II.” Another visitor argued,

This museum teaches us about the ruthlessness of politics. The Warsaw Rising can be compared to other tragedies—in Africa, especially in Rwanda and Sudan, but also the concentration camps in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Politics is ruthless and this is how it is, politics should be conducted in a wiser manner and unnecessary conflicts should be avoided.
Perhaps not surprisingly, people who had participated in the Warsaw Rising were the group least inclined to immerse themselves in the reality re-created in the museum, immune to the nostalgic schema operating there. Although combatants, as members of a community of memory, expressed their gratitude for the creation of the museum, as well as a sense of relief that the history of the Warsaw Rising had been given national recognition and would be transmitted to younger generations, they did not express a need to spend time at the museum. Many of them admitted that they did not understand the logic of the museum and were overwhelmed with its multitude of sound and visual effects. Insurgents often described the museum as too confusing, too dark, too loud, and too cramped, yet they understood that this place is, as one of them put it, “about us but not for us.” However, they expressed hope that the WRM’s modern multimedia aesthetics would speak to young people and attract them to the museum.

Insurgents emphasized that they had their own, often very painful, memories of the Rising, and they claimed that no exhibition could even come close to representing them or to accurately rendering the atmosphere of Warsaw in the summer of 1944. One combatant explained this in the following manner: “Nothing in particular impressed me there [in the museum] because what really made an impression on me was the Rising—those two months almost seventy years ago.” Another one said, “Museum for the insurgents, like me, when I went there, it was something that I had already known. I was looking at all those things, but I knew them all. Well yes, these are good frames, good photographs, this is my opinion, what’s more?” A woman who served as a nurse in the Baszta Regiment explained: “I know that the people who visit the museum are often impressed, but it didn’t make me scared or, let’s say, frightened . . . because the reality back then was so frightening that nothing can render it, not even this museum.” It is interesting, given these responses, that the museum describes itself as a “museum for ‘grandparents and grandchildren,” and that many Rising participants were involved in the creation of the museum.126

By comparing different generations’ reactions to the WRM, the museal game can be observed in action. The WRM puts forth its own narrative and format, its own “conception of sense.” However, young visitors, middle-aged to older adult visitors, and former insurgents react in different ways and find personal meaning in different aspects of the museum’s display. The museum’s effort to speak the “language of youth” through multimedia presentations seems to connect effectively with the generational experiences of young visitors, and most of the youth interviewed seem to experience nostalgic identification with the imagined community of past and present patriotic Polish citizens.

Adult visitors typically also seem to participate in nostalgic identification, but take a broader, more universal perspective on the museum’s meaning. Rising participants, however, have personal experience of the Rising itself, and have lived through the ensuing years of communism. For many of the Rising participants quoted above, no single simulation that aggregates and repackages the experience of the Rising for
broad audiences can encompass what they personally lived through. Yet they appreciate the WRM’s role as commemorative space and keeper of memory for the future—relevant to the *algia* that addresses less definable human themes of remembrance and the preservation of history across time.

Conclusions

The WRM, a highly visible public institution and one of the first museums in Poland to use new and interactive display techniques, takes on an authoritative role in creating historically grounded national mythologies for contemporary Poland. It establishes a sense of continuity between past and present, symbolically resolving the historical disjuncture represented by communism. It does so by promoting “the historical truth,” based on vernacular representations of the Rising that were maintained in opposition to the distortions of official memory under communism, and makes the process of removing the distortions part of the story.

As we have discussed above, in the museal game, the curators convey their intentions and agendas through the design of the museum’s exhibitions. However, the meaning of what is on display is only made, and the museum only takes on social and cultural significance, in the realm of interpretations that are concrete, specific, and socially and culturally situated. The museal game is not only an interaction between visitors and museum but it also encompasses, takes place within, and draws upon the surrounding milieux of culture, media, and history and takes on its meanings within this context. The visitor fills in meaning with symbolic resources from his or her sociocultural context, individual experiences, knowledge of history, and a sense of aesthetics, as well as all of the other interpretations that surround him or her. The museum is only given sense as a sociocultural phenomenon through the process by which commenters and visitors interact with it.

It is this process that we have tried to show in our analysis of the various participants’ roles in the museal game surrounding the WRM. Based on analysis of the museum’s founding documents, the originators intended the WRM to be a participatory, modern, and strongly visual and experiential institution with which visitors are encouraged, through emotional content and presentations of relatable individual participants, to identify personally. In the museum’s narrative, the emphasis is shifted away from the military and political aspects of the Rising onto the ideal of freedom. The Rising as a fight for freedom becomes a symbol thereof. The Rising is contextualized within an account of history told from the perspective of a democratic and independent contemporary Poland, and, in this account, it is framed as instrumental in leading up to the current state of affairs.

The popular press, covering the planning and construction of the WRM, offered an almost uniformly positive assessment of the museum, thus serving mostly to promote it, and framing its opening as a crucial element of the ceremonies surrounding
the sixtieth anniversary of the Rising. The other major theme evident in the popular press was the museum’s high-tech, contemporary format. Scholarly analysis, though from a more critical standpoint, echoes these themes, focusing on the WRM’s use of innovative technology to create immersive emotional experiences, and on analyses of the WRM’s role in promoting and sustaining Polish collective identity.

In light of these two themes, the 2004 commemorative ceremonies can be understood as a ritual of sorts whereby the memory of the Rising was symbolically transferred from individual histories to the WRM. The WRM is then framed as a central commemorative site that is universally accessible, especially to the “next generation” of younger visitors. This is echoed in some of the visitor interviews, in particular those with the insurgents. The WRM is described by the media as a space where collective identities rooted in history can be linked to the present, both symbolically in the museum’s narrative and through a contemporary format that speaks the “language of youth.”

In emphasizing the poetical as well as the political dimensions of the museum, we have shown how this linking of past and present, and encouragement for contemporary people to identify with the past, is accomplished not only through the use of familiar symbols but through the production of emotion in visitors as well. Specifically, we have analyzed the efforts to produce a sense of nostalgia and personal identification with the participants of the Rising. As is apparent from the interviews with Polish visitors of different ages, while divergent generational experiences inform the specifics of concrete meaning, in general the museum’s intended emotional meaning is conveyed to visitors successfully.

As we have shown, the persuasive power of the museum lies in its ability to appeal to the emotions of the audience. The museum’s two main rhetorical strategies include elevating the discourse about the Rising onto the universal moral level and situating the Rising as a historical caesura, semiotically linked to what came before and after it. In addition, the museum’s capacity to evoke strong emotions and, consequently, strong identifications in visitors works toward further legitimating the story it tells. The museal game that takes place here is organized around the payment of a ritual tribute to the heroic past of the imagined communities of both the Polish nation and the Warsaw community.

“Players” of the museal game share a cultural background but take different positions related to their generational experience and overall maturity. Children, students, and other young visitors—the museum’s primary target groups—are especially prone to identifying themselves with the message of the museum and, in being immersed in the nostalgic schema, taking the reality re-created there for granted. They tend to equate Polish national identity with the struggle for the country’s independence, as summarized by one high school student in the statement “We Poles have always been fighting.” The museum’s effort toward producing patriotic citizens is thus successful. For middle-aged people, a visit to the museum is an occasion to reflect on the human tragedy of the Rising. They also place the story of the Rising within a more universal perspective and see it a symbol of war cruelty and the
ruthlessness of politics. Through their participation in the museal game, they draw connections between the Rising and other tragic events in Polish and world history.

The insurgents, in turn, communicate a sense of relief that the memory of the Rising will be passed on to future generations. However, they do not articulate a need to visit the museum and seem to be immune to the nostalgic schema operating there. They participate in the “memory game”—a relay of memory among generations, recognizing the need to share with future generations both the national significance of the Rising and their own experiences, including those not encompassed by the museum. The WRM acts for them as a starting point for the recognition, discussion, and public remembrance of the Warsaw Rising.

Our study raises several questions. First, it must be noted that the research material we use in our analyses comes from the years 2005 and 2006. It is possible that intervening time and changing circumstances have changed the public’s view of the museum. Second, the fact that all interviewees were Polish citizens raises the question of whether foreigners, as well as members of national and ethnic minorities within Poland, would participate differently in the museal game, given the national aspects of its framing. Conducting further research with museum visitors would help to address these and other questions.

Our research shows that the many groups of visitors to the WRM come to the museum to go on a nostalgic journey and pay a visit to a nonexistent world. By doing so, they pay their respects to their national community and foster their individual identity. The success of the museum as an educational and cultural institution, informed not only by the museum’s or the visitors’ perspectives, but by the meaning it is given in a broad-ranging and culturally situated museal game, legitimizes the special place of the Warsaw Rising in Polish collective memory. It creates an important unifying point for national memory and thus also national identity.

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Notes

1. Following the official translation of the museum’s English name (Warsaw Rising Museum), we use the term “Rising” rather than the more popular English translation, “Uprising.” According to museum vice director Paweł Ukielski in a 9 August 2013 interview, the museum’s organizers deliberately chose the translation “Rising.” There are four main reasons for this: (1) Norman Davies’s book Rising ‘44: The Battle for Warsaw (London: Pan Books, 2004) as well as the Oxford Dictionary of New History, both use the term Rising; (2) there were two well-known uprisings in Warsaw during World War II, the Warsaw Uprising and the Ghetto Uprising, and using the term Rising for the former helps prevent confusion; (3) ideological and metaphysical reasons as museum organizers felt that “Rising” carried stronger connotations of a battle for freedom than did “Uprising”; and (4) they thought “Warsaw Rising Museum” sounded more “melodic” than “Warsaw Uprising Museum.”

2. Davies, Rising ‘44. Davies’s book, whose Polish-language publication coincided with the opening of the WRM, is among the most comprehensive English-language accounts of the Rising. According to Rising ‘44, reasons for the lack of attention to the Rising by historians outside Poland include official censorship within Poland and the impression that it was not a crucial turning point of the war from the Western perspective (vii).


4. Approximately 16,000 insurgents and 150,000 civilians were killed; 20,000 insurgents injured; 50,000 civilians (including women and children) were shipped to concentration camps, and 150,000 to forced labor camps. W. Bartoszewski, 1859 dni Warszawy (Kraków: Znak, 2008): 853.

5. “Jaka prawda, jaki mit?’ Interview by Iza Chruślińska with Marcin Kula,” Przegląd Polityczny 66 (2004): 92. All Polish-to-English translations in this paper are by the authors.


9. From the English version of the ubiquitous In Your Pocket guidebooks that greet tourists in many European cities, including Warsaw.


18. Ibid., 17.


24. According to James Mark, the Rising as a foundational historical myth for twenty-first-century Poland offers an example of a fight for freedom that could be regarded as truly “Polish” in that it was free of compromise with occupying powers, and thus can be regarded as a source of pride. Many anti-communists were critical of the transition out of communism, claiming that it represented an “unfinished revolution” because of compromises with communist powers and the lingering influence of ex-party members in the government. Thus the Rising, although unsuccessful, appealed to them as a founding myth, and, as realized in the museum, was shaped into a story of Polish resistance not only against Nazi occupiers but against communism—an example of history’s construction within a contemporary, post-communist context (J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011]).


26. Ibid.; Davies, *Rising* ’44, 619. In later accounts, this story was partly modified as an attempt to legitimize the communist authorities’ perspective.

27. President Lech Kaczyński, quoted in *Stenogram z konferencji prasowej: sprawozdanie z półmetka działalności Zespołu Pracownika ds. Budowy Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego oraz wyników badań ankietowych dotyczących Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego*, Warsaw, 1 September 2004, 6 (from the WRM archive).


30. Radzilowski, “Remembrance and Recovery.”


32. “Polityka historyczna” can be literally translated as “historical policy” or “politics of history” (these terms were used by many of the people Erica Fontana spoke with while conducting fieldwork), but
considering its connotations, it might also be rendered as something like “official vision/version of history” or “governmental version of history.” According to some politicians and intellectuals identified with polityka historyczna, the government should play a strong role in commemorating the past, and themes of commemoration should focus on promoting national pride and a positive image of Poland’s history. Seen from this perspective, historical policy is a response to, and constitutes a rejection of, perceived current social and political conditions, such as “amnesia,” “moral permissiveness,” and poor knowledge of history, which are seen as problems among young Poles in particular (“Polityka historyczna,” op. cit.). According to critics of polityka historyczna, however, its vision of patriotism tends to be characterized more by the re-promotion of past glories and the building of a sense of national pride, often at the expense of a difficult accounting with troubling aspects of the past. See B. Korzeniewski, Transformacja pamięci. Przewartościowana w pamięci przeszłości a wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania dyskursu publicznego o przeszłości w Polsce po 1989 roku (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2010): 10.

34. Ibid., 9.
36. Podstawowe założenia programowe i organizacyjne.
37. Ibid., 19–22.
38. Ibid., 4.
39. Konkurs na opracowanie koncepcji ekspozycji stałej w Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego przy ulicy Przyokopowej 28 w Warszawie w tym pierwszej jej części, tj. wystawy z okazji 60 rocznicy wybuchu Powstania, 6 (from the WRM archive).
41. Podstawowe założenia programowe i organizacyjne, 6.
42. Ibid.
43. A. K. Kunert, Stolica wolności (an expert opinion written by Kunert, commissioned by the WRM, from the WRM archive), 12.
44. Podstawowe założenia programowe i organizacyjne, 3.
45. Kunert, Stolica wolności, 5.
46. Podstawowe założenia programowe i organizacyjne, 3.
47. Kunert, Stolica wolności, 12.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 1: “w momencie przyjęcia w dniu agresji niemieckiej niepodważalnej zasady walki do końca o wolność i całość Polski, zasady przyjętej wówczas przez cały naród.”
52. P. Ukielski, personal communication, 9 August 2013.
53. Kaczyński, Stenogram z konferencji prasowej, 6.
55. As for coverage of the WRM outside Poland, there was very little published in 2004. Most international coverage of the museum was published much later and contextualizes the WRM chiefly within Warsaw’s tourist attractions.
57. “Po 60 latach powstańcy warszawscy doczekali się swego muzeum i uznania świata, a kancelerz Niemiec w miejscu ‘polskiej chwały i niemieckiego wstyd’ zapewniał, że Powstanie Warszawskie stało się częścią europejskiej historii” (“Polska chwała i niemiecki wstyd—60 rocznica wybuchu powstania warszawskiego,” Gazeta Wyborcza, 2 August 2004).
73. Ibid.
79. Kiciński, “Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego.”
84. A. Kiciński, “Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego.”
85. Bogumił, “Miejsca pamięci.”
89. Żychlińska, “Herosi pośród ruin,” 42.
90. Kaluza, “Reimagining the Nation in Museums”; Mark, The Unfinished Revolution.
91. Szczepanski, “Romanticising and Revising.”
95. Bogumił, “Miejsca pamięci.”
96. Żychlińska, “Herosi pośród ruin.”
98. Ostolski, “Przestrzeń muzeum.”
99. Several authors point out that the museum’s approach combines didactic content with an immersive exhibit form designed to evoke emotional responses and personal identification, through imaginative means, with Rising participants among visitors. Żychlińska, “Herosi pośród ruin”; Fontana, “The ‘New Museum’ in Poland”; E. Tucker, “Programming the Past: Museums and the Commemoration of World War II in Post-Socialist Poland” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, IL, November 20–24, 2013).
102. Ibid.
104. Ibid., 168.
106. Radzilowski, “Remembrance and Recovery.”
108. For a historical account, see Zbrodnie okupanta hitlerowskiego na ludności cywilnej w czasie powstania warszawskiego w 1944 roku, w dokumentach, ed. S. Datner and K. Leszczyński (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1962); for the most famous literary account, see M. Białoszewski, “Pamiętnik z Powstania Warszawskiego” (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2003).
109. The museum categorizes “insurgents” broadly, encompassing not only those who were engaged in open combat but a larger cross section of the population who supported the Rising, for example, medics and messengers, among others.
110. Social moods toward the insurgents and the Rising were assessed and reported on by a security department of the administrative authorities of the Polish Underground State (Wydział Bezpieczeństwa Okręgowej Delegatury Rządu na m.st. Warszawy). A collection of those reports can be found in the second volume of Ludność cywilna w powstaniu warszawskim: archiwalia, ed. M. Gettner and M. Janowski (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974). From September 1944 on, when the situation in Warsaw became dramatic because of terror, scarcity of water, food, and the deteriorating sanitary conditions, the reports alarm about “a distinctive precipice between the Home Army and the civilian population” (323). Civilians started to form civic committees to surrender the Rising, hang out white flags, and wanted to join the terrains controlled by the Germans (320–26). One of the reports holds that “the devastated civilian population, which collaborated with us so heroically in the first weeks of the Rising, and which now cannot see the end of its ordeal, lost faith in the sense of the Rising, and is on the verge of endurance. Civilians are turning against the insurgents, and their authorities, both civil and military. Those moods affect the fighters—desertions, individual and in groups, are more and more common” (326).
112. A. Stasik, quoted in A. Ostolski, “Przestrzeń muzeum a polityka traumy,” 84.
116. Ibid.
117. Ibid., xviii.
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We are losing our national and cultural identity. Because of recent advances in technology and the easy availability and speed of air travel, different countries are communicating more often and are therefore becoming more and more alike. The same shopping malls and fast food outlets can be found almost everywhere. National identity built through sport is an important source of collective identification and is amongst the most powerful and visible symbols of nationalism. World-leading scholar on politics of sport Lincoln Allison notes, “All kinds of governments, representing every type of political ideology, have endorsed international sporting competition as a testing ground for the nation or for a political system. German Nazis, Italian Fascists, Soviet and Cuban Communists, Chinese Maoists, western capitalist democrats, Latin America juntas all have played the game and believed in it” (17). No count...