

# ECHOES

EUROPEAN COLONIAL HERITAGE MODALITIES IN ENTANGLED CITIES

## Museum of Warsaw Report #3

### Visitor Studies

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Researched within Work Package 3 'City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts'  
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## Visitor Studies at the Museum of Warsaw<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

This report contributes to Work Package “City Museums and Colonial Pasts” of the Horizon2020 project, ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. The researchers have been conducting in-depth, qualitative, analyses of Amsterdam Museum, the Museum of Warsaw, and Shanghai History Museum, three city museums representing a distinct position within colonial history (Ariese 2019a; Ariese 2019b; Bukowiecki 2019; Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak 2019; Pozzi 2019a; Pozzi 2019b; Ariese, Bukowiecki, Pozzi 2019). This report presents the results of research on the impressions and opinions of Poles and foreigners who visited the main exhibition of the Museum of Warsaw. The research primarily focused on the way this exhibition presents the history of Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, during periods when the city and Poland were under the rule of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

The research questions aimed to find out the visitors’ opinions on the museum’s concept for exhibiting things (from paintings and souvenirs to everyday functional objects) connected to Warsaw (Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak 2019, *Things of Warsaw* 2017). The researchers also wanted to find out the interviewees’ opinions on how the exhibition presented the history of Warsaw during the period when the city found itself under the rule of a foreign power despite its ethnic and religious diversity. The research questions raised the following issues: How should the history of Warsaw at a time when it was dependent on other countries be presented? What is the best way of conducting a meaningful discussion on the fact that Warsaw was a culturally diverse city? What narrative threads from the history of the city’s dependence should be shown? What terms can be used to describe the dependence of Warsaw and Poland on other countries? Are terms such as imperialism/post-imperialism, colonialism/post-colonialism adequate? To answer all these questions, we designed a focused group interview for three different kinds of potential visitors to the museum.

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## Previous research on the Warsaw Museum audience

Shortly after the Museum opened, in December 2017, a study of how visitors perceived the museum's main exhibition was conducted. The study was conducted by "GFK Polonia" research agency and was commissioned by the Museum of Warsaw. During the study, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with people of various ages. The results of this study are currently in the possession of the Museum. They were used for the purposes of this research project, but have not been made available to the general public.

Generally, the main exhibition of the Warsaw Museum was visually attractive to visitors, but during a visit to the museum they were unable to acquire the knowledge needed to consciously interact with the objects. The researchers found that the way the exhibition is built seems to express the assumption that the viewer has extensive historical knowledge. Consequently, this exhibition was particularly appreciated by people interested in history, in particular the history of everyday life. The exhibition was rated very highly by elderly people (60+), but the youngest group of visitors (people aged 20 to 30) found the exhibition tedious and devoid of exciting experiences. Visitors to the exhibition who had the opportunity to listen to an employee of the Museum talking about the exhibits or visited the exhibition with an audio guide took much more information from visiting the exhibition and were often more satisfied with their visit.

All the visitors were most intrigued by the Warsaw Data presentation, which was very highly evaluated in every aspect. In addition, visitors also often paid attention to the silver-plated objects displayed in the Museum, and to models of the city from various periods. Two portraits stood out from the other paintings and aroused a multitude of emotions: the portrait of Ali, a Warsaw insurgent born in Nigeria (during this study a portrait of Ali bare-chested was being shown at the exhibition, but during later research, it was replaced by a portrait of Ali in uniform) and a portrait of Bolesław Bierut (the first communist leader of Poland). At the time of this research, the Relics Room did not yet exist.

The researchers distinguished three main groups from among visitors to the Warsaw Museum:

- "Historians" – people equipped with the historical expertise for independent, "intellectual" reception of the exhibition. Few visitors have been included in this group. These people felt extremely comfortable in the Warsaw Museum. They were able to independently discover the exhibition's "choice items", and viewing objects enriched their knowledge.
- "Aesthetes" – people without the specialist knowledge to fully understand the exhibition, but interested in its visual aspects. A significant proportion of visitors were included in this group.

- “Laypersons” – people inadequately prepared to experience the exhibition on their own and generally underestimated its aesthetic value. A relatively large proportion of visitors were included in this group. People with very limited historical knowledge learnt little at the Warsaw Museum. They barely assimilated any knowledge from the descriptions of the exhibits and were unable to acquire any information from the exhibits themselves.

The main exhibition of the Warsaw Museum was appreciated by the first two types of visitor – “historians” and “aesthetes”, while the last type of visitor, “laymen”, often negatively evaluated the exhibition as they felt that it failed to meet their needs.

### **Research methodology**

This study was conducted using the focus group interview (FGI) method (Barbour 2008; Lisek-Michalska 2013). The study was conducted by “Kolektyw Badawczy” research agency in October 2019. Before the FGIs, participants were asked to make individual visits to the museum, during which they were encouraged to search for exhibits that they personally considered to be particularly memorable, interesting or shocking.

The researchers decided that the issues raised in the interviews would be so specific to their research focus that conducting these interviews among randomly selected people could give results indicating little interest in the history of the city and very limited understanding of the categories, such as colonialism/post-colonialism, which were to be the primary focus of the conversation. Recruiting people interested in such issues provided opportunities for in-depth discussion. In fact, the presence of culturally foreign heritage in Warsaw, the history of the city’s subordination to foreign powers and categories taken from both post-colonial and multiculturalism theory very rarely form part of public discourse in Poland (Skórczewski 2008; Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012; Zarycki 2014) and it can be assumed that many people do not encounter such theories often enough to form their own opinions. In such cases, the FGI method works very well. Talking in a group enables some people to inspire other group members to reflect more deeply on the issue being discussed, thereby emboldening them to present ad hoc opinions. Conversely, if we had decided to conduct individual interviews, this could have put interviewees in an embarrassing situation, especially if they were expected to comment on topics that they had not often encountered before and had no extensive opinions on.

The study was conducted in three groups: Polish students from Warsaw universities, Warsaw guides, and students from foreign countries who study at Warsaw universities. The recruitment for the study took place in two ways. Students were recruited using Facebook advertisements and, in the case of foreign students, emails sent through the IT systems operated by Warsaw universities. Warsaw guides constantly cooperate with the museum and many of them

have already been to various meetings organized by the institution. They were therefore recruited using the museum's database. This recruitment method made it possible to identify those who were interested to some extent in the history of Warsaw or in museums in general. The first differentiation criterion was the country of origin – one group was created from foreigners, and another two from Poles. The Poles were divided into these two groups using the criterion of their level of historical knowledge. This task presented few difficulties because the Warsaw guides, by definition, possessed a very good knowledge of Warsaw's history, while the students, though generally interested in history, possessed no specialist knowledge in this field. Selecting the groups in this way made it possible to assess how people who are not familiar with domestic Polish discourse yet come from countries where the post-colonial perspective is publicly discussed reacted to the proposed post-colonial categories. This selection also made it possible to examine how people with different levels of historical knowledge perceive the exhibition and individual objects.

There were 9 people in the group of Polish students: 6 women and 3 men. They were all studying either the humanities or social sciences. Three people were studying sociology. The other faculties the students belonged to, represented by one person each, were: Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Spatial Management, American Studies, Museum Studies and Art History. There were 7 people in the group of Warsaw guides: 3 women and 4 men. There were 10 people in the group of foreign students: 5 women and 5 men. Two people in the group represented each of Russia, Italy and Turkey, while the others came from China, Colombia, Germany and France. They were studying the following fields: Safety Engineering, Oriental Studies, International Relations, Economics, Architecture, Art History, Computer Science (2 persons), Cultural Studies and Psychology.

Before the FGIs, the interviewees were asked to make an individual visit to the museum, which they documented in the form of a short photo essay (for which they were provided with guidelines in writing; see Annex 1). The essay contained 5 photos and a description of what had impressed the interlocutors at the exhibition (i.e. what had attracted their curiosity or surprise, what they liked). Everyone was also asked to provide a short description for each photo they had taken of an object, explaining why they had chosen the object in question.

On the day of the focus interview, the interlocutors first listened to a lecture by one of the museum staff about the curator's concept for the exhibition and a brief introduction to the city's history. During the description of the city, the museum employee emphasized the history of dependence (on the Russian Empire) throughout the 19th century and a large part of the 20th century (the German occupation, 1939-1945; dependence on the USSR, 1945-1989). Each interlocutor was then given a map of the museum with several marked areas that he/she had to examine and read descriptions of. There were five places on the map:

1. The museum basement and an installation titled “Warsaw Data” that presents demographic and spatial changes that have occurred in the history of Warsaw, which is also presented as a culturally diverse city (in the past and present).
2. The Souvenir Room – the interlocutors were asked to pay attention primarily to a plate containing a view of the Russian Orthodox Church on Saxon Square<sup>2</sup> and other souvenirs of the invaders and occupiers (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Plate containing a view of the Russian Orthodox Church on Saxon Square. Picture by Łukasz Bukowiecki, 2019.

3. The Views of Warsaw Room – the interlocutors were asked to pay attention to a painting by the Polish painter, Marcin Zaleski titled “The Feast of Jordan in Warsaw” (Fig. 2). This painting depicts a Russian governor against the backdrop of the Royal Castle in Warsaw during an Orthodox religious holiday.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was built in the centre of Warsaw by the Russian authorities in 1884-1912. It was the tallest building in the city before First World War. After the Polish state regaining its independence, the shrine was demolished and never rebuilt. The plate presents a procession of Germans troops through Warsaw after the city had been seized in 1915.



Figure 2: Marcin Zaleski, “The Feast of Jordan in Warsaw”. Picture by Łukasz Bukowiecki, 2019.

4. The Portrait Room – the interlocutors were asked to pay attention to two paintings: a portrait of Ali (a contemporary painting by Karol Radziszewski depicting a musician of Nigerian origin who fought in the Warsaw Uprising) (Fig. 3 and 4).and a portrait, dating from the 1950s, of the first communist Polish leader Bolesław Bierut (with a panorama of rebuilt Warsaw in the background) (Fig. 5). The museum currently contains a portrait of Ali in uniform, but, as mentioned above, during the previous research undertaken at the museum, another portrait used to hang there of a bare-chested Ali. All the interviewees were shown both versions of this portrait during the interviews



Figure 3 and 4: Karol Radziszewski's portraits of Ali. Pictures by Łukasz Bukowiecki, 2019





Figure 5: Portrait of the first communist Polish leader Bolesław Bierut. Picture by Łukasz Bukowiecki, 2019

5. Relics Room – mainly personal items from the period of partitions and Second World War, including a plate containing Picasso's autograph from his visit to rebuilt Warsaw in 1948 (Fig.6).



Figure 6: Plate containing Picasso's autograph from his visit to rebuilt Warsaw in 1948. Picture by Łukasz Bukowiecki, 2019



After the museum visit, the focus group interviews took place. These lasted about 2 hours. The Polish students were presented during the interview with short, written definitions of the following terms: imperialism/post-imperialism, colonialism/post-colonialism. They were asked to read these before discussing them (Annex 2). During the conversation, the foreign students were presented with two descriptions providing background information contextualizing the portraits of Bolesław Bierut and Ali (Annex 3). Each interview was transcribed, and it is the transcription along with the photo-essays of the interlocutors that constitute the empirical material analysed in this report.

## **Analysis of the empirical data**

### **The items that attracted the most attention at a first glance (photo essays)**

During the visit to the museum preceding the interviews, all the interviewees visited the main exhibition on their own. They were supposed to select and photograph the 5 objects that were most memorable for them, or interested, surprised or touched them the most. In addition, they were asked to write a short comment explaining their choices. The interlocutors' choices varied widely, but some rooms or exhibits attracted more of their attention than others. Five members of the group of Polish students said that they liked the Warsaw Data presentation the most, although each person paid attention to different types of data. Three people liked the View of Warsaw Room the most. Other people wrote about exhibits such as the models of Warsaw (primarily the one relating to the period of King Stanisław August Poniatowski's reign) and various types of damaged everyday item. For two people, the portrait of Ali and the Relics Room turned out to be interesting, and these later became a subject of conversation during the FGI. Other people did not pay any attention to these objects.

For the Warsaw guides as well, the Warsaw Data exhibit was the most interesting part of the exhibition. This was indicated by 4 people. The same number of people noticed the models. However, as many as 5 people indicated that the most moving and memorable exhibition space, both as a whole and for its individual elements, was the Relics Room. As one guide wrote: "For me, the most moving point of the whole exhibition. The exhibited items enable us to 'touch' the surviving scraps of the history of the urban space." (PW2). In addition, 3 people noticed the miniatures of Warsaw monuments and found that their placement in the museum was a great idea: "King Zygmunt at your fingertips. Normally so distant that only his figure can be seen, and here he can be seen in detail, like other miniature monuments. A great opportunity to look closely and then try to identify these various elements in their 'natural' form". (PW4). Apart from the Relics Room, none of the other items discussed during the FGI had attracted the attention of the guides.

The foreign students paid most frequent attention to the Relics Room (3 people). This evoked strong emotions in these people. As the Columbian student wrote: “The room of relics has the potential to make spectators reflect and rethink the history coming from their emotions. It allows [them] to recognize victims as subjects with individual lives, with families and memories that are narrated by the objects donated to the museum. A relic goes beyond being a simple object developing an intimate relationship with a community with a shared past, which is the city of Warsaw in this case. The museum is a place for the things of Warsaw, whether these objects are excavated, bought, found or donated, they all played a part in the building of the city and its identity.” (SZ3). In addition, the students paid attention to the Photography Room and the presentation showing the evolution of Warsaw’s coat of arms. In addition, two people noticed the portrait of Ali. As in the case of the Polish students, no one paid attention to the subjects that the FGI related to, except for the portrait of Ali and the Relics Room.

Generally, it can be said that although different people paid attention to different objects, it is most interesting, from a research perspective, to observe which of these seemed to convey information about the history of the city in an accessible manner and which evoked strong emotions associated with the feeling of “touching” the history of individual people. The attention of younger people was also attracted by the portrait of Ali (although this only applied to a few people) due to the fact that it stood out very well from the other portraits in the room where it was being exhibited. The interlocutors’ comments on selected items did not raise the topic of the city’s cultural and religious diversity of the city at all. Only one of the Polish students drew attention to a silver candlestick containing elements referring to Jewish culture, but thought it was a very good idea to present this object as testimony to its creator’s craftsmanship, rather than as an element associated with one of the ethnic groups living in Warsaw. In addition, no person referred to such terms as “subordination”, “dependence”, “foreign heritage” or “imperialism” and “colonialism” in their comments.

### **Opinions on the exhibition – between knowledge and experience**

For the Polish students, the nature of the main exhibition was very problematic. Rather than having a single narrative, it is divided into single themed rooms containing individual items assigned to a given category. Students asked to define the main exhibition using several adjectives said that it was inspirational, diverse, evolving and important. They also used terms such as eclectic and austere and more negative terms such as chaotic, insufficient labelling of exhibits and tiring.

In Poland, many of the most visited museums are narrative museums (Kowal and Wolska-Pabian 2019) in which the visitor receives information about historical events: causes, chronologies and consequences. The statements given by Polish students show that they are accustomed to this

kind of museum and therefore expect this kind of narrative. However, the Museum of Warsaw is completely different because it focuses on presenting objects and does not propose any coherent, developing narrative (either chronological or thematic). One person said: “I think a lot of people are confused and don't know how to visit it. It [the museum] is not intuitive”. Another person expected the museum to offer a specific interpretative framework and said that she was unable to find the museum’s “guiding idea”. The opinion was also expressed that it was probably not possible for the creators of the exhibition to present such an idea: “I got the impression this museum’s vision was a little lazy because there was such a huge number of objects to deal with”. In other words, the curators preferred to confine themselves to grouping objects into themes rather than incorporating them into some kind of interpretative framework simply because they had collected together so many exhibits.

One student whose family has been living in Warsaw for generations also doubted whether the exhibition would be understandable for people not living in Warsaw: “I thought I would receive more guidance on how to visit it. Of course, it is cool that there are so many exhibits, because you can create your own tour and go to those rooms that are more interesting for us. I’m saying that from the perspective of a person who has lived in Warsaw since birth and whose Varsovian roots go back generations... I think that for people from another city it could be... the number of these exhibits could be overwhelming (...) And the fact that this narrative is missing may, at first glance, discourage visitors from viewing the exhibition.” Moreover, the current nature of the exhibition not only makes it impossible to learn about the history of Warsaw, but also does not even present any coherent vision of the city. One of the students noticed this while commenting on the Museum’s promotional slogans, which emphasize that “everyone can find their own Warsaw here”: “I used to like that narrative that everyone could find something for themselves, find his or her Warsaw, and so on. But now I don’t think that is happening. I’m from Warsaw, my family also comes from here, and the visit to this museum somehow doesn’t support my sense of identity. These things are fine, you can see a lot of mermaids, postcards, and so on, but somehow it doesn’t influence my perception of the city”. According to this interpretation, the museum, rather than being a place to consider the nature of the city and its identity, is nothing more than an organized collection of artifacts and its role is limited to presenting its collection as simply as possible.

The fact that many people regretted that the exhibition does not provide a chronological narrative of the history of the city was also clear from the positive manner in which they assessed the museum basement, where the Warsaw Data exhibition is located. This presents demographic data and the city’s spatial development using maps and models. The interviewees emphasized that this is an informative and interesting place for visitors that gives a great deal of information that is not widely available: “I like this information in the basement. I mean, this ‘Warsaw data’. This is a

curiosity. Information which people usually don't think about". Interestingly, the demographic information was not only assessed as being informative, but also stirred visitors' emotions. Apparently simple factual information on how much the composition and amount of Warsaw inhabitants changed after Second World War was described as moving.

There was also a group of people among the interviewees who liked the concept of the main exhibition very much. As one student noted: "there is great diversity here. I know that a lot of people don't like it. Actually, I like it when I have many things to see". In addition, they pointed out that this is the kind of museum that should be visited at least twice, because only during the second visit can the visitor knowledgeably interpret the message concealed by the individual items: "these items started to speak to me, for example, they began to appear in my mind in the context of one event, then another. I put them together and the second time I definitely liked it more". The students noticed that the main exhibition, by virtue of its form, forces any visitor accustomed to Polish narrative museums to change their habits: "But maybe you can simply change your approach and say that you will come today and view it, and next time you will come back and look at something else". From the perspective of the students from the Polish universities, this is a museum that does not directly provide visitors with factual knowledge of the city's history, with the implication being that it is worth returning to the exhibition several times to discover other objects. A good summary of this view was given by one of the students: "basically, the recipient can attribute meaning to this item by themselves. On the one hand, this is a disadvantage if someone wants to learn something, but on the other hand, it could be an advantage if someone wants to experience something".

This tension between the vision of the museum as a "provider of historical knowledge" and "a place to experience the past" was very evident not only in the students' opinions, but also among the group of "professionals" – the Warsaw tourist guides. One of them indicated that visiting the museum without proper preparation or without a guide would result in visitors not learning anything about the history of the city: "this museum does not have a form that leads us through the history of Warsaw. I think that if someone visited the museum alone, after leaving it, no matter how much time they spent there, they would not have become familiarized with the history of the city. This is the Museum of Warsaw. I believe that it should fulfill this function. If someone is not from Warsaw and does not know this city, they won't find out anything here. (...) it's great to visit it with a guide, then it's beautiful." However, many interlocutors drew attention to the museum's role as a kind of chronicler of the city's everyday life. When viewed from this perspective, the shift from following a purely historical narrative to presenting everyday objects and people associated with Warsaw begins to make sense, as it shows a different historical truth about Warsaw, which is and was also a place of everyday life for many people: "uprisings and other

conflicts were usually separated by several decades. And during these few decades, people used to live more or less normally. Let's say it was a city of townspeople, of ordinary people who did something, lived off something and were interested in something. And these objects tell us about this in some way. Of course, there are also certain hiatuses, like the Swedish Deluge, and afterwards the first, second, third uprisings, and so on, and finally, obviously, the worst of these – the Warsaw Uprising, which was followed by the rebuilding of the city. But the clue [to understanding the city] is what happened in the meantime". It is therefore important for the Warsaw guides that the main exhibition allows visitors to build many different narratives, including those focusing on the everyday life of "ordinary people". However, they believe that this is not a museum that would meet the needs of people who want to learn about the history of Warsaw in a short time.

The place where the museum is located is also very important for the interlocutors: "Authentic buildings, authentic interiors. Maybe not used as residential interiors. But authentic from the basement up to the attic. This is a great advantage". Thanks to this location, the museum stands out from many other institutions that exist in brand new, specially designed buildings. This enhances the experience of coming into contact with the past and everyday life as it used to be.

In general, Warsaw guides evaluate the main exhibition of the Warsaw Museum positively. They described it using such adjectives as: diverse, interesting, unconventional, individualized, emotional, complicated, cross-functional, logical and attractive. Unlike the Polish students, they did not use any negative expressions. This was also the case for the foreign students, who defined the exhibition as: vivid, creative, interesting, intimate, full of personal things, diverse and interactive.

The foreign students, like the other groups of interlocutors, found it difficult to clearly assess the museum exhibition, which they also perceived as lacking any form of historical narrative. One interlocutor noted: "I guess it's a matter of what kind of perspective you have when you go into the exhibition. What you expect to happen there. So, if you don't know much about the history of Warsaw yet, maybe you won't be satisfied, actually, because sometimes you are interested in certain objects, but there is no historical background [to contextualize them]". According to one foreign student, it is not a museum that will satisfy visitors after one visit: "I could not enjoy myself and the objects I've seen that much, because it was, like, both [chronological and thematic] layers all the time. So, actually, I think that what makes sense is to visit that museum more often, because today I saw many other things that attracted my attention. So, I think it's quite difficult, if you are here on the Old Town Square and you are, like: 'oh, maybe I will go to this exhibition for one and a half hours'". The most important thing for the next person was that visitors should prepare to visit the museum. He believed that without any historical knowledge of the city, it would be difficult not only to discover the general idea that the exhibition wished to present, but also impossible to fully understand the individual objects that are presented there: "And also I think that although the

things can tell the story of themselves, you cannot fully grasp all the important issues about it when you don't have the information somewhere or you are not having a guided tour. So I had this ... when I was here the first time, I was, like ... 'oh ok, I'm so interested in this object, but I cannot find anything more about it', and I would have asked someone from the exhibition. But I think that is the also, like, the matter of how biased you are and what kind of background you yourself have with what you have studied or what you have seen here in Warsaw”.

However, for some interviewees, who focused more on the exhibits, the museum was offering something very interesting that departed from the common practices used in other museums: “Now, today we are also having basically everything which is related to Warsaw, and I think it might be an interesting way to show history in a less historical, typical museum manner”. Even if some students felt disappointed by the lack of historical narrative, they still appreciated items belonging to “ordinary people”: “I think that at some points I was disappointed, but I appreciated a lot of the curators' decisions. I think it's very important to show the small things that are very close to the people, and not only high-class culture art and objects”.

As was the case with the Warsaw guides, the Museum's main building and the area surrounding it made a great impression on the foreign students: “Especially the site of the museum is really impressive too. And maybe if this museum was in a different part of the city, it wouldn't be so impressive, but you can see the Old Town, you can see old buildings and that's really good”. Interestingly, this issue did not appear at all in the statements of the Polish students. Perhaps their experience of living in Warsaw since birth or for many years had accustomed them to the appearance of this part of the city. They did not emphasize its uniqueness, which turned out to be so interesting for the foreign students. One of the foreign students described the Old Town where the museum is located: “it was burned, and then it was rebuilt, but only with new buildings. It was a really big project and I know that the Old Town is on the UNESCO list, and I think it is the only project in the world like this”.

Many of the foreign students did indeed approach the museum from such a comparative perspective. They frequently referred to the appearance of other cities (mainly European) they knew and the museums that were located there. Against this background, the idea of a museum with a number of different types of exhibit seemed very interesting to one of the interlocutors: “one thing I don't really like about Italian museums or other places too, is that you maybe have a museum of paintings and you have maybe twenty thousand of them, and after the fiftieth you don't know who you are anymore... [everyone laughs; some male says – the same in France] So I think it is very nice, you cannot really get bored with what you are looking at”. In addition, the interlocutors stressed in their statements that they do not know the history of Warsaw well and therefore it is difficult for them to assess the exhibition in detail. However, one person alone noticed some



shortcomings in the museum exhibition: “And on the other hand, I had the feeling that not all the stories of Warsaw are told, being told. From... like I think I started from the historical floor on the basement and there was this one chart showing different religions and nationalities, and actually I didn’t find any Jewish relics, like the only Jewish mention I found was a single jar of marmalade. This one was from the Jewish store. And this is quite sad”. None of the Polish students paid any attention to this and only one of the Warsaw guides spoke about the lack of information regarding Jews living in Warsaw: “In this museum, I personally miss a small room of this kind related to the history of Polish Jews, although we do have Polin – Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Nevertheless, while we are talking about multiculturalism, we are showing that Russians and Germans were here, so something else related to the Jewish community should appear as well”.

When all of the items collected in an exhibition about a city are not supported by a narrative about this city and its changing nature, this can lead to the city being perceived as having been homogenous throughout its history in terms of religion and ethnicity (even if such a vision is not explicitly expressed anywhere). Thus, although focusing on objects, primarily those related to everyday life in the city, can provide visitors with the impression that they are experiencing the lives of people from older periods of history, if there is no accompanying narrative, this makes it difficult to find out about the diversity which was often a daily reality for such people.

Generally, representatives of all three groups, when discussing the museum’s main exhibition, drew attention to the lack of historical narrative or general vision of the city’s identity. For one group of people, this was a problem, while for others, it provided an interesting contrast to the presentation of museum content in other places they had visited. Many interlocutors approved of the idea of using objects to portray everyday life and “ordinary people”, but also pointed out that any visitors wishing to benefit from such an approach may need to visit the museum several times and do some preparation in advance. Overall, it can be concluded that the interlocutors perceived the Museum of Warsaw as a cultural institution that encouraged visitors to experience and explore the past as individuals rather than a museum presenting knowledge contributing to a vision of Warsaw today and in the past.

### **The objects the researchers defined as “colonial” or “multicultural”**

#### ***Plate containing an image of an Orthodox Church***

The Polish students noticed the church on the German commemorative plate dating from First World War and identified it with Eastern Orthodoxy (Fig. 1). Although half of the students did not know the history of this building, this image became a pretext for them to talk about the commemoration of Russian heritage in Warsaw. It was clear to everyone that its presence in the exhibition symbolized the Russian connection in the city’s history: “This orthodox church was in

Warsaw. Nobody will change that, so in my opinion it should have remained there like the Palace of Culture, which some people now want to demolish for some reason. This church was there as well". While the object in the museum is not controversial, the issue of commemorating the Russian presence in Warsaw gave the Polish students mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was argued that this historical Russian presence does not raise any negative emotions these days and is nothing more than an element of Warsaw's history: "We will not renounce this part of the history ... we have to consider whether it arouses such emotions in society or whether it's maybe something neutral, let's say like the word 'shoemaker' inscribed in Cyrillic [uncovered when a building was undergoing renovation]. In my opinion, this is not controversial. I don't know if everyone will agree. Nevertheless, it's more of a historical monument". Interestingly, the arguments of those students who thought otherwise, believing instead that reminding visitors of Russia's presence in Warsaw could have a negative impact, did not refer at all to the reactions of Varsovians. They were only interested in the potential reactions of foreigners. Some students believe that tourists from the West confuse Poland with Russia, a mistake that is negatively perceived by Poles and this sense of confusion should not be reinforced: "If it was made very clear that this was only part of our history and that [the plate has only been exhibited here] to show that we used to be [under the rule of Russia], but haven't been for some time, it would make sense then, in my opinion. Otherwise, this would be confusing or misleading for an average tourist".

However, the presence of the plate with the image of the Orthodox church in the museum was very interesting for the interlocutors. Nonetheless, once again, the problem came up of why there was no supporting historical narrative at the main exhibition: "This is a perfect object for telling so many stories: first, the Russian partition, then, First World War, the Germans in Warsaw, and finally [the city's] destruction. In my opinion, if there was a narrative there, this would be the perfect starting point on which to build something like that". Unfortunately, the object does not in itself evoke such associations, because you need to know the city's history well to be able to understand its uniqueness and narrative potential. According to one of the interviewees, such exhibits make it possible to portray Warsaw as an ethnically diverse city: "when we have things with German inscriptions or [inscriptions in] some other foreign languages, we can see the city's multiculturalism. So, in my opinion, this is a good place to show that Warsaw is not only homogenously Polish, but also more multicultural".

Warsaw guides, by definition, have broad knowledge of the city's history. Therefore, they discussed exhibits that were presented to them more precisely. It was clear to all of them that the commemorative plate containing the image of the Orthodox church should primarily be regarded as historical evidence of how the city looked at the time of its production: "It simply forms part of the artefacts from our city. Although everyone has really tried very hard to eradicate the

Russianness in Warsaw, to get rid of it as much as possible, we still have such places”. Since it testifies to a genuine, albeit more diverse, past, it has every right to be placed in the Warsaw museum: “If we put aside such emotional attempts to interpret this object, it would turn out that this is a testimony to history. If we approach this case neutrally, it has a right to be here”. However its presence raises a bigger problem – attitudes towards Russian and Soviet heritage in the city space, which, according to the guides, is very often pushed to the very margins of public awareness, or negatively assessed: “There are many places that are associated with the Russians’ presence in Warsaw, many of them. Even here, within the Old Town, there used to be several Orthodox churches, such private Orthodox churches that mainly served residents (...) there also used to be an Orthodox church in the Royal Castle. Not everyone knows about this because we have been very effective at repressing this period of Russian domination. Just as, now, a lot of people are trying to do the same with the PRL [Polish People’s Republic] period, as if this PRL did not exist here. There was a war. The war ended and then, for a long, long time, there was nothing. And now we are here. There were no achievements. Every time someone tells me the Palace of Culture should be destroyed because it is a symbol of Soviet domination, I think, in that case, we may as well destroy the 1,000 schools built to mark the occasion of the millennium of the Polish state, because they were also built during PRL times and the PRL was very closely associated with the Soviet Union. So, let’s get rid of this period. It didn’t exist. We don’t remember. It seems to me that the same happened with those years when we were under the partitions”. However, the interlocutors realized that the majority of Warsaw residents are not aware of the Russian history of the city. Similarly, Polish society knows about the period when Poland was partitioned from what they learned at school, where curricula tend to focus on hostile actions against Poles and on struggles for independence, while little is said about the social and economic development under Russian rule: “This is such a difficult question, especially since we are talking here among people who undoubtedly know incomparably more about the history of Warsaw than the average city dweller. The question is how to commemorate it, for example, in urban space – if any objects dating from the partitions or any traces of technical achievements have survived. We know they exist. So, the question, now, is: How can such a general tendency for martyrdom and patriotic orientations be overcome? That is what you were saying – how can attention be drawn to the fact that during the partitions, for example, most Polish architects and engineers were educated in St Petersburg, so what they brought here as Poles was also bound up with the fact that Warsaw was part of the Russian Empire?”. The lack of knowledge among the inhabitants of Warsaw means that the city’s Russian heritage in the city goes unnoticed, as it is widely interpreted as being of Polish origin.

The foreign students generally found the plate incomprehensible (only one person associated the image of the Orthodox church with the presence of Russians in Warsaw). They also did not form any other associations or opinions about this exhibit. However, they did not agree that the plate reflected Warsaw's multiculturalism, as one of the Polish students had claimed. They pointed out that multiculturalism cannot be meaningfully spoken of when the country in question is under occupation: "Maybe this is just a way for Russians to appropriate Warsaw for themselves. I'm not sure it's very multicultural". However, one student from Russia believed that contemporary Warsaw could be described as a multicultural city, mainly due to the large presence of Ukrainians and Russians.

### ***The "Feast of Jordan" painting***

Another element of the exhibition that showed the presence of Russians in the city was a painting depicting the Orthodox Feast of Jordan church holiday being celebrated in 19th-century Warsaw (Fig. 2). However, the lack of any explanation guiding the viewer to some form of interpretative framework clearly presented a major problem to the Polish students when they attempted to discuss this painting: "For me, this is just an exotic picture of a world that has basically passed away. For example, I would like to learn something about this holiday, when, why, and who celebrated it, and if it was only recognized by Orthodox believers. I just don't know what's going on here. I think we are interpreting it from our perspective. Probably, then, it won't be so controversial. Maybe I don't know because I have no knowledge of this subject". One of the students also pointed out that this is the only painting in the whole museum depicting a social scene. However, the students did not perceive it as an image expressing Russian domination in Warsaw in the 19th century. In fact, most of them said that they could not interpret it and it did not arouse any emotions in them. One student noted that it is the museum's responsibility to decide how it presents its collections: "When I look at this exhibit, it's a question of which direction the museum wants to take it in. Is it a question of presenting German or Russian domination or showing multiculturalism". From his point of view, rather than the painting gallery or the Views of Warsaw Room, it was actually the room displaying silverware that provided the most accurate portrait of Warsaw as a multicultural city: "The entire silverware room seemed to me to be so multicultural because we had Polish, foreign and Jewish crafts next to each other, without prioritizing or evaluating them, just side by side. It was probably the best example of multiculturalism". It is worth noting that only one student searched for and found signs of the city's ethnic diversity and interpreted them in terms of multiculturalism. This can probably be put down to his field of study, in this case, Cultural Studies, a subject in which concepts relating to multiculturalism are often analysed.

The Warsaw guides generally were not interested in this painting. When asked if they believed that it presented Warsaw's multiculturalism, they made it clear that they did not. One of the interlocutors said: "For me, it's a kind of slight shift of emphasis from the former Royal Castle, to other areas, namely to Eastern Orthodoxy, to Russian religion. As for me, if we were to show multicultural Warsaw, a much better example would be, for instance, Gierymski's painting "Trumpet Festival". Actually, this is a different religion, but all I'm trying to say is that, in that case, this relates to another nation living alongside [us]. In this other case, we had a dominant culture or religion imposed on us". According to the interlocutors, the culture of the dominant group occupying a given country cannot be regarded as a manifestation of multiculturalism. However, it is undoubtedly the case that the Jewish community's longstanding presence in Warsaw made the capital a culturally and religiously diverse city, but it would be difficult for visitors to appreciate this diversity from the very few isolated Jewish artifacts on display in the exhibition.

### ***Ali's portrait***

The portrait of Ali, a Nigerian-born participant in the Warsaw Uprising, was also presented to the interlocutors as an example of the cultural diversity of Warsaw's residents (Fig. 3 and 4). All the Polish students perceived this exhibit very similarly. For them, the decision to display it expressed the museum's desire to show how diverse the inhabitants of Warsaw are. According to one person, the stark stylistic contrast between this portrait and the others presented in the same room greatly enhances the power of its message: "All the other portraits look like they were painted in the nineteenth century, and [what is noticeable] here is not only the distance in time of at least 50 to 100 years separating this painting from these others, but also the style [of the portrait] itself and the diversity of the person depicted. I think it creates a contrast and attracts a great deal of attention by showing that Warsaw's heroes were not as homogeneous as we think". Another student also considered the decision to display Ali's portrait at this specific location to be a clearly defined educational action: "maybe anyone standing here will think about the fact that both foreigners and homosexuals, as well as transsexuals and other people who are not always tolerated, took part in the uprising and also fought for this city. I know this is a very naive theory, but I like thinking that maybe one day something like that will happen and apart from shouting about the Uprising and about Great Poland, they will think about who actually took part in those struggles. So I'm glad to see this painting here, especially because it stands out and it is easy to pay attention to it. During my last visit, I saw that some children were interested in it and were asking their parents why this man is black. And their parents more or less vaguely tried to explain it somehow. So I would definitely put this painting in a museum". According to this interlocutor, the painting performs its role because it raises questions and forces everyone to think about the history

of the city. However, this goal would have been better achieved if it had been incorporated into a narrative: “There are many exhibits that ask questions, but I haven’t always found the answers.” Once again, the shortcomings of the main exhibition at the museum were defined in terms of incomplete information about the exhibited objects. They do not speak “for themselves” and more information is required to interpret them than that which is currently available in the museum.

However, when it came to the message that Ali’s portrait was giving, the students thought that the second version of this painting (with Ali in uniform) definitely communicated this better: “In my opinion, the painting that is hanging there now is more appropriate. He’s more or less dressed like a typical insurgent. The first one is not so clear.” Another person added: “[When he’s] in uniform it’s easier to interpret. Let’s admit that the more people this painting will convince, the better. Not everyone is analysing each individual exhibit. Especially here, where there are so many exhibitions, so many exhibits. Therefore, in my opinion, it’s just easier to understand what’s going on [when he’s presented in uniform]”. Ali’s portrait was treated by the interlocutors as part of the museum’s educational activity aimed at promoting a vision of Warsaw as a diverse city. However, for one person, it was primarily a portrait of one of the capital’s inhabitants. To her mind, the portrait room was lacking in images of such “ordinary people”: “What I missed there were portraits of such ordinary Polish women and men, because there were some people who somehow left their mark in history, and I think that everyday life is interesting, especially for those people who are somehow connected with this city (...) I think it would be interesting if ordinary citizens were also presented in this museum. It would have a great impact on my imagination.” Characteristically, the people whose families have lived in Warsaw for generations most often demanded that the museum show the lives of “ordinary people” because this was most interesting for them.

The Warsaw guides’ assessments of Ali’s portrait were negative, primarily because of the huge contrast between this painting and the others located in the room: “this is a juxtaposition between such soaring art with something ... someone said he was getting a toothache just looking at it. For me, this is the first contrasting feature that immediately stands out. All these portraits, with their refined details, surround this one, which is sloppily painted with large spots and thick lines, so in terms of aesthetics, there is such a strong contrast to everything else around it”. The guides do not have too much to say about this portrait, besides noticing that the character in the uniform definitely fits the overall concept much more than the portrait of Ali bare-chested. In general, neither Ali’s character nor the decision to place his portrait in the museum provoked any comments. However, there was one exception, namely a man who recalled the controversy accompanying the theory that Ali participated in the uprising. There are no credible documents or testimonies confirming that Ali really took part in the struggle for Warsaw: “And now we are presenting a story that is not historically supported and only for the sake of political correctness.



Everyone is afraid to deal with this topic in some way, as they don't want to insult anyone or behave badly. In my opinion, this story is offending us, and offending the insurgents who we know were fighting for sure, and thousands of them are totally forgotten. Why are we forcing ourselves to look for someone else? Oh my God, I would really like this Ali to be an insurgent. That would be a great story". The interlocutor resented that the museum authorities' eagerness to dismantle the mono-national vision of the city's history had outweighed reliable, historical facts.

Ali's portrait, unlike any of the other objects, provoked a long discussion among the foreign students. Many stressed that they were very surprised when they saw this portrait at the exhibition: "I was super surprised. I will tell an anecdote, but I don't want to sound racist. But I was here four years ago, so I think you actually changed a lot within those four years alone. Since I come from Germany and I lived in... now I'm living close to Hamburg and Dortmund, so super, super diverse cities, with a lot of Turkish migration, from Arabic countries, Albania, Polish people, so very, very diverse. And when I came here, I actually needed to get used to Warsaw being very white. And it was very difficult for me, because I was not used to it (...) So that is why I was surprised to see this displayed in this building". The student from France also thought it was extraordinary, because even in a society diverse as the French, it is difficult to find images of black soldiers in museums: "When travelling around France, there are more black people but there are not a lot of representations of black people in Second World War or First World War (...) I am surprised to see a representation of a black soldier in Poland, because I think it's more of a white country. And... when we have nationalism today, I think it's good to see today there are not only white people, only Polish people fighting for Poland, there are some foreigners fighting here too". The student from Germany noticed a clear political declaration in the decision to exhibit the painting: "There are actually so many political statements that I saw in this exhibition. (...) So, I think it is good to be informed that it is from 2015, because it makes a huge difference when it was painted. (...) probably you would need to know more about the artist, and specify more about his historical background (...) It's probably like saying, it's not only the Polish people who have been living here back then and still nowadays and you have a more diverse perspective on the population here in Poland and a rather leftist view". For the student from Columbia, it was a positive sign that Poles are trying to deconstruct their historical canon: "it is an unusual sight here, but it was very interesting to see how there are parts of history that are usually not told. (...) So, I really like how it's placed there to give us a re-reading of the canonical history". Almost all the students were surprised by the presence of Ali's portrait at the exhibition and it had a positive impact on many of them. However, they were critical of the version of the painting in which Ali is presented bare-chested: "I would not be able to tell he is a soldier from the painting on the right. He looks like a rapper. Or something... Which is good, but when giving the message that he is a soldier, that he fought for Poland, I think

it's better to let this show". Others were more critical and drew attention to the stereotypical presentation of a black man in the portrait: "I have a thought about the first one that it is a super stereotypical perception of black people, with the big lips and the nose".

Of all the objects presented, it was Ali's portrait that provided the best pretext to talk about the ethnic diversity (or its apparent absence) in Warsaw. In this sense, the portrait performed its role of drawing visitor's attention to the issue of the presence of people from different cultures in the history of Warsaw.

### ***The portrait of Bolesław Bierut***

By contrast, the portrait of Bolesław Bierut (Fig. 5) did not arouse any emotions or controversy among the students. The decision to place it in the exhibition caused a dispute between the museum management and the city authorities and provoked controversy in many circles. However, from the students' point of view, this portrait is neutral: "In such a neutral category as people of power, Bierut has a right to be on this wall. I don't see anything controversial here." What is more, despite many people being outraged that Bierut's portrait is the largest in the portrait hall, some of the students did not notice this fact at all: "I have visited the museum a few times and did not pay any attention to this painting. (...) [In response to the question of whether painting's presence outrages him] No. Maybe [communism] is an issue that did not affect me that directly." Since the students are in that age category that did not experience life under communism, this period seemed to be nothing more than history for them. Therefore, they don't even approach the worst period of communism, when Bolesław Bierut was president, from an emotional perspective. According to them, he is simply one of the many people who have ruled Poland in the past. Since he was presented in a portrait in the museum against a background showing work on the reconstruction of Warsaw, one student suggested that more portraits could have been added to the exhibition to provide some context: "there could be more reconstruction architects included in this. I don't know if they had their portraits". This suggestion fits in with the museum's concept of a place where all of Warsaw's inhabitants are presented – not only the rulers but also the "ordinary people" who created the city.

The Warsaw guides were more aware than the students of the controversy aroused by the portrait of Bolesław Bierut. At the same time, they also understood that he made a significant contribution to the capital's reconstruction after it was destroyed during the war and they therefore all agreed that his portrait had to be present in the museum: "He was a very important person in the history of Warsaw. Although I would assess Bierut negatively, he had an immensely positive impact on the city's history, so he must be here. There, in the background, you can see that the reconstruction is booming. And this is a kind of testimony to his considerable legacy". However,

one person noted that controversial characters could not be left in a museum without any form of explanation: “It seems to me that since he is a very controversial person who arouses so many emotions, at least some information about him is needed”. The guides also drew attention to something that did not appear in the conversations with the other groups: the context in which Bierut was shown. Some of the people in the other portraits are also controversial, but so much time has passed since they were in positions of power that they no longer arouse such emotions:

“I would also come back to the fact that this is not a hall of fame on that wall. These are important figures in the history of the city. For example, there is Konstanty, who might have liked Poles, but Poles had every reason not to like him. And there are more such characters there. Characters in Russian uniforms. But of course, I don’t know all these characters that are commemorated there, but every second painting depicts a Russian officer or other dignitary. So, I wouldn’t think of it as some form of glorification”. Another person even noticed that this is a room showing how people with power were usually presented: “It’s very interesting to place him in this company. If we leave the role Bierut played in the history of Warsaw for a moment, what we have here is a fantastic, meticulous demonstration of how to present an important man. We can compare it with what was happening in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries and see that this is such a pose. After all, when this painting was created, there were completely different styles in art and here we can see that it so beautifully refers to what had been popular long before”. Therefore, the guides, rather than focusing on the individual persons depicted in the portraits, perceived the whole portrait hall, as a meta-message that not only showed people of power, but also how they were presented to others.

The portrait of Bolesław Bierut did not arouse any emotions or controversy among the foreign students. Nevertheless, they understood that given the fact he had been a communist leader, Poles might well judge him critically.

### ***The Relics Room***

The Relics Room aroused much more emotion among the Polish students. On the one hand, there were doubts regarding the criteria the custodians had used when deciding which items to place in it. On the other hand, some doubts were raised by the very name of the room: “The question is why the male insurgent’s uniform is in the Relics Room, but the female insurgent’s shirt is next to the other costumes. For me, it’s not coherent. I understand that it looks a little bit like we didn’t have anything to hang there or it’s simply less important. But there is no such comment explaining why it is less important. I’ve already mentioned that I began to wonder why this object is here and that object is there. Can we exchange them and, then, will everything still be the same? Doesn’t it matter? At that point I began to think about the sense that guided the creation of this

'Relics Room'. The Warsaw Uprising is an important topic for me. I'd rather not call it a relic. I wouldn't call it a relic at all, and when looking at the 'Relics Room', I expected something different from the toys exchanged for a child's weapon during the uprising. This story is also interesting, the fact that it took place, it's nice to see it, but I wouldn't call this room a 'Relics Room'. Without any extreme emotions, I think it can be offensive. For me, it's not, but I'm wondering what my grandfather would think, for example; [for him], it might be offensive and distasteful. Rather misplaced". However, one of the interlocutors indicated that the term Relics Room reflects the way of thinking in Polish society well: "I think that in the case of Poles, with their cult of martyrdom, calling it a Relics Room is the most appropriate [solution]."

The interlocutors were also questioned in detail about one of these items – a plate autographed by Picasso that he left during his visit to Warsaw after the war. Everyone recognized that this was an object that did not fit in with the general concept underlying the selection and display of exhibits: "In my opinion, on the one hand, it stands out, but on the other hand, it doesn't fit, because, for example, there was a glasses case belonging to one boy who died during the uprising that had that 'wow' factor. You have a person who sacrificed his life for a greater purpose and suddenly next to it the autograph of a famous artist who visited Poland once, not for the sake of Warsaw at all. What is it doing there? I don't know. The plate is a nice thing, I won't deny that, but why [is it displayed] in this room? I was surprised because I considered it to be a very interesting thing accompanied by a nice description explaining why he came, and so on, but why was this object with the others? I don't know". Nevertheless, for one of the interlocutors, it testified to a trend she had observed throughout the museum, one for juxtaposing very different objects that often do not have much in common: "I would say that it does actually fit in with the museum's narrative, because these things are mixed up and we have the opportunity to think about them amidst things that don't quite match each other."

Once again, the opinion was expressed that the museum was showing things, but not providing the stories of the people with whom these things were associated. One person said: "There was little in the way of storytelling but, for sure, there are some very interesting stories behind these objects. Such relics are presented in the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, where there is a jacket once belonging to a shot shipyard worker and a very detailed description of the story of the person who donated this jacket. I think it works very well on the imagination, but also enables you to learn a little bit about the history of this object and find out about an ordinary man from that period in the past".

The Relics Room aroused a great deal of emotion among the Warsaw guides. They focused on the emotional potential they had noticed in the exhibits and did not think that the history of the individuals associated with the objects was missing. This may be due to the fact that they know the

history of Warsaw well and many items have a clear message for them. For one of the women, the most touching exhibit was the monkey toy from the period of the Warsaw Uprising. When asked what was most memorable, she replied: “Firstly, the monkey. Secondly, the remains of a plaque in the neighbouring showcase that contains the names of people who had been shot in the yard, probably on Puławska Street, and then buried. The plaque was supposed to remember their names, or some basic information and dates. It’s simply amazing that on this impermanent material, something so transitory, [buried] somewhere under debris, such tangible history has survived up until our times. It’s amazing to me. It’s like going back in time and just being there in those ruins”. In fact, each of the interlocutors found something important in this room: “For example, every time I am shocked by the cigarette case belonging to the Mayor [of Warsaw] Stefan Starzyński, which shows how fleeting human life is, and how much this man brought to this city, probably the most of all”. Given the guides reacted in such a manner, it is not surprising that they consider the term “relics” to be the most appropriate for the collected items: “this whole display cabinet is basically a great reliquary of this kind; it is very accurate [this term]. It stands out from the other rooms because it is very emotional”. It is very important that these items are closely related to the inhabitants of Warsaw, which allows you to empathize with aspects of everyday life in the city: “I also really like the fact that it brings such an element, someone’s personal experience of such a kind, because we have a collection of objects that we see from the perspective of Warsaw’s history, and here we have one specific object whose history gives us such a micro perspective”.

Although the Warsaw guides like the emotional and personal potential of the exhibits displayed in the Relics Room of Relics the most, they think that the plate signed by Picasso (Fig. 6) does not fit in with the general concept. Such arguments are very similar to those raised by the students: “It just doesn’t suit the other objects. Picasso was the kind of person who could be associated somehow with the rest of this room, with this martyrdom. The fact that he was painting does not mean he was a special hero. He was indeed a very skilful businessman who knew how to promote himself, and how to make a great brand for himself. Yes, in fact, he was a very good painter, but I would move his plate to the souvenir section”. However, the most important argument relates to the lack of emotional potential in this exhibit: “The emotions associated with this plate eluded me. Every other object in this room is a real relic of the people associated with that object, and in the majority of cases, these experiences are tragic. It would be nice to have some positive experience for a sense of balance. For me, this plate does not carry any emotional potential at all.”

For the foreign students as well, the most important thing in the Relics Room was the emotional potential that the personal items carried. As one person expressed it: “It’s like little story in a big story”. Many people, much like the Warsaw guides, recalled the monkey toy: “The monkey,

because this monkey has seen a lot, even more than some people. It was in different countries, in Africa and Italy, as I remember... Am I right? And it lived through the war and maybe it was... somebody's toy which helped them to get through the fear of wars". All the interlocutors, including the foreign students, agreed that the plate with Picasso's signature did not match the room's concept because it displayed no potential to develop an intimate relationship between the visitors and that specific person: "And the rest of the objects really have an emotional and, I don't know, historical background... [they are] more intimate, more related to the people". Another interlocutor drew attention to the lack of items related to the Jewish community: "Ah, this is also a part where I missed the Jewish history, because there was a lot about the Warsaw Uprising or Home Army, but nothing from the Ghetto Uprising, as I said before, there was nothing to be found, which was a bit sad". Generally, all the research participants, regardless of age or origin, interpreted the Relics message similarly, but also liked it very much. However, many criticized the lack of an individual, human dimension in the presented objects. Undoubtedly, only the Relics Room satisfied the need to come into contact with the stories of Warsaw's "ordinary people".

**What are the opinions of visitors on the notions of colonialism/post-colonialism and imperialism/post-imperialism?**

All the Polish students agreed that terms such as "colonialism" and "post-colonialism" do not apply to Warsaw's history and contemporaneity (or more generally – to Poland). Their arguments can be divided into two groups. First of all, some interlocutors indicated that the term "colonialism" was not adequate to describe what was happening in Poland. One student said: "I studied American Studies, and colonialism has a different meaning for me. This is much more restrictive domination. That means you totally take over the culture and you mix it so much that it stops being itself. In Poland, to some extent, our culture has been preserved, because Poles had a very strong identity. We were dominated when it came to the economy and rebuilding of the city, and so on. Even though this influenced us, it did not have any impact on our identity and on who we are". Another person had similar feelings about using this term for the period of Soviet domination: "If colonialism imposes culture and is seen as domination, within the context of communism, we have to ask the question: did Poles really feel subordinate to the East? Did this really happen? Is it this kind of situation?" Additionally, one person drew attention to the racism that, in her opinion, always accompanies colonialism: "I wouldn't use such terms as colonialism and post-colonialism [in relation to Poland], because I've got used to the fact that colonialism was skewed with racist ideology all the time".



One argument against using the category of colonial discourse would be the fact that Poles have managed to preserve their culture despite extensive periods of ostensible foreign domination during which they never really felt completely dominated. It is worth pointing out that the literature on the subject also raises the argument that Poles maintained a “sense of superiority” over the Russian and Soviet empires, although there are still disputes over to what extent such a sense actually existed during the partitions and communist times, and to what degree claiming that it did exist is basically interpreting events with the benefit of hindsight (Rolf 2016; Zarycki 2004)

The second kind of argument used by students referred to the absence of the terms “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” in public discourse. In their opinion, such expressions are hermetic scholarly categories that are incomprehensible within the Polish context. Within the public discourse, such terms as “occupation” and “partitions” are commonly used. For this reason, the students believed that terms related to colonialism should not be used at all in the museum. One student noted: “I think that using such terms in a space like a museum requires extensive education in order for them to be understandable for every potential visitor and not only those who are well-educated or highly-educated in the humanities. So, I wouldn’t do that. It seems to be very risky and could be very negatively perceived by some people who simply won’t understand this concept, or these concepts won’t be clear to them at all”.

The term “imperialism” is definitely less controversial: “When it comes to imperialism, I have the impression that we mainly focus on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (...) I feel that you can see two influences through the prism of this exhibition, German [influence] and Russian [influence]. I would say that it is evident what a theatre of history this city was. (...) the kind of stage where various historical powers collided and somehow, more or less, generally more, left their imprint on this city”. Clearly, the impact of neighbouring European empires on the history of Poland and Warsaw was obvious to the Polish students, but they objected to some of the categories used to describe this. Notwithstanding the influence that certain foreign powers held over Warsaw and the clashes that took place between them over the city’s fate, the very fact that it was the Polish capital that they were struggling to gain influence over shows what an important place the city held in world history. Consequently, according to these students, the term “colonialism” should not be applied to this part of Warsaw’s history.

The Warsaw tourist guides held a very similar opinion. They believed the term “imperialism” is well-suited to nineteenth-century Poland: “When talking about the nineteenth century, it is preferable to use ‘imperialism’. After all, we, and especially Warsaw and the Kingdom of Poland, were part of an empire”. However, they had doubts over whether the period of Soviet domination could be described in the same way: “Up until the nineteenth century, these terms are applicable. However, the closer we get to the present day, the odder they sound to me”. Interestingly, the

guides were much more open to using the word “colony” in relation to Poland or Warsaw. For one of these people, this was a logical consequence of using the word “empires” to refer to countries that had seized Poland: “Of course, this can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Let’s say if something is an empire, then something must be its colony”. Even if the history of Poland can be viewed in terms of Poland being one of a number of “colonies”, the interlocutors believed it was important not to forget about the local specifics: “We used to be a kind of colony, but we were a unique colony. What is notable about post-colonialism is that [is bound up with] the political and economic relations in the modern world. And these relations are causing these [other] former colonies to really want to be colonies again. There is an influx of people to the metropolis. In general, sometimes I feel that they regret they are not colonies anymore and they would love to become them again. We do the opposite. We really don’t want to restore what happened, and we constantly emphasize that we need some individuality, some independence”. Even though this idea was expressed using other words, it was similar in spirit to what the Polish students said. Both groups shared a vision based on the notion that people from the other continents colonized by European countries have lost their culture, diversity and independence and are not able to restore them now. Meanwhile, Poland is a country that has always preserved its cultural diversity and Polish society has always strived for independence from other countries. This is a vision of the history of Poland which is strongly present in the Polish educational system as well as in public discourse and the social imagination.

The arguments used by the guides also refer to the way in which most Poles understand the term “colonialism” and what they associate it with: “That is why Poles do not necessarily think about themselves and the history of Poland in terms of colonies, because, in the Polish nomenclature, this term is mainly reserved for Africa, America, Oceania, and overseas territories”. Another interviewee stated openly that the categories “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” can even be considered offensive from the Polish point of view: “It seems to me that they [these categories] have some negative connotations. Because those nations that were colonized were at quite a low civilizational level, no matter how bad what I’ve just said is. (...) I mean, they also didn’t have, for example, such developed technology. Poles are therefore very reluctant to think about themselves in this way”. Generally, the dominant tendency among the guides was to highlight Poland’s local specifics. This best explains their unwillingness to use terms usually associated with other regions of the world: “I would avoid these terms because they are taking us somewhere, we really don’t need to go. To sum up, we should be more focused on what has happened locally and concentrate more on our own locality. So, I would avoid these terms and definitions”.

Interestingly, some people believed that the terms currently being used in Poland are much more universal and understandable than the term “colonialism”. One of the interlocutors admitted:

“I would rather use the Polish term, namely ‘the period of lost independence’. This should be translated into English, because it will be clearer, won’t it? The loss of independence is understandable to almost everyone and it also includes the exploitation of human and natural resources and taking advantage of the indigenous population”. Thus, no matter whether the guides were referring to the argument that local ways of defining local history should be preserved or whether they were searching for terms that seemed to them to be universal, they rejected the use of “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” as terms for describing the Varsovian and Polish situation.

The foreign students held a similar opinion. Two of them who came from countries affected by European colonialism (Columbia and China) had fairly clear beliefs about what kind of situations could be described as “colonial”. However, the other people also thought that these categories are not appropriate to describe the history of Poland: “I think colonialism won’t work at all, because it’s a totally different historical and cultural period. Poland didn’t even exist when the other countries had colonies, so it doesn’t work”. Exactly the same argument appeared as in the case of Polish students: using such terms will only confuse visitors, who will not be able to understand what these expressions mean within a Varsovian context. Conversely, the term “imperialism” seemed to suit this context much better: “the colony was something else [altogether] and a country that had been colonized still existed somehow but was under economic rule. And, also, I would never start to adopt concepts [just because] they might fit in with some theory, because if you think of visitors coming to a museum exhibition, maybe they don’t know these terms, they don’t know what kind of tropes they include. So I think ‘imperialism’ works”. Again, as was the case during the conversation with the Polish students, it was an argument based on distance and cultural closeness that determined which situations were regarded as examples of colonialism, and which as nothing more than simple conquest: “distance matters somehow. If you have ... I mean if I look at the European countries, how they colonized Africa in past centuries, they barely considered African to be humans. I don’t think they wanted to be close to them as a nation. So I think if you are dominating a country which is next to yours, you can’t really be colonizing it, because you want to get closer to the people of that country and you sort of care about them, of course in a sort of distorted way, but I think this is not what colonies are”. The same argument was also used when students were asked about their attitude to the Polish state occupying areas that are currently part of Ukraine and Belarus. None of the interviewees considered this situation to be colonial: “I also agree with the space and distance argument, in fact, because when you are talking about Ukraine and Belarus, actually, the cultures, the languages, sometimes even the religions, are so much closer to each other, when you compare Eastern European or even other Russia-related countries”.

These students therefore believed that creating an empire amounted to a country building a large state at the cost of its neighbours, an idea summarized well by one of the interlocutors: “post-imperialism is the best term, whereas colonialism is basically not connected anyhow. Because imperialism is building big states and basically this is why Poland was disappearing from the map. And post-imperialism means we are now free, but you have to rebuild, you have the consequences, you and your country, and that, I think, is more appropriate”.

According to the student from China, there is a significant difference between colonialism – a system that, for a long time, facilitated the exploitation and transformation of conquered communities – and occupation, which involves the seizure of territory as a result of warfare. This distinction can even be regarded as universal. It not only applies to the history of Poland, but also to China’s situation: “I think colonialism, I’m not so sure about it, because I think colonialism is different from occupation. Maybe because I think in China, Hong Kong was maybe colonized by the English people, maybe for some periods. Yes, so in... the provinces in the north of China were occupied by the Japanese for a while, during the Second World War. And I think these two are cases of... intrusion? I’m not sure about it, I think it’s quite different. But... I don’t think China was colonized during a war, it may have lost some wars over the whole period, but... So, I’m not so sure about those concepts. It’s quite different from what I think about those things”. The difference between these terms was also clearly visible to the student from Colombia: “I agree too with what you said about using specific terms, because always for me, coming from Latin America, using the term colonialism has a different connotation. Because I am colonized, I’m still in it, because it just erased a whole culture and, at least in Latin America, we have a crisis of identity, because we don’t belong to any side of history. So, using those terms in Europe is actually new for me. I have never thought that and I think the closest terms is actually imperialism, and that is still kind of difficult because, then again, we have to be very specific about which period of time we are talking about. Because not everything was a product of imperialism, but the occupations and partitions were so much like that”. Once again, the argument appeared that colonial categories cannot be applied to Poland because the thorough destruction of local culture that characterizes the colonial situation never actually occurred in this country.

All the interlocutors, regardless of their country of origin, educational level and knowledge of history, rejected the terms “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” as being adequate for describing the history of Poland and Warsaw. In all three groups, the types of argument that were employed were similar. Generally, they can be divided into three categories: 1) these terms describe the typical actions of colonists (who generally seek to destroy local culture), so are not adequate for describing a situation, like in Poland, in which the local culture was allowed to survive 2) the large cultural distance characteristic of colonialism (which results in racism against and even refusal

to recognize conquered peoples as human beings) does not exist in cases when neighbouring countries are conquered and 3) these categories are understood by a small group of academics, but not by Polish society at large. However, interviewees from all the groups acknowledged that the term “imperialism” could be used to describe at least some period in the history of Poland.

## Conclusion

Depending on whether they came from Poland or other countries and how much they knew about the history of Warsaw, the interlocutors drew attention to different elements that they liked at the Museum of Warsaw. However, it is possible to distinguish some common opinions shared by all three categories of interlocutor. The dominant belief among them was that the museum is unconventional. The interlocutors’ primary expectation before visiting the city museum had been that it would provide them with a narrative of the city’s history. Consequently, they were surprised that the museum primarily focuses on the presentation of objects rather than narratives. No one rated this approach negatively, but some thought that the main exhibition should have been supplemented with a historical narrative. When the interlocutors’ statements are analysed, a tension becomes evident between the two goals attributed to the city museum: “providing knowledge” and “experiencing the past”. Knowledge is necessary, according to the interlocutors, not only to understand Warsaw’s history and its contemporary identity, but also to be able to feel a sense of communion with what is most important in the Warsaw Museum – the things of Warsaw. The argument occurred during the interviews that the things whose historical context was not described are largely incomprehensible and the museum is therefore not using their potential. This is closely related to the second goal: experiencing the past, which the interlocutors valued very highly because it is very important to them to be able to make their own discoveries while exploring exhibition rooms and individual exhibits. Only then do these exhibits evoke the kind of emotions in them that help them to remember the story behind each exhibit. They therefore expect museums to provide them with the context they need to interpret exhibits.

Very often the concept of “authenticity” appeared in the interlocutors’ statements. Authenticity, in this sense, not only applies to the exhibits themselves, but also the place where the museum is located. The fact that the exhibition was being shown in old tenements deepened the feeling of being “immersed” in the past. In addition, some interlocutors (especially the foreign ones) thought that the view of the Old Town Square extending from the museum’s attic complement the exhibition very well and revealed its connection to the city. The museum builds the viewer’s sense of authenticity while experiencing the past by presenting him or her with many items related to everyday life in the city as well as things belonging to people who experienced

dramatic events related to the history of the city (such as war, uprisings, strikes). The Relics Room holds a special status in this aspect. Most of the interlocutors noticed it during their first visit. Furthermore, during the FGI, they emphasized the importance of this place and talked about the emotions that were evoked by it.

For interlocutors, the most interesting and memorable items were personal items of everyday use, which they defined as objects enabling them “to experience the past.” Consequently, they expected the museum to facilitate this kind of “experience” by providing historical information not only about individual objects and people, but also about the context within which they had functioned. Many interlocutors were also enthusiastic about the Warsaw Data exhibition, which allows visitors to examine the history of Warsaw both from a broad perspective (spatial development, demographic changes) and in terms of individual elements (the evolution of Warsaw’s coat of arms; Warsaw “Firsts”, i.e. the dates when various kinds of phenomena and inventions first appeared in the city).

Interestingly, the interlocutors did not primarily perceive the museum as a place where the history of the city is told and therefore did not refer to the history of Warsaw’s dependence on foreign countries when they talked about the experiences they gained from their solo trips to the exhibition. However, during the FGI, when they were asked about these issues, it turned out that they were aware of these period of Polish and Varsovian history, but their perception of “foreign heritage” depended on how extensive their knowledge was of the city and the epoch from which a given heritage originated. The students, irrespective of whether they were Polish or foreign, tended not to notice the Russian heritage in Warsaw and referred more often to the heritage of communism. This is probably also partially explained by the debates taking place in Warsaw in recent years that have tended to focus on the heritage of communist times, and in particular the continued existence of the Palace of Culture and Science. Debates about Russian heritage do take place, but few people are aware of them because they are generally held among a narrow circle of specialists rather than in public. This explains why the presence of Russian heritage in the city was primarily addressed by the Warsaw tourist guides.

However, as far as the interlocutors (regardless of age, origin and vocation) were concerned, categories such as “colonialism” and “post-colonialism” did not seem adequate to interpret the history of Warsaw and Poland. They argued that such categories did not apply to Poland because it was a “unique” colony, very different from those that Western European countries conquered on other continents. Generally, colonial/post-colonial discourse within the Varsovian or Polish context is considered to be hermetic and limited to a narrow circle of humanists. This was perceived as artificial as it did not reflect the specifics of the local history. However, the opinions of the interlocutors on the term “imperialism” were completely different. Most of them



agreed that it was an adequate term to describe the history of Warsaw, and in particular the period before its dependence on the Russian Empire. However, there were doubts as to whether it could also be used for the period of subordination to the Soviet Union. However, for the interlocutors, especially those from Poland, the most convenient terms are those they know from the Polish educational and public discourse, which include “occupation”, “partition” or “lost independence”.

The Museum of Warsaw is not regarded as an institution telling the story of ethnic and religious diversity (or multiculturalism) or the story of Warsaw’s dependency on foreign powers (accompanied by the presentation of heritage of different origin). Instead, it is mainly regarded as a chronicler of everyday life of the city. Every exhibit is viewed, in the first place, as being “Varsovian” rather than the product of life in an ethnically and religiously diverse city. Any existing information on the internal diversification of the adjective “Varsovian” is hidden and not visible to the audience.

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## Annex 1

### GROUND FLOOR

You are on the ground floor, go to the Souvenir Room and find a souvenir from Warsaw – a white plate containing a blue drawing of a place of worship and the inscription “Warschau”. Do you recognize this building?

### 1st FLOOR

Find a corridor containing a sculpture of a mermaid There are stairs next to the sculpture – take these up to the first floor, where you will find the Views of Warsaw Room. Find the painting titled “Celebrations of the Feast of Jordan”, completed in 1836 by Marcin Zaleski. Does this painting stand out from the others in the room?

### 2nd FLOOR

Return to the staircase and go up to the second floor. Look at two portraits in the Portrait Room – the one of Ali and the one of Bolesław Bierut. Note the other images that surround them.

### 3rd FLOOR

On the third floor, find the Relics Room with Picasso’s plate. Look at the other exhibits. Is the plate in the right room?

## Annex 2

**Imperialism** – a trend in international politics, especially intense in the second half of the nineteenth century, characterized by the global domination of several great powers. The term in a broader sense refers to the political and economic dominance of one political structure over others. In this sense, imperial tendencies have occurred from ancient to modern times.

**Post-imperialism** – a term referring to the period after the fall of empires, the processes accompanying this fall and processes and political, social, economic and cultural vestiges of the old imperial system.

**Colonialism** – a policy of conquest involving the subordination of territories and the people inhabiting them, and the exploitation of human and natural resources, often associated with racist ideologies and territorial expansion.

**Post-colonialism** – the cultural, social, economic and political heritage of colonialism, which, on the one hand, manifests itself in a desire to maintain political and economic relations between former colonial states and their former colonies, and, on the other hand, affects social and cultural identity in former colonial states and former colonies.

### **Annex 3**

**Bolesław Bierut (1892 –1956)** – a communist activist, leader of the Polish United Workers' Party (1948-1956). He was also the President of Poland in 1947–1952 and the Prime Minister of Poland in 1952–1954. A highly controversial historical figure responsible for the persecution of members of the anti-communist movement in post-war Poland.

### **Ali**

The man portrayed was a jazz musician, August Agbola O'Brown (1895-1976, code-named Ali), the son of a Nigerian father and Polish mother, who had moved to Poland in 1922. He is believed to have been the only black participant in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Having survived the war, O'Brown emigrated to the UK in 1958.

His life story was rediscovered several years ago and became immensely popular in the traditional media and on social media in Poland. The tributes to his life story included a series of paintings called "Ali" by the Warsaw-based artist, Karol Radziszewski (b. 1980). In several of his representations of O'Brown, Radziszewski connected Polish political symbolism of the Second World War by consciously applying a post-colonial perspective. Ali was instrumental to Radziszewski, who was able to use the story of an ethnically diverse migrant to intervene in well-established patterns of collective memory experienced by a white and homogenous society.

In 2015-2016 the Museum of Warsaw commissioned two portraits of Ali. The reason given for the "bare-chested" Ali being put on display was its artistic value as a portrait. Interestingly, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising in 2019, the bare-chested portrait of O'Brown was replaced by another one from the series. In the second painting, Ali is wearing a uniform, like the other men whose portraits are hanging on the same wall. The change was provoked by the criticism that presenting Ali without a uniform was stripping him of his dignity, especially as the portrait reproduced stereotypes of black men.