

Musealisation of communism, or how to create national identity in historical museums

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Musealisation of communism, or how to create national identity in historical museums

The goal of the article is to critically analyse and deconstruct museum narratives about communism in East-Central Europe 30 years after transformation. The research material is museum exhibitions interpreted in accordance with the methodology of visual research (composition analysis, content analysis, analysis of material objects, and analysis of meanings). The first and most important museum type from the perspective of the memory cano The Act of 6 June 1997 Penal Code (Journal of Laws of 1997, item 553). Art. 125. § 1. Whoever destroys, damages or takes away a cultural object in an occupied area or in which military operations are taking place, violating international law, shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for a term of between one and 10 years. § 2. If the act concerns goods of particular importance for culture, the perpetrator shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for not less than 3 years. Art. 278. § 1. Whoever takes away someone else's movable property for the purpose of appropriation shall be subject to the penalty of deprivation of liberty for a term of between 3 months and 5 years. § 2. The same punishment shall be imposed on anyone who, without the consent of the authorised person, obtains someone else's computer program in order to gain financial benefits. § 3. In the case of an act of a lesser significance, the perpetrator is subject to a fine, limitation of liberty or deprivation of liberty for one year. § 4. If the theft was committed to the detriment of the closest person, the prosecution takes place at the request of the injured party. Art. 279. § 1. Whoever steals by burglary is punishable by imprisonment from one to 10 years. § 2. If the burglary was committed to the detriment of the closest person, the prosecution takes place at the request of the injured party. n, as it represents the official historical policy of most East-European states, is the so-called identity or heroic museum. Its purpose is not so much to show the truth about the past but to create the collective memory of a society and its positive self-image.

Keywords: historical museum, exhibition, communism, collective memory, narratives

Thirty years after the transformation, the canon of knowledge and remembrance of communism in the Central-Eastern European countries is still at the stage of development and, sometimes, stormy debates.¹ The communities' memory of the recent past remains divided and frequently full of contradictions, the degree of consensus being different in each case because it is closely linked not only with past socio-political circumstances but also with the course of transformation and a specific political and economic situation after the change of the political system.

In light of my studies, the thesis that there is one memory of communism shared by the whole region would be an exaggeration: too many differences both at the level of historical

¹ My studies conducted between 2014 and 2018 in European museums were funded by the National Science Center under grant no.: NCN 2014/13/B/HS3/04886

facts themselves and their representations exclude this possibility. It is possible, however, to distinguish certain processes and types of exhibitions that have appeared in most of the former Soviet bloc countries. A phenomenon common to the region is the introduction of official lines in the interpreting of communism that are materialised in museum exhibitions organised by large state institutions. The narratives endorsed by policy-makers usually present a coherent story of heroic nations fighting against the imposed regime that is treated as foreign to the “nature” of individual communities. This heroic-martyrological version of recent history is intended in all cases to perform identity-related functions and promote a positive image of particular countries in the world. Examples of museums pursuing such objectives are the European Solidarity Centre (Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, Poland), the House of Terror (TerrorHáza, Hungary), the Occupation Museum (Latvia) and the Occupation Museum (Estonia) and the Museum of Genocide Victims (Lithuania).

1. Poland: The Struggle for Independence

The European Solidarity Centre (ECS) in Gdansk was opened in 2014 in an edifice specially built for the purpose and resembling a ship. The exhibition content does not cover the whole period of communism in Poland but its most heroic period only—the history of the trade union “Solidarity”, which is a symbol of the democratic anti-communist opposition. Events in Europe were marked only by some dates symbolic of the acts of social (civil) disobedience against communist authorities: 1953 (Berlin), 1956 (Hungary) and 1968 (Prague). The exhibition invokes moral categories, speaks the national language and, through its heroic narrative, revives the Romantic vision of Polish history dating back to the nineteenth century, when a partitioned Poland fought to regain independence.

The highlight of the exhibition is the victorious strike in the Gdansk Shipyard (then known as the Vladimir Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk) in 1980, which is extremely convenient from the perspective of heroic narrative. Having focused on steadfast resistance and rebellion, the narrative omits the questions of the widespread adaptation of the Poles and other nations to the system, their causes and far-reaching consequences. In this case, what is “forgotten”, or rather consciously “erased”, is the whole set of social attitudes that were deemed as inconvenient from the perspective of identity narrative. The exhibition also omits to emphasise the fact that the majority of Solidarity’s demands were about social benefits rather than political issues, the goal of the strike being “socialism with a human face”, not necessarily liberal capitalism. The clear narrative line and consistent narrative do not allow for ambiguities and disputes, which are now the dominant element both in the accounts of direct witnesses and in the comments of professional historians studying that period.

The authors of the exhibition (Jarosław and Beata Szymański) stress that its overriding goal was “to make visitors feel that it is a story about them”, and the method for the attaining of this objective was the potential possibility of “the visitor’s identification with the heroes of that time”.² Identity and collective memory readily refer to those moments in history that strengthen the positive image of a given community, and easily reject that which is incompatible with its heroic picture. In the ECS presentation, the picture of communism, difficult and complicated in many respects, especially with regard to the attitudes of the society, takes on explicit dimensions of the heroic past, expressed in the struggle against the communist system.

² SZYMAŃSCY Jarosław and Beata, *Powstanie nystany stałej*. In: GOLAK Paweł, KERSKI Basyl, KNOCH Konrad (eds), *Wystawa stała Europejskiego Centrum Solidarności. Katalog*, Gdańsk: 2014, p. 257.

Resistance was not, however, the only attitude towards the post-war situation; adaptation soon developed, while the authorities, although widely perceived as foreign, implemented certain national values and carried out social reforms that satisfied the expectations of significant sections of Polish society.³ The adaptation did not disappear with years; on the contrary, it grew stronger. As many opposition activists and intellectuals emigrated, a large portion of society accepted the growing dominance of communists, either unwillingly or out of a sincere belief that the new system, for all its deficiencies regarded as temporary, was the realisation of the



Figure 1: *The European Solidarity Centre, Gdańsk*, photo Anna Ziębińska-Witek

dream of a people's Poland of justice and equality.⁴

The strike at the Gdansk Shipyard in August 1980 is presented at the exhibition as a turning point underlying the founding myth of not only the Solidarity trade union and a free Poland, but of the whole of Europe. The two most important objects-icons at the exhibition are the large charts with the listed demands of the strikers, and Gate No.2 of the Gdansk Shipyard, outside of the exhibition building, which is nevertheless an integral element of the narrative (it can be viewed from the windows of the exhibition halls).

Both the strikers' demands, written down by Arkadiusz Rybicki and Maciej Grzywaczewski, and the shipyard gate are symbols of the August 1980 strikes, well-known in Poland and Europe. The gate was the first place commemorating the shipyard workers shot and killed during previous protests; in August 1980 the pictures of the Mother of God and Pope John Paul II were hung on it, as well as the board with the demands and the banner with the motto: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" The Gate was also the meeting place of the strikers with their families. It was at this place, on 31 August 1980, that Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the strike, announced information about the signing of the Gdansk Agreement.⁵

³ KERSTEN Krystyna, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem. Polska 1944–1956*, London: Aneks, 1993, p. 12.

⁴ KERSTEN Krystyna, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem*, p. 25.

⁵ GOLAK Paweł, KERSKI Basil, KNOCH Konrad (eds), *Wystawa stała Europejskiego Centrum Solidarności*, pp. 38–39.

These two objects ideally accomplish the ECS mission, which is to imprint the Solidarity trade union on Europe's memory. They are large and recognisable all over the world owing to the media. Contrary to appearances, the former feature is extremely significant in cases of historical reconstructions of phenomena or processes, for which it is difficult to find spectacular material evidence, while most existing objects are difficult to exhibit since they are highly "ordinary". Such exhibited elements as shipyard tools, safety helmets, tables or work records lack the appeal of those exceptional and valuable objects that turn into museum exhibits more easily and can be perceived at a cognitive or aesthetic level.⁶

In the subsequent galleries are references to the most important events, from the perspective of the heroic narrative, which preceded the strike at the shipyard. They are mainly political events and phenomena characterised by the highest dramatic intensity. These are the social protests of March 1968 and December 1970, the growing economic crisis and the accompanying strikes, as well as the establishment of the Committee for the Defence of Workers in 1976. At this point, in a way in passing, a significant item of information appears: that only a very slight portion of society was involved in opposition activities. Only an insignificant part of the exhibition presents the private life of the masses under the communist system: there is a small reconstruction of a furnished room in a typical apartment house. From the perspective of the heroic narrative, elements like these are not significant because they do not contain the right emotional charge.

A typical narrative device at the exhibition is the creation of the collective entity, "Polish society", on whose behalf and with whose consent a handful of oppositionists were active. The exhibition also emphasises the exceptional role of the Catholic Church in the Polish transformations. The narrative thus has two indisputable heroes: Lech Wałęsa and Pope John Paul II, whose pilgrimages to Poland are highlighted as events of high political significance. In this way Catholicism is shown as an inalienable element of Polish national identity.

This black-and-white picture and one-sided interpretation help build a strong sense of unity within the nation, but they do not help in critical thinking, in distancing oneself from the past and understanding complex historical processes. Formally, the exhibition is a realistic reconstruction of the past, neutral and objective by assumption; but this can never be attained in practice in the case of heroic exhibitions. The exhibition is characterised by the advantage of emotional factors over the intellectual, by an appeal to imagination, by patriotism (often on the verge of exaltation), political commitment to the battle of freedom and independence, and hero worship. In the ECS we are dealing with the formation of a Polish national identity, whose main component is a romantic desire for freedom, and the Polish nation is represented as entirely exceptional compared with other countries in the region.

2. Hungary: Shaping the Myths

Another example of the identity narrative being combined with the representation of the nation's image, prepared mainly for the needs of foreign tourists, is Budapest's "House of Terror" (*TerrorHáz*). The most noticeable elements in the case of the Hungarian exhibition are the simplified vision of the not so distant past and clear symbolism of the narrative. The opening of the museum (in 2002) was strongly politically motivated and linked with the election struggle conducted by the right-wing politician Victor Orbán.

⁶ ZIĘBIŃSKA-WITEK Anna, *Historia w muzeach. Studium ekspozycji Holokaustu*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011, pp. 81–92.

The *TerrorHáza*, dedicated to the memory of both totalitarianisms—Nazism and communism—is housed in a Neo-Renaissance building of 1880, which the two governing regimes in Hungary chose as their headquarters. In terms of the narrative and aesthetic foundations of the exhibition, the *TerrorHáza* can be defined as a narrative historical museum organised in accordance with the so-called performative museology characterised by a transition from information to experience, from exhibition to staging, from thinking to feeling emotions.⁷

The past conveyed in the Hungarian museum is a reconstruction with conspicuous simulation elements. The authors of the exhibition have created a spectacle based on historical facts, which is intended to make history intelligible to tourists and acceptable to Hungarians. The *TerrorHáza* is, as a result, a kind of adapted presentation (a sort of *mise en scène*) of totalitarianism (mainly communism); the term is not used pejoratively but only as a category helpful in the analysing of the poetics of the museum. The exhibition shows distinct features of arrangement. Exhibits are, in the main, replicas of objects from different places and periods loosely linked to the communist era. The only original space in the museum is the torture chamber called “the gym”, located in the basement, in which political prisoners were detained and tortured in the period 1945–1956. The exhibition catalogue presents an exact description of tortures.

The first hall of the museum, titled “Double Occupation”, introduces the subject of the presentation. On a two-coloured, two-sided wall (the colours refer to the black and red regimes) there are monitors: one side represents the genocidal Nazi regime (Hitler and cheering crowds) and photographs from Bergen-Belsen, the other the communist regime (inter alia the Red Army, the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pacts and fights for Budapest). In the next part of the museum there is a distinct overrepresentation of the communist regime.

The corridor of the Arrow Crossers and the hall of the Arrow Cross members are the only spaces entirely devoted to the active participation of the Hungarians themselves in the Nazi system. Hung from the corridor wall is an excerpt from the speech to the nation by Ferenc Szálasi, who took power in Hungary on 16 October 1944, and pictures of the exhumation of victims of mass murders committed by his organisation. In the room there are uniforms of Arrow Cross members and the ghostlike figure of Ferenc Szálasi himself, while the monitors screen parts of films showing deportations of Jews and propaganda materials.⁸

This comparatively small presentation devoted to the extermination of the Hungarian Jews belittles the role of the Hungarian Arrow Crossers in those events; the exhibition points out that the Hungarians were victims of the two systems rather than active executioners in the service of one of them. This is clearly implied by a portion of the exhibition in which two uniforms—Nazi and Soviet—placed on a rotating platform suggest a simple exchange of one occupation for the other. The domination of the communist period in the exhibition indicates, however, that it was somehow worse than the Nazi one.

The simulations are in principle conducive to the concealing of certain inconvenient facts, events or processes because they use extremely suggestive symbolism that directs the visitors’ attention towards specific (and desirable) elements of a given issue. The anti-communist

⁷ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT Barbara *The museum as catalyst*, accessed 9 August 2018, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/vadstena.pdf>

⁸ Hungary devotes a separate museum to the extermination of Jews: the Holocaust Memorial Center. It is interesting in formal terms, with dominant virtual elements, sounds and digital pictures, but this cannot be the excuse for the absence of a proportionate representation of the Holocaust in the best-known and most popular museum in Budapest.

resistance among certain circles of the public was not invented for the purpose of the exposition but in Hungary the adaptation of the society to the system was considerable, and one cannot really speak of a mass opposition movement.

In the case of the House of Terror (in addition to omitting that content undesirable and inconvenient to Hungarians) the point is also to create and strengthen certain myths that naturalise crime by “squeezing” it into the conventional format of the museum narrative, which means an unavoidable reduction of actual places to a tourist space.⁹ No museum is free from mythicising elements; however, with the kind of representation offered by the House of Terror the principal goal is apparently to create a myth.

The House of Terror, as intended, evokes emotional involvement and transforms the spectator into an actor and spec-actor. With similar reconstructions, one can also speak of the phenomenon of “suspension of disbelief”, which means that the public accept the limitations of the medium, suspend a critical look for the duration of the visit, and sacrifice realism and logic for a good time and excitation or involvement. The exhibition instrumentalises the past for purposes of a current historical policy that are related to the favourable presentation of the Hungarian nation to the Western world (the museum is a great tourist attraction). Not without significance for the popularity of the place is the creation of an exceptionally uncritical self-image of Hungarians.

The House of Terror differs from the European Solidarity Center first of all by the language used. The ECS narrative refers to the language of moral reasons, creates a solemn, sublime mood, and seeks to restore an already non-existent community by invoking the heroic past, at the same time passing over painful and conflictual situations. Instead, there is an attempt to create the anti-communist myth of the opposition as the founding basis of a free Poland. The Terrorháza does not use sublime language; on the contrary, it contains many nostalgic, non-heroic elements (some features of everyday life in the communist state are warmly remembered). In her interview (with the telling title “I don’t believe in objectivity”, given to the Polish weekly “Tygodnik Powszechny”), Mária Schmidt argues that the authors of the exhibition were motivated by other objectives than only an objective representation of history: “They said that we were falsifying the history of the twentieth century. But I was sure that I wanted to move the hearts of the visitors to the museum, and make them emotionally involved in history.”¹⁰ The exhibition is also meant to evoke feelings of nostalgia: “(...) I regard it—says Schmidt—as something natural. Why shouldn’t we feel nostalgic about the time when we were young? (...) everyday life under communism also had many advantages.”¹¹ Nevertheless, we are still dealing with a highly identity-based museum creating the myth of Hungarians as the victims of two totalitarian regimes and with the patriotic narrative promoted by the state. In the museum, the mythologising elements predominate over nostalgic ones.

3. Latvia and Estonia: Double Occupation

The collective memory of the Baltic republics significantly differs from that of other countries in the region as the Soviet occupation, which began there in 1940 under the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, lasted an exceptionally long time: the Yalta and Teheran Conferences

⁹ PIOTROWSKI Piotr, Auschwitz versus Auschwitz. In: *Pro Memoria*, 2004, no 20, p. 20.

¹⁰ SCHMIDT Maria, Nie wierzę w obiektywizm. In: *Tygodnik Powszechny (dodatek specjalny)*, 2012, nos. 18–19, p. 16.

¹¹ SCHMIDT Maria, Nie wierzę w obiektywizm, p. 17.

tacitly accepted the incorporation of the Baltic republics into the Soviet Union. They regained independence as states only in 1991. During that time the societies of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia experienced the Nazi regime for a relatively short period (1941–1944; together with Belarus they were included in the Reich Commissariat East [Reichskommissariat Ostland]).

Accounting for or reviewing the past is difficult in this case inasmuch as the Baltic countries still have to cope with charges of collaboration with the Nazis and of being accessories to the Holocaust. The policies of the German occupiers in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were characterised, according to many scholars, by a comparatively low degree of repression and wide range of collaboration.¹² Even today, the Baltic societies remember long-lasting Soviet repressions far more clearly, with scant memories of the Nazi occupation and Holocaust. The situation is aggravated by Russia's policy, which the Baltic States may regard as hostile and as jeopardising their sovereignty.

The idea of juxtaposing and comparing the two regimes and the establishment of the occupation museums in Latvia and Estonia is aimed at attracting the attention of Western societies to disproportions in the perceiving of the two regimes. "East Europeans must now come to terms with the Holocaust and everything connected with it. West Europeans must get to grips with the Gulag. That's the only way both sides can come to an understanding", Valters Nollendorfs, deputy director of the Latvian museum, contends.¹³ The author of the first concept of the exhibition in Riga, Paulis Lazda, admits that he had to resist pressures to reduce fragments of the exposition about the Nazi period in order to emphasise Soviet repressions.¹⁴

From the outset, Russia opposed the equation of fascism and communism in the two museums because this approach entirely reversed the vision of Russians until the *perestroika* as liberators of the Baltic societies from the Nazi regime. Opinion polls show that the Russian minority seldom visit the museums in Riga and Tallinn, and among Russian children who visited the museum in Latvia it evoked a sense of guilt because they identified with the "occupiers".¹⁵

The edifice of the present Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in Riga (*Latvijas Okupācijas Muzejs*) was built in 1971 to commemorate the centenary of Vladimir Lenin's birth. It is located right in the centre of Riga's Old Town but its colour, shape, building materials and general atmosphere strongly differ from those of the neighbouring buildings. Until 1991 this institution was a department of the Museum of Revolution and the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia replaced the previous one in 1993 as a private enterprise initiated by Paulis Lazda of the University of Wisconsin in cooperation with the Latvian Ministry of Culture. In 2006 the Latvian parliament passed a law, which permits the subsidising of the museum from state funds. The new institution entirely dissociated itself from the Museum of Revolution (and from the past), with nothing but several busts of communists remaining of the former exhibition, most of the collection having been transferred to the War

¹² WOJCIECHOWSKI Marian, *Czy istniała kolaboracja z Rzeszą niemiecką i ZSRR podczas drugiej wojny światowej?* accessed 7 November 2017, http://mazowsze.hist.pl/35/Rocznik_Towarzystwa_Naukowego_Warszawskiego/737/2004/25579/

¹³ MARK James, Containing Fascism. History in Post-Communist Baltic Occupation and Genocide Museums. In: SARKISOVA Oksana and APOR Péter (eds) *Past for the Eyes East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, Budapest: Central European University, 2008, p. 350.

¹⁴ MARK James, *Containing Fascism*, p. 350.

¹⁵ GUNDARE Ieva, *Overcoming the Legacy of History for Ethnic Integration in Latvia*, accessed 4 February 2017, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ece/research/intermarium/vol5no3/latvia.pdf>



Figure 2: *The Occupation Museum, Riga (2013)*, photo Anna Ziębińska-Witek

Museum¹⁶ in Riga.

The exhibition that I first visited in 2013 commemorated the Soviet (1940–1941), Nazi (1941–1944) and again Soviet (1944–1991) occupations. The two regimes were juxtaposed both through the intertwined symbols of the hammer and sickle and the swastika, and the enlarged photographs of the dictators: Hitler and Stalin, exhibited side by side.

The chronology of the tragic events in Latvia was illustrated with photographs showing the crimes and repressions towards society, with a strong emphasis laid on the responsibility of the Soviet Union for the destruction of this country and its economy, and the Sovietisation of the community. The comparison between the activities of the German and Soviet occupiers clearly demonstrated which regime was more destructive to the Latvians. For example, the part of the exhibition devoted to the first Soviet occupation strongly highlighted the terror and crimes of the Soviet secret services, and the introduction to the section on the Nazi occupation read as follows: “After a year of horror, the German army was welcomed as liberators”, which is additionally illustrated with pictures of the exhumation of victims of the Soviets. The exhibition also stressed the unrelenting resistance by and the will to survive of the subjugated society, at the same time justifying those behaviours that are assessed from today’s perspective as collaboration.

In 2018, during my second stay in Riga, the situation of the museum was entirely different. The building and the exhibition were closed, officially because of reconstruction and extension; however, as one of its employees told me, there were also political reasons. As long as the museum was an entirely private enterprise, it enjoyed independence. However, when the Latvian parliament began to have a say on its form, discussion on the shape of the

¹⁶ The War Museum (*Latvijas Kara Muzejs*) is located in the fourteenth-century Gunpowder Tower within Riga’s Old Town. It is one of the oldest Latvian museums, founded in 1916. The exhibition presents Latvia’s military history from the ninth century to contemporary NATO operations.

edifice not “harmonising” with the buildings of Riga’s Old Town was expanded by the debate resulting from the disagreement of the Russian minority (represented by the left-wing coalition: Harmony Center) with certain aspects of the exhibition. The main pivot of dispute was the use of the term “occupation” in reference to the Soviet presence in Latvia after 1944. The opponents to this term insisted that it would be more justifiable to use the term “illegal change of the regime”.¹⁷ The change would have to result in the complete remaking of the exhibition. Due to this “terminological” and, practically, political conflict, the date of re-opening of the museum is unknown, and the public can visit a temporary exhibition located in small rooms in the public administration building also housing the archive (city centre, at Raiņa bulvāris 7, but not within Riga’s Old Town).

The establishment of the Museum of Occupation in Tallinn (*Okupatsioonide Muuseum*) meant, like in Riga, a shift in the collective memory from an almost total focus on the Soviet regime to the admission of the effects of Nazi occupation to Estonian consciousness. The museum, like the one in Latvia, is based on external subsidies. In Estonia, the greatest contribution to the foundation of the museum was provided by Olga Kistler-Ritso, who emigrated to the USA in 1949 and who, after the “singing revolution”, became interested in the question of commemorating Estonia’s occupation by the Soviet Union and the Third Reich. For that purpose she set up the Kistler-Ritso Estonian Foundation (*Kistler-Ritso Sihtasutus Eesti*). The Museum was opened in July 2003, and, despite its private character, its periodisation and contents were preceded by a conference of Estonian academics in 1998.

It is symptomatic that according to Heiko Ahonen, the museum’s director, it should be organised in opposition to Western exhibitions of the Holocaust, where, he maintains, there is a church-like atmosphere and one should behave accordingly, which, he believes, prevents



Figure 3: *The Occupation Museum, Tallin*, photo Anna Ziębińska-Witek

the conduct of educational activities. In addition, he believes that the Holocaust museums are oppressive and that it is prohibited to express doubts in them, which makes it difficult for young people to actively approach this question.¹⁸ The Occupation Museum in Tallinn was

¹⁷ A conversation that the author had with Karlis Krekis on 12 January 2018.

¹⁸ MARK James, *Containing Fascism*, p. 351.

meant to be free from those difficulties and designed in such a way as to provoke debate rather than give ready answers.

The glass and concrete building of the museum is also intended to commemorate, i.e. to function as a memorial to “the many victims buried in unmarked graves”, as is underlined at the exhibition. The museum is located along the line running from the parliament to the national library situated nearby. Until 2007 this route was interrupted by the Bronze Soldier monument, and after it was removed, the straight line without breaks came to constitute a symbol of Estonia’s independence and the uninterrupted road to freedom continuing from 1918 to 1991.¹⁹ Over a dozen concrete suitcases in front of the entrance to the building symbolise tens of thousands of Estonians who left the country in 1944, fleeing from the Red Army, or who were deported to Soviet camps. The suitcases, a world-known symbol of deportations to concentration (and extermination) camps, in Tallinn draw a parallel between the Holocaust and Gulag.

In accordance with the formula presented at the exhibition, the Museum of Occupation’s mission is to preserve historical memory which strengthens the identity of the nation and the state. The authors of the conception declare that the past should be commemorated regardless of whether it is something to be proud or ashamed of. In practice, however, at the exhibition there are no elements that could “bring shame” on Estonians; the abovementioned message only suggests that such events (i.e. collaboration with the Nazis) are part and parcel of the nation’s past, which, nevertheless, is treated as the outcome of tragic circumstances for the state and society. The exhibition that I visited in 2015 commemorated two occupations: the Soviet occupation of 1940–1941 and 1944–1991, as well as the Nazi occupation (1941–1944). It did not present a consistent narrative, however; it was filled with objects that related mainly to the communist period, both at the political and daily-life levels.²⁰

The museums of occupation in Latvia and Estonia are official spaces, visited by foreign visitors. Like all identity museums they create the founding myths of the two nations, which are: the fight for freedom and necessity to defend it. In their rhetoric, both museums emphasise the equal suffering of victims of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes—the differences between them are blurred, and the exhibitions do not accuse any ethnic groups of crimes: they are all included in the national martyrdom. However, the exhibitions clearly highlight the elements that show that it is the Soviet regime that is treated as the main external force whose aim was to entirely destroy the Baltic nations. The German occupation appears to be far less brutal, and those who fought against the Soviets (jointly with the Nazis) are presented as national heroes. It is on the fight against the Soviets that the new post-communist identity of the Latvians and the Estonians is founded. When writing about the now closed exhibition in the Latvian museum, Ieva Gundare stresses that over 70 percent of the artefacts and over 80 percent of the content related to the Soviet occupation (particularly emphasised being the population losses, deportations and Stalinist crimes). Some visitors, including history teachers, were in fact surprised that the term “occupation” was connected in any way with the Nazi period: it was

¹⁹ The Bronze Soldier or the Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn was unveiled on 22 August 1947 on the third anniversary of the Red Army’s entrance into the city, see BURCH Stuart and ZANDER Ulf, Preoccupied by the Past: The Case of Estonia’s Museum of Occupations. In: *Scandia: tidskrift för historisk forskning*, 2008, vol. 74, pp. 53–73.

²⁰ The exhibition was changed in 2018. The quick changes of exhibitions demonstrate that the Estonian canon of knowledge of the past and the manner of its representation has not been fully developed and depends on the current political situation.

strongly associated only with the Soviets.²¹

4. Lithuania: Memory as a Form of Justice

The process of identity creation by remembering about sufferings and national disasters, which are redefined in favourable terms and gain a cathartic value, is best accomplished in the museal martyrdom trend. The best example of such an exhibition is the Museum of Genocide Victims (*Genocido Aukų Muzejus*) in Vilnius. This most important museum in Lithuania showing the crimes of communism was opened in 1992 (and reorganised in 1997) in the building previously housing the KGB (State Security Committee: Soviet secret services) headquarters, which was also used in 1941–1944 by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret state police). The Museum informs the public opinion about the suffering of the Lithuanian nation during the occupation, about resistance, about the occupiers and brutal methods that they used. The purpose of the museum is to collect, store and present historical documents evidencing the forms of physical and spiritual genocide committed against the Lithuanian nation, as well as the forms of resistance against the Soviet regime.²² The initiative of converting the prison into a museum was launched by the Lithuanian Association of Political Prisoners and Exiles, and was financially supported by the ministry of culture and education, which means that the project conforms to the historical policy pursued by the Lithuanian state.

The ground floor and the first floor in the building present an exhibition devoted to Lithuania's history in 1940–1941, the guerrilla war until 1953, and to the subsequent activities of the occupiers and acts of rebellion of the subjugated population. The events that sealed Lithuania's fate were, as demonstrated by the exhibition, two Soviet-German pacts: the non-aggression pact of 23 August 1939 and the pact of 28 September 1939 on the division of areas of influence. There is no information on the daily life in the Sovietised country; only the ways of spending free time of the anti-Soviet partisans are shown. The curators focused exclusively on the repression of the communist regime against the Lithuanian nation (forced labour camps, deportations), and placed the strongest emphasis on the continuity of resistance, which (according to the vision presented in the museum) lasted incessantly from 1940 to 1991, only with its forms changing: armed struggle, hanging out national flags, distribution of leaflets, writing patriotic messages on the walls, organisation of demonstrations, publishing banned



Figure 4: *The Museum of Genocide Victims*, Vilnius, photo Anna Ziębińska-Witek

books, intensified activity of the Catholic Church or the dissident movement. The form of the exhibition is traditional: information charts, documentary photographs, and very few objects, mainly of symbolic significance.

In accordance with the martyrdom trend's aesthetics, the principal and most important part of the exhibition is a genuine KGB prison housed in the basements of the building from the autumn of 1940, with the original prison cells of the early post-war years, which were not preserved, having been meticulously

²¹ GUNDARE Ieva, *Overcoming the Legacy...*

²² RUDIENĖ Virginija, JUOZEVIČŪTĖ Vilma (eds), *The Museum of Genocide Victims: A Guide to the Exhibitions*, Vilnius: (w/o date of publication), p. 3.

reconstructed.

The Museum reconstructs in detail both the living conditions of the prisoners and the administrative rooms of KGB officers. The exhibition also contains objects from other places, for example the door of the Lukiškės Prison (*Lukiškių tardymo izoliatorius kalėjimas*), notorious not only in Lithuania but all over the Soviet Union, because members of many nationalities were detained there. The central point of the exhibition in the Genocide Victims' Museum is the cell where executions were carried out: between 1944 and the early 1960s about a thousand persons were murdered in it, with only one third of them having been sentenced to death for anti-Soviet activities. The majority of the victims are buried in the mass grave at Tuskulėnai.²³

The martyrdom trend in representations of communism is inspired by the symbolism and visual iconography found in Holocaust museums. What links these places is first of all the aim, to hand down the experiences of the victims, and second the basic exhibition strategy, to impact on the visitor's emotions through the genuine infrastructure and objects. Another shared element is the use of photographs of the victims, both portrait photos of the then living persons (prisoners, POWs) and controversial photos of their dead bodies (of those murdered and tortured). In all cases there is a clearly discernible tendency to personify the memory of the victims, and the emphasis on remembering and commemorating each of the murdered individually.

The main function of the exhibition in Vilnius is to symbolically pay homage to the victims and mete out justice to the perpetrators who avoided punishment because of the imperfect law or inefficiency of the courts. The fighting victim of the communist system is the ideal type of a freedom fighter, whose death gave the final and complete moral meaning to his/her activity. The few genuine objects owned by the prisoners, or at least copies of their letters, function as relics in the martyrdom trend. The exhibitions also show documentaries and eyewitness accounts recorded and played back on monitors. The heroic victims who died in the struggle are the germ of the founding myth of an independent Lithuania and their death as martyrs helps build the identity of Lithuanian society.

Conclusion

All the museums described above share features in common: they provide consistent narratives that guarantee the continuation of national identity, and popularise formative narratives consistent with differently understood *raison d'état* and with the positive image of particular nations. This requires the making of difficult choices because the history of each nation is full of moments that contradict the heroic identity visions. The museums in question seek ways to "elevate" their community; consequently, they combine history with various ideas: progress, change, modernity, martyrdom or freedom.²⁴

The narratives offered by their authors impose particular interpretations, organise and select evidence, and subordinate the objects that function as illustrations of narratives. All the media and technologies present in a museum, theatricalisation, creation of fictional spaces or dramatic lighting, also serve to impart information in such a way as to present a specific interpretation and manipulate the audience's emotions. Identity exhibitions obey the requirement of scientific presentation only to some extent, which means that the presented historical facts conform as

²³ RUDIENĖ Virginija, JUOZEVIČŪTĖ Vilma, *The Museum of Genocide Victims*, p. 16.

²⁴ For comparison of national museums see: *National Museum Making Histories in a Diverse Europe*, accessed 7 May 2017, <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:573632/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

a rule to the official historiography, whereas the choice of these facts and their interpretation tend to be controversial.

Identity narratives adopt a specific moral position and test the ethical judgments of visitors. They also seek ways to produce definite responses of empathy, feelings of right and wrong, and of justice or a sense of injustice. As a result of all these measures, the authority of the institution is supposed to remain undisputed, the (national) ideas and objects (“speaking for themselves”) legitimising each other, which impresses on visitors that there is unquestionable and unmediated evidence in support of specific theses.

In addition to clearly presented positive heroes, the identity narrative requires the defining of an enemy. It is owing to the enemy that the history of heroism can confirm its weight and significance. The rules for the creating of the figure of the enemy at museum exhibitions are consistent with the obligatory patterns of historical narratives; moreover, this picture is influenced by memory discourses, cultural stereotypes and historical policy, as well as psychological and sociological mechanisms. Interestingly enough, the enemy (or “stranger/alien”) is not as important as the enemy-hero relationship/tension, which, in many cases, is the foundation of museum narrative.²⁵

In the case of exhibitions about communism the enemy could be individuals (such as General Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland), institutions (e.g. secret services) or the Soviets, but usually it is an impersonal enemy in the form of the communist system. The hostile system at the exhibition is characterised by a set of features specific to totalitarianism: brutality, militariness, heartlessness, anonymity, a craving for all-embracing control and a striving to stay in power at all costs. This device particularly serves to create identity narratives that cannot exclude whole social groups, admitting that large portions of societies identified with the system or even managed it. A possible deconstruction of the picture of the enemy would weaken the whole story and destroy the dichotomy, and the narrative would be less heroic and less convincing. Instead, it would introduce unwelcome relativity, which would jeopardise the identity discourse.²⁶

A serious problem in identity museums is the lack of space for dispute or even dialogue, the avoidance of controversies and varied opinions, and the depriving of the visitors of their own interpretation of the events represented. The most frequent case is that a differing comment is introduced into the identity narrative only when it supports the dominant narrative. The national identity emerging in this way has a mythological structure and conceals or entirely overshadows other narratives and possible potential interpretations. Obviously, the museum is not a place where historians are expected to argue or present a critical in-depth analysis of a given historical process. This is neither possible nor necessary; however, on the scale between a one-dimensional, selective narrative and a deeply analytical dispute there are intermediate values.

Identity museums identify with a particular vision of the past and with some of its actors, which in practice means that they represent the memory of certain events and processes rather than their history (in the meaning of historical science). In addition to this type of museum, there is a very strong nostalgic trend in the whole region in question,²⁷ but it is identity museums, which speak the national language and appeal to such concepts as freedom, heroism

²⁵ BOGUMIŁ Zuzanna, WAWRZYŃIAK Joanna, BUCHEN Tim, GANZER Christian, SENINA Maria, *The Enemy on Display: The Second World War in Eastern European Museums*, New York-Oxford: Berghahn, 2015, pp. 133–136.

²⁶ BOGUMIŁ Zuzanna, WAWRZYŃIAK Joanna, BUCHEN Tim, GANZER Christian, SENINA Maria, *The Enemy on Display*, p. 149.

²⁷ TODOROVA Maria and GILLE Zsuzsa (eds), *Post-communist nostalgia*, New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012.

and martyrdom, as well as creating the mythological structure of national museum narratives, that remain the most important instrument of historical policy from the perspective of each state in the region.

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