Occupying whateverland : journeys to museums in the Baltic

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Abstract

Recent history of Central and Eastern Europe charts multiple occupations, liberations and reoccupations by a variety of states and regimes. Museums of recent history, located across the region, strive to both constitute a memorial shaping narratives of national identity, and to represent the past in a way both recognizable and persuasive for their predominantly international tourist visitors. These visitors come with their own preconceptions and aims towards building both a historical narrative of the past and a personal identity narrative of a cultured, engaged tourist. In this paper, we chart how the historical past is used in contemporary sensemaking processes in the museums, and how tourist interpretations cross organizational and national barriers that the museum-curated historical narratives attempt to create.

Keywords

museums, tourists as community of practice, Baltic history, memorylands, whateverland

1. Introduction

The title of our article stems from a misreading. While studying a visitor book in the Museum of the Victims of Genocide, we werethrilled to discover an inscription proclaiming 'No more military occupation of whateverland!' Only later, a closer inspection of theentry led us to decide that the authors professed their opposition to occupation of whatever kind. However, as the original readingstays close to the less succinct opinions expressed by museum visitors in interviews and visitor books'entries, and as the issues ofmisreading and reinterpretation are central to this text, we decided to treat our original deciphering as serendipitous enough toprovide us with the title.

Our text is based on an ethnography-inspired study of museum visitors and staffin three recent history museums in the Balticstates and forms a part of a larger project examining museums presenting similar subjects across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Inthis article, we explore the gap between accounts of museums as sites of national historical memory, described by museum staffandpresented through exhibition objects, text and imagery, which create the memorylands of Macdonald (2013), and the narratives ofhistory recounted by museum visitors, who are mostly international tourists, within the whateverland. By using this term, we do notmean to imply that such tourists lack empathy (Tucker, 2016). Rather, we argue that responses to specific narratives from historicallyengaged visitors are

Article published (2019) in *Annals of Tourism Research* 75:238-247, DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2018.09.010. This copy includes the content of the article, but does not follow journal layout or page numbers.

framed within the wider context of their knowledge and experience.

Smith (2006: 500) memorably described museums as sites constructed to show'the cargo of the past on consignment into the future.' As will be discussed, we also contend that tourists in the sites we studied are, to paraphrase Smith, like a cargo from thepresent being transported to the past, with knowledge of that past shaped by their present day relationship with it. On the basis ofcollected field data, our study shows that museums of recent history operate as bounded organisations with only occasional contact between different institutions. Visitors, on the other hand, while forming a demographically varied and largely international, butculturally integrated group, actively search out similar museums, which they treat as consecutive stops in a tourist itinerary. Consciously collecting and comparing narratives presented in different institutions and different countries, visitors appropriate the encountered stories to construct, for their own use, a coherent, if multifaceted, understanding of historical past.

The notion of community of practice was originally proposed by Orr (1990/1996) concurrently with Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe common patterns of behaviour and connective networks binding professional workers. However, we argue that the conceptcan also be used to encapsulate the characteristics and activities contributing to making tourists a consistent group both in terms of its behaviours and with regard to expressed opinions about learning and experiencing history. Thus, through applying the notions of community of practice to the tourists within this study, we offer new insights into how engaged cultural tourists construct meaning separately and together in the manner of worldmaking, (Hollinshead, 2007) and show how their approach differs from the way the museums construct and create meanings based on the imagined visitor (Beckert, 2010).

CEE region (itself a sometimes contested definition) is an area where political allegiances and governance have changed drastically (perhaps more drastically than elsewhere) over the course of the last century. In case of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), their brief independent existence after World War I ended with the outbreak of World War II. After the war, all threefunctioned as constituent republics within the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1991, and as sovereign democracies since then, joining bothNATO and EU in 2004. In the post-Soviet era, regardless of their formal independence, all CEE countries have experienced significantideological and political pressures from outside (Kostera, 1995; Törnquist-Plewa & Stala, 2011) and from within the region (Mink & Neumayer, 2013; Snyder et al., 2010). As a result, it is not surprising that in the region's countries, located at the boundary of Europe,modern and postmodern forms of commemorating and cherishing national pride mix together and open themselves up to strategiesthat seek to render them politically charged (Hackmann & Lehti, 2008: 378).

2. Museums as memorials and imaginaries

All of the museums under consideration in our study are consciously engaged in seeking to reclaim ghosts, being what Williams (2008) terms memorial museums: history museums constructed to commemorate mass suffering through reverential remembering. However, they simultaneously provide a critical interpretation of the past and historical sources. Consequently, they emerge as highly politicised institutions, often igniting public arguments that touch the heart of museum practice. The presentation of the past as a constant stream of suffering serves, as Misztal (2007: 389) terms it, 'the periodic need to reawaken and strengthen the public's

feelings of moral outrage.' As Macdonald (2013: 1) notes, Europe has become a memoryland obsessed with the disappearance of collective memory and its preservation. The obsession arises from both the realisation of the risk of forgetting over time and the increased interest in remembering. It also touches, we argue, on the public right to remember. Crucially, the museums we refer to in this article are drawing on the political present to 'move from the denigrated status of the powerless and abject to providing a potentially powerful platform for articulating grievance and seeking redress' (Macdonald, 2013: 193–194).

The creation of space locating historical memory and unquestionable, shared truths binding local populace and associated diasporic communities carries important

symbolic value, regardless of whether local inhabitants visit the museum or not (StlyianouLamert & Bounia, 2016). Yet as the most frequent users of the museum space are the visitors, it is their perception which has, in the long run, the strongest influence over the reputation and success of the museum as a cultural site. As our study shows, the studied sites (and their counterparts in other countries of the region) share common characteristics enhancing their reception among visitors

as museums of universal suffering while, simultaneously, representing the particulars of the context of their creation (country, city, timeframe of construction and the range of covered issues and events).

Memorial museums confer public recognition to events (Radstone & Hodgkin, 2003), constructing visions and versions of the past, where the focus is often on individual suffering, set in the context of the wider narratives. Memorial museums become custodians of the authorised versions of the past (Smith, 2011), which they have also shaped through merging individual bounded selfhood with the objectivised social history context (Radstone & Hodgkin, 2003). Yet museums, once shaped, themselves become memory props (and prompts) for local people (Feuchtwang, 2003), explicitly so in the case of the studied museums: in the interviews, museum workers in all of the museums we visited illustrated the significance of their museum by the intensity of emotions evoked by presented artefacts (or, more rarely, recordings) in some of the older visitors (and we ourselves observed some of the visitors crying).

Quite often, the remit of the museum does not include dealing with current events; such is the case of the Baltic museums, where there is little coverage of events occurring after 1991. But even then, it is the contemporary preoccupations and contemporary events that shape the dominant views in interpreting history, and it is the assorted stakeholders who attest to the significance and meaningfulness of the museums' existence. Consequently, museums take pains to engage stakeholders who might not be interested (or be less interested) in visiting exhibitions: the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn engages former dissidents, members of anti-communist

opposition, in research and oral history projects, while the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius provides genealogy services for diasporic Lithuanians; all have a role working with local school groups. Memorial museums aim, not necessarily shared by their visitors, to commemorate and reclaim the unique suffering of specific geographically located individuals and to project a united present and a renewed sense of patriotism or nationalism.

Baker (2012: 2) argues that notions of self and belonging are 'shaped by place in both imaginative and material ways'. In our reading, nation states seeking to create nationally sanctioned or endorsed narratives need to both draw on the imaginaries of place (and, indeed, displacement) and to fix these narratives so as to provide rooting in actual and, ideally, symbolic spaces. González (2016: 47) notes that 'the need to create an identity between heritage, people, territory and state... usually involves the fashioning of symbolic imaginaries' in order to shape collective identity within "concrete manifestations and legible form and materiality'.

Following Decker (2014), we contend that collective memory shaping and reinforcing is a process of socially constructing active relationships between history and the present, involving not only representations and interpretations, but also space (or stage) whiche mplaces narratives in their material context. We are primarily concerned with how museums themselves carry symbolic meaning and the shaping of symbolic imaginaries. Nevertheless, several of the museums within our wider research project are located within symbolic buildings, where the past use can be seen to shape their current museum status. Thus, for example, the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius is sited in a building that served as KGB and Gestapo headquarters during successive occupations.

3. Study and methodology

Our analysis in this paper is based on an ongoing ethnography-inspired study of recent history museums in CEE. Through a mixture of non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with staff and visitors, we are working to make sense of the processes of interpretation, representation and communication of the past taking place at the studied sites. In line with the ethnographic tradition (e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Goodall, 2000), our aim is to approach the studied field with an anthropological frame of mind, characterised

by 'on the one hand, modesty and openness toward new worlds and new meanings, and on the other, a constant urge to problematize' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992: 72).

We are helped in this by our differing levels of engagement with and separation from the field: one of the authors comes from Poland and is closely emotionally involved with the political discourses of the region, while the other brings in academic and institutional expertise of having worked both as a social history curator and as a museum studies researcher, with a focus on the representation of social and political history. In short, we could not have carried out this study individually, needing the skills, knowledge and personal (or otherwise) insights.

Our differing approaches and life experiences mirrored those of the international tourists we interviewed, where the degree of geographical proximity to the Baltic states influenced the extent to which they felt the museum narratives were 'partly our story, but not our story'. Thus, one author being Polish had a local/national perspective, while the other author held the broader national European perspective, coupled with a critical appraisal of media as well as message. Therefore, this is fully a collaborative study that, we argue, benefits equally from our diverse viewpoints. We are aiming for what Macdonald (2009: 22) terms democratic ethnography, embracing the interplay between our insider/outsider viewpoints, engaged in negotiations with both curatorial staff and locals and tourists, and aware that we are both also visitors, each having a particular but different relationship with the visited places.

Throughout the study, our varied degree of engagement with narratives repeatedly resulted in different responses ranging from empathy through anger to detachment and amusement, linked to both our knowledge and our lived experience (Tucker, 2016). In line with our findings, we were both able to visit and appreciate the three studied museums, while remaining aware of our own differing perspectives, genders and, indeed, age. Yet when visiting the Rising Museum in Poland (not presented in detail in this article, but part of our larger project and worth mentioning for context), the Polish-born author found it difficult to enter and stay within the premises. Expectation and then awareness of the pain of facing up to the contemporary framing of the exhibition, in support of a new nationalism, was stifling and difficult to endure.

Discussion of the divergences in our perspectives inevitably framed our approach to the research, brought to the surface unconscious biases and expectations and led to occasional tensions in 'reading' museum displays. In a memorable metaphor for historical sensemaking, Leshkowich described historically laden spaces as haunted sites where 'ghosts' inevitably emerge: odd fragments of memory that wander homeless in the wake of social and individual efforts to render the past coherent (Leshkowich, 2008: 5). Confronting both these ghosts and our own reactions to their hauntings, we were able to reflect individually and together, to discuss

our varying perspectives at the end of each visit. Questioning how these perspectives impacted on our understanding separately and together helped us to both raise and try to frame, if not raze, the ghosts of our own insider/outsider, visitor/tourist experiences.

Our research project began in 2015 and, so far, we have conducted observations and interviews in museums in Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia. In this paper, however, we concentrate only on three sites: Museum of Occupations in Tallinn, Museum of Occupation in Riga and Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius. The slice of the research project reported here should more accurately be described as ethnography-inspired rather than ethnographic (cf. Stewart, 2007), in a manner sometimes called the window study (Czarniawska, 2014). This is primarily due to the limited timeframe of our research. The reported studies comprise 12 days of fieldwork (observations and interviews) with both of us involved in the study at all times. It includes 28 unstructured interviews of 15 min to 2 h duration with 5 guides, 3 curators and 20 museum visitors. When we encountered the same visitors who were visiting all three Baltic states, we interviewed them again with regard to their perceptions of the museum we were in that day. Consequently, the interpretation process is abductive (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), relying on extant literature as well as iterative analysis of fieldwork material to generate our findings.

The three museums are quite similar in terms of size, visitor characteristics and social/national context: they are relatively small sites, each located in a relatively

Article published (2019) in *Annals of Tourism Research* 75: 238-247. This copy does not follow journal layout or page numbers.

central location in the capital of a small country (Baltic state). All three cities are popular tourist destinations for international visitors. All the museums focus on roughly the same period (1930s–1991) and attract a similar mix of visitors. The Museum of Occupation in Riga and the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn are both non-governmental entities that mostly rely on outside financing, while the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius is a public institution financed by the state.

Our interviews at these sites were conducted in English, but only once we met a visitor who cited poor English skills as a reason for declining our invitation to be interviewed (he also declined our proposition to conduct the interview in Russian or German). The non-participant observation involved full-day stays at the museums and focused on visitor interactions with exhibits and museum staff. We also studied the exhibitions themselves as well as museum visitor books and promotional literature of the museums. In all cases, we obtained prior permissions from the museum authorities for conducting the study.

We are not historians, and we neither wish nor have the means to adjudicate between the competing historical narratives of the Baltic states' recent history. Instead, we endeavour to examine the history-focused sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995), observed and analysed from an organisation studies perspective. This is why our main focus is the production of meaning in museum spaces,

In this text, we are particularly concerned with the divergent perspectives adopted by two stakeholder groups: visitors and staff, as well as with collaboration and conflicts occurring while defining museum space and museum experience. While we remain hesitant about the value of the reductionist descriptions of museum activity in terms of products being offered to customers in a market transaction (cf. Camarero & Garrido, 2008), we nevertheless see both studied groups as participants in an organisational process and organisation theory as crucial in understanding social relations and interactions structuring museum visits.

In our research, we collect and analyse stories of museums and of the past, relying on the notion of storytelling as a ubiquitous form of knowledge production and communication (Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003). Consequently, we used primarily thematic and narrative analysis in coding and analysing all the interviews, field notes and collected textual material. Throughout this article, we use the terms narrative and story interchangeably, following Gergen's (1997) very broad notion of narrative as any form of temporal embedding rather than e.g. Gabriel's (2000) more narrow conceptualisation relying on the identification of a clearly delineated plot. From our perspective,

> stories are integral to the human condition as the means by which experience is made meaningful; they gather and arrange the comparisons by which things and events become things and events of significance in everyday lives (Popp & Holt, 2013: 53).

Thus, all kinds of cultural objects, inscriptions and utterances are experienced as stories and parts thereof and can benefit from being analysed as narratives. In this study, they include museum exhibits, their spatial presentation and accompanying descriptions, interviews, comments in visitor books and our own field notes on our experiences and interpretations of museum visits. The abundance of perceived narratives can diminish the value of the analytical category (this is the argument of the proponents of defining stories more constrictively, e.g. Boje, 2001), but it is a boon for the study of learning and communication processes, as it allows us to adopt a more uniform approach to the wide variety of our sources.

Historical past not only serves as a resource to be used but also is a burden that requires to be dealt with. Returning to Leshkowich's (2008) metaphor, we see both the inhabitants and the visitors to historical sites finding themselves faced with the ghosts that need to be exorcised, or integrated, within their personal narratives of history. To find uses for the past is to engage with its haunting power, always open to the possibility of evoking multiple, conflicting meanings whose power can prove overwhelming.

We argue therefore that these museums serve as both spaces for shaping and showcasing historical narratives while rooting them in the presented physical artefacts and as authoritative sites making 'truth claims' to establish presented narratives as true history and simultaneously as representative recording of collective and individual memory. It is this legitimising role of museums that, as Misztal (2007) argues, constitutes them as a distinctive cultural complex. This is precisely because museums are trusted spaces associated with knowledge giving and are located within what are perceived as easily accessed community spaces (Carnegie, 2014;

Article published (2019) in *Annals of Tourism Research* 75: 238-247. This copy does not follow journal layout or page numbers.

Stylianou-Lambert & Bounia, 2016), that they continue to be developed, even prioritised, and why they offer an important and complex area of study within the given context of the recent historical and political past. Museums have, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblet notes, 'long epitomised a product-driven ethos reserving for themselves the prerogative (in the public interest) to determine what they want to say and show' (1998: 137).

4. Museums and the reclaiming of the material past

Reclaiming or reinterpretation of a hidden or politically charged recent past requires careful shaping or construction of historical memory, and always carries the danger of summoning unquiet ghosts (Leshkowich, 2008). The museums we studied actively use visual historical representations (photographs, paintings, newsreels) in constructing their narratives, reclaiming or repatriating (Edwards et al., 2013) these representations as tools for memory shaping. This is most evident in the Museum of Occupations, Tallinn, where propaganda posters and socialist realist sculptures serve to not only illustrate the past, but also to underscore its absurdity in the perspective of the contemporary museum curators.

Prioritization of clear historical narration over indeterminacy of the past, coupled with the museums' reception as trusted spaces (Carnegie, 2012), diminishes the usefulness of physical artefacts as testimonies of the past. In consequence, (but also to some extent due to the paucity of available objects), all of the studied museums use very few artefacts in their expositions, relying on written descriptions, multimedia presentations, and recordings of eyewitness statements. Most of the narratives follow clear, linear plotlines; such presentation narrows down the field of possible interpretations, strengthening the single dominant reading of the past, the exhibited objects, but also the individuals whose accounts are used in building expositions. While we believe that noting this overarching organizing principle of the studied museums is important, we do not seek to offer formal reviews of the three museums. Instead, we remain interested in their subject position and reception, and in the following sections we offer some thoughts on how they specifically tell their stories.

5.1 The Museum of Occupation, Riga

The Museum of Occupation Riga, housed in a temporary exhibition space during our visit as it awaits the refurbishment of its dedicated site, has few actual objects on display and consists primarily of a series of exhibition boards, in different shades of red. The rooms containing the boards are arranged to form a chronological path and, as the narratives of occupation unfold, we are reminded of the difference of each period occupation as much by symbols as in word or deed. A thickly drawn black hammer and sickle adorning the lower edges of the panels during Russian occupation changes to the Nazi swastika only to change back to a hammer and sickle again. The final panels lack any brand of occupation and imply freedom. These panels are text heavy, occasionally augmented with photographs; the rooms also leave space to show a few films which. According to an interviewee, the museum holds the second largest video archive in the world next to Stanford, evidence of the wider aims of the museum going beyond the presentation of the exposition.

Interestingly, period historical victors are augmented with oral testimony of survivors whom we now see as elderly men and women discussing an early period in their lives. The snippets are deeply moving, but they also leave us wondering about their lives in the following times and the present. Had they been happy? Successful? Are their current lives a struggle and are they better or worse for the retelling? In this we are reminded that while history is often said to be written by the winners, and although winners change with each turning of a historical epoch, history is always lived. Remembered, and reclaimed by the survivors. In this museum, the testimonies presented do not lead the narration towards the present, focusing on reliving events from the distantly experienced past. Such events, repeatedly retold and rooted in the past already shaped and stabilized, appear smoothed out through the parallel retelling, over decades, of similar accounts of the same disasters, sufferings, and atrocities.

5.2 The Museum of Occupations, Tallinn

The Museum of Occupations, Tallinn is located in a purpose-built, architect-designed glass and concrete

structure, where the building itself, we are told, is intended to carry symbolic messages about openness and transparency. Concrete suitcases line the entranceway turning into actual suitcases in the interior; all are, curiously, labelled John Smith, although the affiliation (or point of origin?) changes: John Smith of Riga, John Smith of London, John Smith of Warsaw. The migrant as the everyman, but also an implication of dispossession: disaporic experience strips one of individuality and history? This is one of the few touches of whimsy in the museum narration; most of the exhibition space is traditionally organized and narrated.

Objects lining the walls are slightly overshadowed by a sequence of screens showing substantial historic films on continuous loop in a long case against the back wall. Detailing the dramatic history of Estonia, the films are too long for causal viewing, and also subject to sound spill everywhere except for a small space directly in front of each screen. The permanent displays, as in Riga and Vilnius, and more generally in memorial museums, break off their historical narrative before reaching the present, though the museum's collaboration with a large group of external stakeholders allows it to shape historical memory in dialogue with contemporary experiences and viewpoints. During one of our visits, we witness a workshop underway with survivors, forming a visible presence of these connections.

An extension of such engagement is the ongoing programme of brought-in temporary exhibitions which fill the otherwise empty space leading up to displays. These are not necessarily linked to the core displays or narratives (the recently ended temporary exhibition focused on the life of Ingrid Bergman) but offer a significant draw to visitors. The 'backstage' areas of staff offices and archives, mainly clustered on the first floor of the building, are also clearly visible on public display, offering further evidence of the desire for and commitment to openness. Downstairs, banished to guard the toilet, towering statues of Soviet era dignitaries point with damaged limbs and proclaim their own importance to no-one left listening. The curator interviewee we discuss them with clearly appreciates the irony and the diminution of the symbols of erstwhile power.

5.3 The Museum of Genocide Victims, Vilnius

Located in the building that previously served as KGB (and, even earlier, as Gestapo) headquarters, this is the most rooted of the three museums and includes displays within the basement KGB prison. As a museum it suffers from the limitations of the building (originally constructed as a Tsarist-era courthouse) and its subsequent refurbishments: the succession of smallish office rooms disrupts the narrative, and large graphic panels and displays appear crammed in the spaces allotted to them. This is a museum that feels peopled by ghosts, and not just in the Leshkowich sense; spectral images barely visible on historical films are projected onto photograph-covered walls. We try, and fail, to figure out who they represent. Elsewhere, life-size photographs, slightly blurry, line the corridor walls: pale ghosts in wedding dresses, children, family groups.

Despite the location in authentic space, this is a museum that plays to the senses, albeit in confusing ways. But the presented history is also complex: different forms of resistance against consecutive occupations intersect and mix, conspirators turn into insurrectionists and back again, all the while surrounded by artefacts and narratives documenting waves of deportation, exile, and personal experience of oppression. Downstairs, in the prison cells, we can find an acknowledgement of the treatment of Jews and of Roma, but their histories are absent from the main exposition.

While the medium of the presented narration confuses, the main message is abundantly clear. As in the two Baltic museums, this is a presentation of the national history of suffering, where heroism requires alignment with the oppressed nation and resistance, preferably armed, against the occupant; among all the confusion, dissidents remain comfortably framed in their role of freedom fighters.

6 Objects within the memorylands

As Classen and Howes (2006: 209) argue, all 'collecting is a form of conquest, and collected artefacts are material victory over their former owners'. Such conquest requires an integration of the conquered artefacts with the 'new set of values imposed by the governor – collector or curator' (Claessen & Howes, 2006: 209). The governor can be taken to mean the literal government funding the

exposition (as in the case of the Vilnius museum), an independent foundation (as in the non-publicly funded museums in Tallinn and Riga), or their appointed representatives (to some extent, in all the studied sites).

In all these museums, and indeed in memorial museums in general, it is the small, domestic objects, survivors of the vagaries of history, that create the strongest emotional bond with the presented historical narratives. These objects form a physical stand-in for the survivors, reminding the visitors of the human cost of the commemorated events (Macdonald, 2009). Items confiscated by the occupants are symbolically given back to their original owners who, however, are represented here not as individuals, but as a collective that unites the long-suffering nation-state and its previously oppressed citizens.

Complementarily, objects of oppression are taken over by the formerly repressed, and their status is changed to that of conquered artefacts as described by Classen and Howes (2006); supersized statues of communist leaders, now reduced to guarding toilets in the Tallinn Museum of Occupation, are the prime example of artifacts repurposed to ridicule the bygone regime. Other giant statues, removed to sculpture parks such as Grūtas Park or Memento Park, are simply robbed of any rhetorical power. Regardless of these moves, artefacts in all the studied museums play a secondary role as a background to historical narration, including the largest artefact we examined: the building of the Museum of Genocide Victims. They conjure up ghosts of history: always vague and unclear, impossible to pin down in a single, definite interpretation.

7 The imagined visitor

The question that brings us to a key issue of this article is Which people visit museums of recent history? How closely do they resemble the model visitors (Eco, 1979)? Whose conceptual image influences decision making? These questions bring us to the key issue of our article: the distinction between model and actual visitors. Our fieldwork suggests that there are two distinct types of 'imagined' visitors: those with a direct relationship to people or events depicted (this category also includes young learners and school groups), and tourists, notably international tourists, who are understood to be interested in learning something about a foreign sliver of historical past.

All of the museums under discussion here have also been shaped by the imagined non-visitor: the perpetrator linked to the occupying regime of the past. Despite this, the museum workers with whom we spoke repeatedly stressed their openness towards current inhabitants of Russia and Germany, whose countries are invariably presented in the exhibitions as aggressors and occupants. Nationality is an important consideration here, as in our interviews (particularly with the employees of the Museum of Occupation in Riga), visitors are repeatedly described as representatives of their countries. The strict division on grounds of nationality is particularly interesting, as despite very similar historical narratives presented in the exhibitions, the museums in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius did not maintain, according to the museum workers we interviewed, any institutional links with each other.

Many of the tourists we spoke to were often engaged in 'doing' the Baltic region in a single trip and visiting two or even all three of the museums we studied as part of their cultural itinerary. For them, the history presented in the museums, even if dislocated into a nebulous whateverland, spoke of the shared suffering of the Baltic peoples; they were actively striving to understand and underscore the links and parallels between the different museum narratives. Because of the historical and geographical proximity and because the expositions were driven by similar goals (even if oriented towards divergent national communities), there are numerous possibilities of bringing together and intertwining the presented histories.

A failure (or unwillingness) to do so strongly suggests the primacy of the urge to enforce nationalist agendas of the political present, requiring each nation to emphasise the events of the recent past as a unique experience. Additionally, while the demands of tourism require each destination to offer uniqueness, a group of linked and related (as well as geographically proximate) sites can successfully function as a single tourist attraction. Furthermore, discourse predicated on a rigid definition of pertinent history may petrify tourist perceptions and prevent the change and evolution of interpretations and meanings to the extent that, as KirshenblattGimblett notes, 'locations become museums of themselves within

a tourism economy' (1998: 151) and actively promote the consumption of whateverland.

Tourists who visit more than one Baltic country/museum are likely to do so within a short period of time, and the discourse of uniqueness becomes very difficult to sustain. Although the foreign visitors we spoke to (and those who left their inscriptions in the visitor books we studied) were generally enthusiastic and eager to absorb the history presented throughout exhibitions, this does not preclude them from integrating the newly acquired information with the already established sensemaking schemata (shaped by prior learning and concurrent museum visits). The imagined tourist appears to enter each museum as a blank slate, possibly checking in

their baggage of experience among the suitcases lining the entrance to the Museum of Occupations. He or she is certainly not expected to question the lines demarcating boundaries between carefully separated national narratives of historical suffering.

In the next section, we analyse the discrepancies between this imagined visitor of the Baltic museums and the actual people we observed, interviewed or whose remarks on the trip to whateverland could be found in the museum visitor books.

8 Visitor stories

In all three museums, the vast majority of visitors came from abroad, though the museum staff at all sites were keen to point out that the institutions served the local community as well, singling out school visits and workshops in particular. Accordingly, all three museums offered explanations (plaques, descriptions and film subtitles at all sites, and additionally audioguides in Tallinn and Vilnius) in English and in the local language; in Riga, museum guides offered tours and talks in a wide range of European languages.

Most visitors, and most of our visitor interviewees, are tourists who do not have a personal connection to any of the Baltic states. Many stop in multiple countries during a single trip, and during our research, we encountered (and interviewed) the same three student travellers in both Riga and Tallinn. For these visitors, the Baltic states (and sometimes other tourist destinations in the CEE) formed a part of a single cultural trail (which they did not necessarily follow in its entirety), with the museums of recent history serving, together with other museums and cultural attractions, as significant waypoints to be sought out along the route. An English student interviewee spoke of 'doing Vietnam' and a war museum there before coming to see what she saw as a similar museum in Vilnius. Another interviewee, from Singapore, spoke of the Museum of Occupation in Riga, Museum of Genocide Victims in Tallinn, Stasi Museum in Berlin and Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin as similar and readily comparable cultural attractions.

In general, in interviews, these visitors drew little distinction between the localities, nor did they concentrate on the specifics of each museum's designated historical focus. The same attitude dominated visitor book comments where most comments were very general, verging on platitudes. Assertions that the past should not be forgotten were common, as were statements that perseverance took courage, and that oppression must not be allowed to reassert itself.

The particular museum where we encountered and interviewed visitors was always but a single stop on a wider cultural itinerary (and, indeed, so was the particular country where we met). All of our interviewees were either university graduates or current students and, in case of students, often travelled in small multinational groups, in line with the thesis of museum-goers representing a definable stratum within society (DiMaggio, 1996). One visitor, asked about reasons for coming, remarked as follows:

> It's our thing, we are museum-goers; everywhere we go, we love history museums, so we go all over the place: Hungary, Portugal, Sweden. And I studied history (male visitor, Slovakia).

There was a second, smaller but distinctly discernible group of foreign visitors: those who were conscious of the locality, either because of family history (children of refugees and emigrants, and, to a lesser extent, emigrants/refugees themselves constituted a noticeable group among foreign visitors), or because of some other connection to the region. Thus, we spoke to a young couple visiting Tallinn on a short trip from Vilnius, taking advantage of the national holiday celebrating the Lithuanian Independence Day.

> It's not really our story. All three Baltic states share those moments, so it's partially our story, but it's also not. We were three different countries at the same

> moment, different aspects and et cetera. Because these days I know that the Russian impact on Latvian people and Estonian people was even bigger than on Lithuanian people, especially in culture, in language. Like I said, it's partially ours, but it's also not (male visitor, Lithuania).
> Our family left Estonia in nineteen forty-four. And so, having that family background and knowing what they went through and what our relatives went through... [changes our perception] (female visitor, United States).

Visitors in this group position themselves in relation to the historical narrative presented in the museum but remain outside of that narrative: the museum's story is important because it can be useful in fleshing out and contextualising a family history narrative or a national narrative acquired elsewhere, not because it impinges directly on their identity.

> We know the history of Estonia so well, and we know the different phases, because we are the neighbour, and we know what hard years they had and somehow we have a lot in common with them, and because we knew the story already, that is also one of the reasons why we did not crack so much in here (female visitor, Finland).

Despite close connections to only a single country, these visitors were invariably also interested in seeing similar museums across the region: some have already visited these museums, others said only that they would consider it should they find themselves in their vicinity. None of our interviewees claimed that the museum they just finished exploring had sated their curiosity. This means that the visitors' knowledge of the recent history museums in the region was roughly on par with that of the museum staff: no staff member we interviewed had seen all three museums, though they all also expressed interest in visiting if the circumstances allowed it.

8 Eager guests

As Macdonald (2005) noted, visitors to history museums tend to be good guests, and all the visitors we encountered, and the vast majority of visitor book entries, were very positive about their experience and the value of the encountered museums. When invited to do so, they were willing to rank the visited museums according to the quality of exhibits and exhibitions, and a few of them had ideas for improving presentation (these included more information about post-1991 history, more interactive displays and clearer explanations of the significance of presented objects). All the interviewees we encountered in all the museums were unanimous in describing the museums as important and valuable, often linking their mission specifically to the notion of remembrance:

> It's definitely so important to remember what was done in the past, to not be repeating the mistakes that were done in the past
> (female visitor, Germany).

Taken together, these positive comments can be understood as part of the performance required of, and played by the visitor, of the role of a gracious guest in a culturally significant space of the host nation (Macdonald, 2005; Reisinger, 1994). At the same time, we should not dismiss these accounts as wholly conventional: maintaining a positive image of the museum exhibition is part of the sensemaking activity that contributes to the shaping of the collective historical narration of the region, involving both the museums themselves and the process of visiting them.

Generally, the visitors we spoke to, much like the museum staff, viewed the presentation in museum exhibitions as largely neutral, providing an unbiased glimpse into history rather than a specific interpretation of it:

> For me, it was very neutral: here is the Russian occupation, here is the German occupation, here is the Russian occupation again. And even the first period of fighting, I like how they work to keep their distance, just showing what people went through... they don't have any historical bias (male visitor, Slovakia).

While prevalent, this was not the universal view among our interviewees. Nobody we spoke to expressed indignation or displeasure with the portrayal of events or their interpretation (though such a stance did appear in a few visitor book comments), but some of our interlocutors described museum storytelling as an inevitably partial practice, though due to necessity rather than any conscious choice:

> For me, it felt like it was a particular point of view of people of Estonia, I guess (female visitor, Slovakia).
> It is more than a neutral view. But then I suppose you're in Lithuania, so they are gonna argue their case, really (female visitor, United Kingdom)

9 Communities of practice

Earlier on in the text, we mentioned Paul di Maggio's (1996) description of museum goers as a particular social stratum, identifiable by education level, demographic characteristics, and a network of social contacts. We believe that the notion of a community of practice is a better way of describing features uniting museum visitors. The term comes from ethnographic studies of organizational learning and knowledge communication, and was introduced into the social science vocabulary almost simultaneously by Orr (1990/1996) and by Lave and Wenger (1991). In its traditional formulation, community of practice is a group of professionals working together but not bound by any common organizational ties. Such groups, studies have shown, are crucial for knowledge transmission, particularly in regards to tacit knowledge that remains uncodified and is difficult to acquire through formal training or through studying textbooks.

In our study, we expected to identify a community of practice among museum workers, formally employed in independent institutions and yet involved in assembling, structuring, and exhibiting parallel historical narratives involving a single region in the same period, and with a similar sociopolitical focus. To our surprise, we discovered very little in the way of contacts between museum employees from different Baltic states. We did, however, find an international, informal group of people among tourist museum visitors, engaged in collective construction of regionwide narratives of history, connecting events and stances presented in different museums. This group certainly exhibits similar behaviours and attitudes, but is it a community?

We believe it is, even if bonding and information exchange does not take place in any regular patterns, and sometimes involves no physical contact whatsoever. Social media sites, travel-focused Internet portals such as tripadvisor, discussion forums, and physical meetings in hostels, hotels, and on public transport allow for exchange of views and for promotion of desired practices and interpretations. Our interviewees spoke of finding out about interesting museums from user-sourced entries on social media sites, as well as from chance encounters with fellow tourists. Student interlocutors also spoke of short-term travelling companions met by chance along the trail. In other words, one of the explanations for the relatively congruent interpretations of the expositions in studied museums, as well for the similar visiting patterns can be found in analysing museum goers as a community of practice engaged in collective negotiation of activities and sensemaking patterns.

10 Paradoxes of uniqueness

The studied museums, focusing on the same period of recent history in small, neighbouring nations, present a unique insight into communicating parallel historical narratives, whose commonalities and differences are shared, contested, and interpreted in a well-intentioned collaboration between exhibitors and visitors. Both groups have generally high regard for each other, and both are eager to communicate. At the same time, sense made of the presented history differs markedly in the key aspects of perceived difference and singularity of national narratives.

As we have noted in our earlier description of the museum presentation, all three exhibitions offer up narratives of uniqueness, of solidified national history bounded by national borders (ruptured only through invasions and deportations) with little regard paid to either the history or to the prevalent narratives in neighbouring nations. As Velmet, surveying two of the same museums, aptly noted, theirs is the

> ethnonationalist mythology [which] prescribes a society that is culturally and linguistically homogenous, shares ideals of unity and uniqueness, and the membership of which is based on birth, rather than choice (Velmet, 2011: 207).

For the largely foreign visitors, largely unfamiliar with the specificities of history of the region, the most significant points of reference for these narratives are the transnational events of recent world history, such as the outbreak of World War II, the Holocaust, Iron Curtain and the Cold War, and the fall of the Soviet Union. Even when, as in the case of the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, the location itself was significant for the exhibition, its context was transnational as well: our interviewees referred to it as the KGB prison, and compared it to other grim prisons in and outside Eastern Europe (East Germany, Ireland).

Such frameworks offer little possibility, for the visitors,

of distinguishing between local narratives presented at each of the museum. Thus, when the interviewees visited several museums of local history, they referred to them as aspects of the same historical narration, though differing in presentational techniques and perhaps emphasizing different details. Narratives of uniqueness, or of particular victimhood, while clearly present in the exhibitions of each of the studied museums, were conspicuously absent from interview accounts (there were a few nation-specific entries in the visitor books), and the tourists who have visited other Baltic museums were quite ready to describe them as representing regional, rather than national, history.

11 Conclusions

In conclusion, we agree with Macdonald's (2013) bnotion of memorylands, where contemporary heritage and identity shaping inEurope are linked to the desire to remember, reposition and reframe the recent past within'cultural stations' (Graburn, 1983) such asmuseums. However, our study argues that tourists, in particular international tourists, when travelling thus, act as a community ofpractice, but that there is a mismatch between how the museums of this study present the recent historic past and how visitorsperceive and received it.Of course, we should be aware that shared meanings are not necessary for communication or collaboration (Kociatkiewicz, 2000), and that the three museums can be described as successful organizations for drawing in visitors, satisfying their interest in local culture and recent history, and in creating space for the commemoration of recent national history of their locations.

And yet, our fieldwork leads us to believe that the significance of all three museums and the level of their influence on the knowledge of, and the interpretation of recent history could be noticeably boosted if more of the presentation was directed at the actual, rather than the imagined, model visitors. We do not believe it would in any way diminish the memory of suffering caused by wars and waves of successive occupations, affecting the region's inhabitants regardless of their nationality or the precise site of their dwelling.

On the most mundane organizational level, the disconnect between the imagined and the actual museum visitors is exacerbated by the lack of collaboration between the museums. Precisely because of the focus on the ethnonationalist narratives (as identified by Velmet), all the work of connecting the parallel historical narratives is shouldered by the visitors. Presentation (as opposed to reading) of history does not span the space between museums. Thus, while the visitors travelling between Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius, sampling historical museums as an essential part of tourism, form a community of practice united by both activities and shared knowledge, museums remain discrete, bounded organizations that fail to share curatorial experiences or to provide linking narratives between exhibitions. Without these linkages, most visitors are doomed to experience the unrooted, if horrific, histories of the occupation of whateverland, and the national ghosts evoked by museums remain neither integrated nor exorcised.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the staff and visitors to the museums under consideration here for their willingness to engage with the project. We would also like to thank Sheffield University Management School for the seed funding that made this project possible.

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Article published (2019) in *Annals of Tourism Research* 75: 238-247. This copy does not follow journal layout or page numbers.