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National narratives of 'occupation' in historical museums of the post-Soviet landscape

Katarzyna Jarosz

Introduction

This chapter focuses on narratives regarding the Soviet past, as represented in historical museums in former Soviet bloc countries. My aim is to investigate how and why a past that was similar across the Soviet bloc can be interpreted in many different ways. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and in the ideological vacuum left behind after its fall, the question of national identity became one of great importance in all the countries of the former Soviet bloc, conventionally referred to in the literature on the subject as 'post-Soviet space'.¹ Olivier Roy in *The New Central Asia*, for example, argues that 'one significant change is that national identities indeed have taken root; the fabrication of nations has worked'.²

A common element in the history of countries as diverse as Lithuania, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine is a prolonged period of Soviet rule – a period referred to, sometimes controversially, as 'occupation' and/or 'colonization'. The Russian Federation refuses to use these terms, maintaining a narrative of victory in the 'Great Patriotic War' (i.e. the Second World War), followed by a post-war era in which industrialization and other successes took place. In Russia, Ewa Thompson writes that 'the politics of interpretation is still informed by the imperial vision. Russian history is yet to be recast in postcolonial terms'.³ Post-Soviet Russia still refuses to recognize its 'colonial' past. When, in 2005, Vladimir Putin declared that the collapse of the Soviet Union had been the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century, most Russians agreed with him.⁴

Just as importantly, within those states that were 'occupied' or 'colonized' by the Soviet Union, the narrative is far from homogeneous. The deconstruction and revision of the Soviet past across the former Soviet bloc, which started in official narratives after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, differs depending on the country. Indeed, it is sometimes not even the same within specific countries. On the one hand, the Soviet past is interpreted as being synonymous with oppression and mass deportations; on the other, it can evoke images of stability, peace and a generous welfare state. Alexander Cooley suggests that, in Central Asia, even the invocation of the term 'colonial' still makes many people uncomfortable, and the common refrain, not just amongst the

ruling elite, is that the ‘Russians brought us electricity’.⁵ In contrast, the official position in Georgia is that the country was a victim of Soviet occupation; since 2010, 25 February, the day of the ‘Soviet invasion’, has been marked as an official holiday called ‘Soviet Occupation Day’. In the Baltic states, ‘occupation’ is also a common word in official narratives. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states based their entire legal discourse on the claim that the military occupation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the Soviet Union, under the auspices of the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, as well as their subsequent incorporation into the Soviet Union, contravened international law.⁶ This claim means that these countries re-established their independence on the basis of having been *de jure* annexed and occupied by the Soviet Union. The terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘colonial’ were already being used in Western historiography in the 1960s with reference to the Baltic states. Robert Conquest, for example, argued that ‘The three newest colonies in the world today are the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.’⁷ Despite all this, such terms are still considered controversial in political discourse in the Baltic states today.⁸ ‘The Baltic Republics represented an “outpost of Western civilization”’⁹ and with their grand history, economic development and high rates of literacy, under the Soviet regime they felt culturally superior to Russians. ‘Preferring to think of themselves as superior to other colonized peoples [...] the Balts find being lumped together with the rest of colonized humanity unflattering, if not humiliating, and want to be with the “civilized” part of the world.’¹⁰

This chapter does not seek to resolve historiographical disputes over whether certain countries were indeed ‘occupied’ and/or ‘colonized’ by the Soviet Union. Rather, I am guided by the words of Gayatri Spivak: ‘When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, “colonizer” and “colonized” can be used.’¹¹ Similarly, the notion of ‘post-Soviet space’ itself, in the context of the terms ‘occupation’ and ‘colonization’, is not always clear. The question is whether ‘post-Soviet space’ exists, as such, or whether this phrase is simply an empty label. Firstly, it has to be borne in mind that ‘post-Soviet space’ is neither homogeneous nor monolithic. It is composed of varied sub-regions and numerous countries, each differing in many elements, but all sharing a common history, and a common set of legacies and influences.

In order to demonstrate the full spectrum of these often contradictory narratives, I have chosen to examine a number of museums dedicated to the memory of Soviet rule in a number of countries across the former Eastern bloc. I will explore how these museums build narratives around the experience of Soviet rule, as well as how they visualize such narratives through displays, exhibits and publications. In order to do this, I will pose the following auxiliary questions: What do these museums commemorate of the Soviet ‘occupation’? How does the presentation of Soviet rule align with my own knowledge, based on general historical knowledge and on my sensibilities and ideas about the period? What strategies and techniques of creating a specific narrative are used in each case? And what are the overarching aims of each museum in its own national context?

The material for my case studies is drawn from a number of museums in a range of countries. I will examine the display of exhibits at these museums, the spaces of the museums themselves, the publications they have produced and even the role of

museum guides at each site. By choosing such an approach, and by looking at museums across an array of vastly different countries which share a Soviet past, I hope to show the multitude of narratives that have been attached to this shared past.

The first of these museums is the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (*Okupacijų ir laisvės kovų muziejus*), or 'MOFF' (formerly known as the 'Museum of Genocide Victims'), in Lithuania. This museum documents 'the loss of independence in the middle of the twentieth century, repression by Soviet authorities, and the self-sacrificing and persistent fight for independence'.¹² The building in which this museum operates formerly housed numerous institutions, including the KGB, which took over the building in 1944, and stayed there until 1991. In October 1992, the Museum of Genocide Victims was founded by order of Lithuania's Minister of Culture and Education and the President of the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees. In the basement, the former KGB prison was reconstructed, with the upper two floors containing contemporary displays relating to anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi resistance. The museum changed its name and became the MOFF in 2017.

I will also be examining *Grūtas Park* (*Grūto parkas*), or 'GP', in southern Lithuania, which was founded in 2001. GP, considered by *Lonely Planet* to be one of the 'strangest' museums in the world, is a kind of outdoor theme park.¹³ It includes a playground, a restaurant, a small zoo and a sculpture garden in which are exhibited about 100 sculptures from the Soviet era, depicting Soviet leaders in various poses along with other Soviet ideological relics from the period of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a significant number of propaganda monuments and sculptures were left all over Lithuania. Many of these were either taken down and put into storage by local municipalities, or damaged. Viliūmas Malinauskas, a local entrepreneur, won a contest in 1998 to create a 'rest home' for such monuments and sculptures, and exhibits were subsequently transported to the site. Tourists can now admire sculptures of Joseph Stalin looking relaxed with his pipe and a book, of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka (the forerunner of the KGB), looking sombre and demonic in his long coat, and of Vladimir Lenin.

Beyond Lithuania, I will be examining the Museum of the Soviet Occupation (*Sabch'ota ok'up'atsiis muzeumi*), or 'MSO', in Georgia. This museum was established to commemorate the 880,000 Georgians who were killed or exiled under the Soviet occupation. It was opened on 26 May 2006, that is, the anniversary of Georgia's declaration of independence from the Russian Empire in 1918. The museum contains about 3,000 exhibits, documents and photographs. Many of the exhibits came from Tbilisi's KGB archives. The timeline of the exhibition begins in 1918 with the first Democratic Republic of Georgia, and continues through the years of the invasion of Georgia by the Red Army, the subsequent Soviet occupation, the independence of Georgia in 1991 and the Russian-Georgian military conflict in 2008. In addition, however, a very different Georgian museum that I will be considering is the Joseph Stalin Museum (*jozef s'talinis muzeumi*), or 'SM', in the city of Gori – Stalin's hometown. The SM was first opened in 1957 and quickly became a temple to Stalin. Today, the museum complex consists of a small wooden hut – the same hut in which Stalin was born and spent the first years of his life – as well as Stalin's personal railroad carriage, in which he travelled to Potsdam and Yalta. The museum's main building is

a huge villa in which Stalin once lived. It now contains his office furniture, gifts that were presented to him over the years, his personal belongings and even his death mask.

In Ukraine, I will be considering the National Museum Holodomor Victims Memorial (Nacional'nyj muzej «Memorial zhertv Holodomoru), or 'NMHVM', located in Kiev. On 28 November 2006, the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) of Ukraine adopted the Law on the Holodomor of 1932–1933, signed by President Viktor Yushchenko. Under this law, the Holodomor of 1932–33 – a great famine that was particularly harsh in the ethnically Ukrainian areas of Ukraine and Russia, and which claimed the lives of several million people – was considered to be a genocide of the Ukrainian people. The new law also led to the decision to construct the NMHVM.¹⁴ The museum opened on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Holodomor in Kiev. Its aim is to honour the memory of the victims of the Holodomor. The museum is composed of a memorial complex and an underground 'Hall of Memory' with permanent exhibitions, where there is a unified register of Holodomor victims – a 'National Memory Book' containing 882,510 names (Figure 10.1).

In Kyrgyzstan, I will be examining the National State History Museum (Kyrghyzskij gosudarstvennyj ystorycheskij muzej) or 'NSHM' in Bishkek. The aim of this museum is to present the history and culture of the Kyrgyz people from antiquity to the present. The museum has changed its name a number of times, but many people still refer to it as the 'Lenin Museum', rather than by its official title. In this museum, thousands of documents stand testament to Lenin's revolutionary activities and theories, as well as

Figure 10.1 The National Museum Holodomor Victims Memorial in Kiev on 22 November 2014 (the eighty-first anniversary of the Holodomor). Photo by NurPhoto/NurPhoto via Getty Images. (See Plate 11.)

Figure 10.2 The National State History Museum in Bishkek, September 2009. Photo by Eric Lafforgue/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

to the work of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan. It also holds some 2,000 portrayals of Lenin, with everything from reliefs to sculptures, and inscriptions in Russian and Kyrgyz reading 'Workers of the World, Unite!' (Figure 10.2).

In considering each of these museums in these countries – Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan – that all experienced some form of Soviet control, I will analyse displays, publications (e.g. catalogues, leaflets and booklets) and museum websites. I will consider the very different institutional history of each museum. My aim is to explore how the periods of Soviet 'occupation', 'colonization' or control in each of these societies are now memorialized and visualized, and how museums themselves play a pivotal role in shaping wider social memory about Soviet rule. As I will demonstrate, museums help us to understand how the Soviet past is represented, visualized and narrativized in vastly different ways across Europe and Central Asia today.

Museums as political and memory machines

Collective memory is ephemeral and can easily be distorted and interpreted in various ways according to political, religious or economic conditions. State authorities possess various means by which collective memory can be reproduced. Museums, along with textbooks and public spectacles, constitute a major instrument in the process

of nation-building. A key element and a priority of museums and heritage sites is the interpretation of the past.¹⁵ Stuart Hall argues that 'museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute meaning and value in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific'.¹⁶

By underlining moments of suffering and national shame – and by omitting other moments – narratives can be made to shape understandings of the past which fit into specific social, economic, political or religious conditions. It is worth quoting Spencer Crew and James Sims here on the possibility of transparent and objective museology, for neither artefacts nor exhibitions are neutral: 'The problem with things is that they are dumb. They are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie'.¹⁷

Museums can be described as 'memory machines' through which curators and directors create stories through their specific choice of exhibits, labels and captions. This is particularly the case in countries that are in the process of shaping new national identities. Societies in transition seek to build a new future, while also dealing with a complicated past. Museums are institutions closely connected to the national collective memory, and sites in which 'imagined communities', to reference Benedict Anderson, can be born.¹⁸

In my notion of 'narrative', I build on the work of the psychologist Jerzy Trzebiński, who has observed that the idea of the world and of human life existing in culture always takes the form of a story. Stories are a means of understanding the world. People see stories as a stream of events and problems. The universality of this narrative way of understanding the world is demonstrated by the fact that stories are a common element in religion, mythology, legends and fairy tales, as they are in literature, opera and cinema. Stories as a means of expressing thoughts and ideas represent an effective narrative means of understanding the world.¹⁹

The past is also often retold in this narrative way. The question, however, is what *kinds* of stories are told through museums. What happened in the past? Who was guilty? Who was innocent? How does each story end? The words 'story' and 'narrative' are often considered to be interchangeable in popular discourse. However, for scholars there is a clear distinction between the two. A story tells what happened at a certain time to a certain person. A narrative (or discourse), on the other hand, is the manner in which the story is told or represented, be that in a book, a film or a museum. Heritage tourist sites and museums authorize a master narrative – the official version of cultural identity – as imposed by policymakers and nation-builders.²⁰ These sites streamline memory, history, events and emotions into a powerful and unified vision imparted to posterity. The museums that are the subject of my analysis in this chapter are politicized and conflictual sites, where difficult histories are revealed and reassessed. They are, in part, 'sites of conscience'.²¹

Museums related to the period of Soviet occupation have mushroomed throughout the countries of the former Soviet bloc. However, these are very often controversial projects that are closely connected to contemporary political debates, and might even be interpreted as attempts to write a 'final chapter' into each of the national histories with which they are connected. I do not aim to analyse the wider politicization of such

events in this chapter, as there is already an extensive literature on the issue.²² But it is important to bear this context in mind when considering the ways in which such museums depict the Soviet past.

Under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine (2005–10), for example, the NMHVM became the site of an obligatory visit for all official guests and international delegations to Ukraine. In 2008, the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declined Yushchenko's invitation to attend the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Holodomor at this museum, although two years later, during an official visit to Kiev, he did visit the NMHVM after a newly elected pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich, had officially rejected the definition of this famine as a 'genocide'. Similarly, the opening of the MSO in Georgia drew expressions of personal displeasure from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who considered the displays at the museum to be highly provocative.²³

In Lithuania, the MOFF has elicited antagonistic criticism for placing an emphasis on crimes committed under Soviet rule and downplaying the Holocaust (in which Lithuanian collaborators also played an active part) while the creation of GP gave rise to hostile criticism from across the political spectrum – members of a group of former political prisoners even went on hunger strike in order to try to force the government to stop the project, which they claimed was 'drenched in the blood of partisans'.²⁴ Juozas Galdikas, a spokesperson for the survivors of Stalinist deportations, argued that 'Malinauskas [i.e., the park's owner] does not care that these forests where Grutas Park was built once served as shelter for Lithuanian freedom fighters against Soviet occupants [...]. What is the purpose of this park? To laugh at our pain?'²⁵

The Soviets as the enemy

At all of the museums that are the subject of my analysis, four major narratives – sometimes schizophrenic and contradictory, even within the same institution or country – can be observed. The first of these narratives could be summarized as 'the Soviets as enemy, aggressor and brutal colonizer'. In this narrative, 'colonized' countries are presented purely as victims. The MSO offers a good example of this. This museum in Tbilisi is a kind of mausoleum of Georgia's occupation. One of the museum's centrepieces, for example, is a steel-framed wooden door which symbolizes Soviet terror.²⁶ The central artefact in the museum is a life-size, wooden train carriage – a carriage which is said to have originally been used to transport cattle and in which participants in the national uprising of 1924 are said to have been executed. The carriage has been placed in a darkened room in the museum, and is lit from the inside, so that beams of light shine through bullet holes in its side. At this museum, there is no opportunity to reconcile the past and the Soviet occupation. The museum makes a clear and obvious attempt to equate the terms 'Soviet' and 'Russian'. Indeed, historical trauma is directly linked to more contemporary developments in many of the museum's displays. For example, a documentary shown to museum visitors is a 2008 film about the Russian-Georgian conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along with Russia's military intervention and occupation of regions that Georgia claims as its

own territory today. A map with secessionist territories and displayed in the museum is captioned with the phrase 'the occupation continues'. The message here is simple: there is no reconciliation, as Georgia is still an 'occupied' country.

In Lithuania, the MOFF follows the official government narrative about the Soviet past and stimulates public debate about the political past. It was developed according to a political agenda, that is, as part of a national revival movement, which started in the late Soviet period in 1988 and lasted into the 1990s. The exhibits in the museum are built around a dichotomy of the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor', the 'occupied' and the 'occupiers'. Even though the museum premises are located in a building that was once used by the Gestapo during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania (1941–4), there is only one perpetrator identified in this museum – the Soviets – and one ideology that is said to be responsible for historical crimes – communism. The fifty years of the Soviet occupation are presented as being a period of brave resistance on the part of Lithuanians, and the struggle of a heroic, occupied nation against the Soviet regime, eventually resulting in Liberation.

The NMHVM was built on what are almost theological ideas of suffering and resurrection in Ukraine. The structure of the museum and the choice of exhibits are commemorative rather than informative. On 22 November 2008 (when the museum was inaugurated), the Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko stated that the museum would be a resurrection of our memory, and a source of purification from lies and filth. 'It is to be pure and honest work, as only such work can help bring a just national order and decent living conditions to Ukraine. We must dress Ukraine in a neat shirt and remove the symbols of totalitarianism from her body.' In using the word 'filth', Yushchenko was referring to Soviet symbols.²⁷

In all of these 'occupation' museums – constructed according to the notion of 'the Soviets as enemy, aggressor and brutal colonizer' – the world is divided into good and evil, oppressor and oppressed. There are 'good Georgians' and 'evil Soviets'; Ukrainian or Lithuanian victims and Soviets perpetrators; civilized Lithuanians or Georgians, and cruel, primitive and barbaric Soviets.

National histories, Soviet nostalgia and commercialization of the Soviet brand

The Soviet period is an integral and highly significant part of the history of a number of countries in Europe and Central Asia. At the NSHM in Bishkek, such an approach is clear. The picture presented here is of the Soviets unifying the nation, industrializing the country and bringing civilization and industry. In other words, the Soviets are presented as agents of peace and progress. In Kyrgyzstan, Soviet rule is considered not as an 'occupation', but as a period of transition from a nomadic to a civilized society. Since the Kyrgyz Republic gained its independence in 1991, the transformation of Kyrgyz society has been very painful, and many people have started to feel increasingly nostalgic about the Soviet past.²⁸ During a meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2019, the Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev, stated: 'Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. Whoever wants it back has no brain.'²⁹

Such an image of the Soviet past is clear at the NSHM. The myth of the Great Patriotic War, for example, is central to the narrative presented through this museum. For decades, Soviet propaganda stressed that, at the time of the war, Kyrgyzstan's population was about one and a half million; 363,144 people were drafted into the Red Army, with 160,000 of these people not returning.³⁰ The 385th Artillery Division, which was established in Kyrgyzstan, participated in the Soviet attack on Berlin on 16 April 1945.³¹ This is all represented in a mural shown at the museum, representing Soviet soldiers dancing and eating in harmony with Kyrgyz farmers. In addition, there is a mural of a Russian marine in the company of Kyrgyz women in traditional dress, and a mural showing an elderly Kyrgyz holding a banner featuring a portrait of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. The inclusion of such artwork speaks clearly to the notion that the Soviet Union was an integral – perhaps even the most significant – part of the history of this country. In this museum then, the Soviets are not 'others' but 'us.'

Collective nostalgia for communism is a widespread phenomenon in many countries of the former Soviet bloc. In Poland, for example, several museums bearing the name of 'the Polish People's Republic Museum' have been set up over the last decade, many including iconic objects from that period.³² Those parts of Germany which were formerly the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have also witnessed an explosion of such 'Ostalgia', though the communist past has been commodified and merchandized in such cases. Daphne Berdahl, for example, has argued that 'Ostalgia can be an attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat* (homeland), albeit a romanticized and hazily glorified one.'³³ Nostalgia is often considered a strategy for coping with a problematic past, and, as Fruzsina Müller explains, 'the development of collective nostalgia is very likely when personal lifelines are crossed by a large historical event or sudden change in society that evokes similar fears or answers in people. This makes them feel nostalgic because they notice how different everything was only a few years before.'³⁴

Museums are a common communicative platform for mediating such nostalgia. Thus, the notion of commodifying nostalgia to document everyday life in the Soviet period has become very common since the turn of the twenty-first century. One result of this tendency has been the creation of several 'nostalgic' museums of Soviet rule in various countries of the former Eastern bloc.

Lithuania's GP is a typical example of this phenomenon. GP features two small wooden cottages. The first is presented as an 'authentic' house from the 1960s. The second, also built in the style of the 1960s, is a typical 'culture house' – a kind of clubhouse that existed in the Eastern bloc during the Soviet period. Such clubs were established in a large number in the Soviet Union. Run by political organizations or trade unions, they played a significant role; they served as *sui generis* schools of culture – places where workers, children, adolescents and pensioners could broaden their horizons, expand interests and relax after a day of work.

At GP, paintings, graphics and different communist memorabilia introduce the visitor to the atmosphere of socialist realism. Inside are displayed all manner of Soviet material culture, including toys, socialist realist paintings, rugs decorated with Lenin's face, musical instruments (such as 'pioneer drums' – played by members of the Soviet Young Pioneers at events such as marches), flags and small gadgets (such as Soviet-era

calculators). There is also a machine from the 1970s, with a large barrel dispensing *kvass* – a beverage made from fermented bread, which was commonly consumed during the Soviet era. The park's restaurant offers typical 'Soviet dishes', and visitors are welcome to buy vodka and raise a toast to Stalin. At GP then, the Soviet era is evoked through nostalgic memories of 'the good old days', childhood and youth.

One common way of dealing with an uncomfortable, ambivalent heritage can be found through 'Disneyization', which, as Alan Bryman has observed, consists of commodifying and homogenizing the past into more digestible forms.³⁵ There are several components of the Disneyization process, one of which is 'theming', whereby different elements are combined into one leitmotif. GP in Lithuania is one example of the Disneyization of the past. The leitmotif found in GP is the Soviet past itself. The food, atmosphere, the Soviet restaurant, cultural house and the very idea of 'having a drink for Stalin' – these are all made to interact with each other here. A second component is the 'dedifferentiation of consumption', by connecting various categories of leisure, hospitality and retail. In GP there is a restaurant, a zoo, a fast food kiosk, a souvenir shop, a playground and a sculpture exhibition. By creating a false reality in the form of shallow pastiche, the park thus lulls visitors into a false sense that they are experiencing real history.

At the time of its establishment, GP sought to desacralize a tragic or sacred past. But disarming past atrocities with laughter is not a new strategy. GP can be read as a profanation of the sacred past. However, leaving this classical dichotomy aside, re-colonizing the past for pure entertainment can be read in a different way, that is, as an act of sabotage. Through the desacralization of the ideological content of Soviet icons, and by reducing the past to a collection of statues that now look out of context, the collapse of the Soviet system is demonstrated through concrete examples. The absurdity of the Soviet occupation is a counterpoint to the sacred elements of Lithuanian collective memory.

Nostalgia for the Soviet Union is also still very strong in Georgia. As many as 42 per cent of Georgians believe that the break-up of the Soviet Union was a negative development.³⁶ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the SM acts as kind of time capsule for Georgians, in which everything (including the museum's own guides) seems to have been imported directly from the Soviet Union. A visit to the SM makes it feel as if nothing has changed in the last sixty years, despite Khrushchev-era de-Stalinization, the fall of the Soviet empire, Georgia's proclamation of independence and the removal of monuments to Stalin from Gori's main square in 2010.

Under the pro-Western government of Mikheil Saakashvili (2004–13), attempts were made to erase everything Soviet in Georgia, and to transform this 'Stalin Museum' into a 'Stalinism Museum'. In 2012 a commission was established whose aim was to discuss the future of the SM. However, after parliamentary elections in 2012, the new government was much more eager to cooperate with Russia, and the idea of altering the SM petered out. Lasha Bakradze, a Georgian historian and professor of Soviet history (and one of Georgia's most visible and active analysts of Soviet heritage), has argued that 'the Stalin Museum is a very special thing, and its survival to this day is amazing. We need to make this safe. We need to show everybody how primitive Soviet propaganda was. How primitive the Stalin cult was. So we need to keep it as the Stalin Museum.'³⁷

Today, the museum is still a shrine to one of the worst dictators of the twentieth century. This monumental villa, built in a Stalinist gothic style, is expressed as being a shrine, both in material terms – through its collections and exhibits – and in the narratives presented by its tourist guides. An 'authentic' Soviet atmosphere is encapsulated in the décor used, furniture from the epoch, the inclusion of large portraits and photographs of Stalin, as well as newspaper articles about Stalin's youth and his career as a bank robber. Captions and text are written only in Russian, and museum guides speak only Russian. The narrative of the museum is enhanced by the museum employees themselves, who are not only passionate about the subject, but give a sense of admiring Stalin, as a politician and a great Georgian. One room which dispels any lingering doubts about the nature of the museum is the 'death mask room'. Here, a darkened oval amphitheatre displays the macabre sight of Stalin's death mask, made in bronze and placed upon an altar-like stand, on a white pillow on red velvet (Figure 10.3).

According to Lasha Bakradze, it is clear that

even those Georgians who were not brainwashed by Stalinist propaganda and who believed Georgia was a victim of Communist rule, thought of Stalin as being more than just a Soviet leader and the architect of the totalitarian regime. For them too, he was also a Georgian, who remained the sole leader of a huge empire for three decades.³⁸

Figure 10.3 Stalin's death mask at the Stalin Museum in Gori, January 2008. Photo by Pigi Cipelli/Archivio Pigi Cipelli/Mondadori via Getty Images. (See Plate 12.)

In other words, in Georgia, Stalin no longer remains a political symbol, as there is no longer an ideology behind him. For most Georgians who sympathize with Stalin today, he is seen more as a folk hero. He is a Georgian who is both evil and cruel, but also smart and clever. The traumatic inferiority complex of a colonized people is compensated for by a kind of primitive pride in Stalin. Georgia was 'occupied' by Russia, but Russia was ruled by Stalin.³⁹

Narrative-building strategies: From historical amnesia to collective memory

One strategy that reinforces suffering is the 're-humanization' of victims, namely bringing them to life in the museum. The narratives deployed by the MOFF, the MSO and the NMHVM all place a great deal of emphasis on individual human beings. The collections of these museums are curated in a specific way: they consist to a large degree of personal items that once belonged to deportees or to partisans of the resistance movements. This is, of course, part of a larger tendency that Bickford and Sodaro, and Lacquer, have all observed: that is, since the Second World War, memorial projects have often focused more attention on the individual.⁴⁰ The museums that are the subject of this chapter use various techniques to underline individual people, for example, by naming them. This can be expressed through lists of names, or through the inclusion of original documents along with family and personal photographs, but also by presenting personal artefacts that were previously in the possession of victims, such as everyday objects, and works of art or jewellery made by prisoners. The aim of these strategies is to bring back and build up the memory of individual people, to transform them from simple statistics into individuals. For example, the NMHVM has published a 'book of memory' with the names of Holodomor victims. At the MSO in Tbilisi, and at the MOFF in Vilnius, through displays of photographs and documents from before the occupation period, Georgians and Lithuanians are shown to be more than just victims. The emphasis is shifted from the Georgians or Lithuanians being purely victims of occupation, to subjects existing independently of the occupation and having their own histories. The crucial aspect becomes not how they died, but how they lived and who they were.

In Vilnius, objects belonging to political prisoners, and later discovered in mass graves in which these prisoners had been buried, have been put on display, along with labels providing information about their owners (such as the years of their birth and death). The section of the museum dedicated to deportations includes vernacular objects, such as hand-embroidered tablecloths, items made of lace, hand-made jewellery and crucifixes, while the captions provide information on the history of the exhibits and the links to specific owners. The same technique is used in both Tbilisi and Vilnius, with numerous photographs of people who were deported, executed or repressed, along with detailed information about such individuals (such as their names, birth and death dates, profession or social status before the occupation) all included (Figure 10.4). In Tbilisi, there are also photographs of members of the Georgian elite who disappeared after the Red Army invasion and in the subsequent

Figure 10.4 Photographs of former prisoners of the KGB displayed at the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius, 2015. Getty Images.

years, as well as a long list of the names of people (including children) who were executed by the Soviets.

The strategy of omitting inconvenient or shameful facts, but at the same time underlining those facts that fit into a specific narrative (and thereby decontextualizing several facts, or presenting them not as a subject of debate but as indisputable) is a common strategy used in a number of these museums. In addition, the process of selecting or glossing over facts can be observed, which is clearly present in the MOFF, where the uncomfortable parts of the past, namely collaboration between Lithuanians and Nazis, is summed up in just one sentence. The narrative of double genocide, the aim of which is to equalize and symmetrize Nazi and Soviet crimes, was officially endorsed by the Lithuanian government. Indeed, it was only in 2017, and after prolonged political debates and diplomatic protests, that the museum changed its name from the 'Museum of Genocide Victims' to the 'Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights'. The museum – referred to as 'the "mother" of Double Genocide museums within the EU'⁴¹ – came under harsh criticism for sweeping under the rug the active participation of Lithuanians in the Holocaust. However, according to international legal definitions, the Soviets, when considering all the crimes that have been perpetrated against Lithuanians, are not actually guilty of genocide in Lithuania. Daniel Brook, using very emotional words, has stated: 'Lithuania wants to erase its ugly history of Nazi collaboration – by accusing Jewish partisans who fought the Germans of war crimes.'⁴² Over 90 per cent of Lithuania's 220,000 Jews were killed during the Second World War, and since 1991 (when the country became independent), not a

single citizen has been punished for Holocaust crimes in Lithuania. Most of Lithuania's 200,000–220,000 Jews were killed and left in mass graves within five months of the Nazi invasion of Lithuania in 1941, but this is not mentioned at the MOFF. Neither is this sinister part of Lithuanian history (i.e. Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis) a part of the museum narrative.

At the SM, the strategy of selective memory is also used extensively. A guide who has worked there for thirty years states clearly that, in her opinion, Stalin was a great man who cared about his country. During a guided tour on the afternoon of 26 August 2016, the same guide conceded that 'not everything went as planned, and terrible things took place too, of course, but he really cared about his people, his country'. In the story told by the guide, there is no room for gulags, repression, purges or any trace of the horrors of Stalinist persecution. What counts, and what is presented in the paintings and documents on display, are Stalin's numerous talents and artistry. By visiting the museum, it is possible to come away with the impression that Stalin was a brave, James Bond-type hero, who was able to escape Siberia five times – or to write poetry.

Conclusion

Museums are sites where memory, power and nationhood intersect.⁴³ They are also sites that construct or stress specific and selective narratives about identities, 'concretizing memory or institutionalizing a particular vision of history in a hegemonic way'.⁴⁴ Craig Calhoun and Anthony D. Smith have both argued that a pre-existing history is crucial in the process of creating a national identity and in nation-building more generally.⁴⁵ Imagining the nation entails imagining national history and national myths. In each of the countries that I have examined in this chapter, 'post-communist memory' has developed in various directions since 1991, from a schema of suffering and resurrection, to acceptance and glorification, or even mockery of a tragic past.

National identity is built not only on national pride and a sense of 'sameness', but also to a large degree on a contrast with 'others'. This can be seen in a number of the museums that I have explored in this chapter. These museums shape discourse, legitimize national memories and build collective memories based on a dichotomy of the 'occupied' versus the 'occupiers'; the 'innocent' versus 'criminals'; or 'civilized nations' versus 'barbarians'. As Bell and Said have both observed, in postcolonial societies such distinctions are crucial for self-identification.⁴⁶ And as I have shown, such dichotomies are clearly visible in the way in which museum exhibitions are constructed in many societies that once experienced Soviet control.

Narratives that do not fall easily into such dichotomies often end up being marginalized. In *Memory, History and Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur shows that narratives are constructed through selectivity in a continuum of memory and forgetting, arguing that 'one cannot recall everything and one can always recount differently, due to the unavoidable selective nature of narrative and its connective functions. Selection means that seeing one thing means not seeing another'.⁴⁷ The political narratives of history or memory politics entail 'remembering' certain events of the past and 'forgetting' others. Museums are sites that create national identity through a proper selection of

what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. This can be seen clearly in the ways in which the Soviet 'occupation' is narrativized, visualized or forgotten in museums across the former Soviet bloc today.

Notes

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- 7 Robert Conquest, *The Last Empire* (London: Ampersand Books, 1964), 80.
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- 15 On this, see David Aldridge, 'How the Ship of Interpretation Was Blown off Course in the Tempest: Some Philosophical Thoughts', in *Heritage Interpretation: The Natural*

- and *Built Environment*, ed. D. L. Uzzell (London: Belhaven Press, 1989), 64–87; Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984); and Michael Wallace, 'Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States', *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 63–96.
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 - 32 See, for example, Magdalena Banaszkievicz, 'A Dissonant Heritage Site Revisited – The Case of Nowa Huta in Krakow', *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 15, no. 2 (2016): 185–97.

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