Prison Experiences and Socialist Sculptures – Tourism and the Soviet Past in the Baltic States

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The bags in this cell are filled with documents cut up by a shredder. They were destroyed by Lithuanian KGB executives between 1988 and 1991 to cover the tracks of their activities. (The Genocide Victims Museum, Vilnius)

Heritage tourism and heritage sites are commonly associated with something to be proud of – intriguing, heroic or industrious local or national history. The literature on heritage tourism has concentrated in pleasant sites. A number of scholars, however, have noticed that tourist interest in death, disaster and atrocity has been growing. Concepts such as dark tourism, thanatourism, black spot tourism and atrocity heritage have been introduced to make sense of the marketing and consumption of violence and suffering as a tourist experience.¹

For investigating atrocity heritage Gregory Ashworth and Rudi Hartmann have sketched a definition for the concept of atrocity. They want to distinguish it from a wider understanding of dark tourism. Atrocity presupposes that there has been a human perpetrator and a human victim. The perpetrator must have been engaged in a conscious action and the victims have been innocent. The scale of events has been out of the ordinary, which means a degree of extreme seriousness. Furthermore, the event has to be remembered – it can be used “to create and sustain collective memory by those with an interest to do so”. In their strict definition the atrocity itself should be a major element in the tourism product — not a place with dark history qualities.²

The sites founded to present the Soviet occupation in the Baltic states meet all these criteria. In this chapter I will discuss five sites of Soviet period dark heritage: three occupation museums in the capital cities of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, a Soviet sculpture park in Lithuanian countryside and a cultural park in a former prison in Tallinn, Estonia. All but the last one have an important role in the local tourist scene. My purpose is to find out how the traumatic Soviet past is presented at the sites and what kind of different modes of display are used. I will also discuss the ways the sites have been interpreted by the visitors.³

According to the Baltic Cultural Tourism Policy Paper, which was produced for UNESCO in 2001–2003, Soviet period heritage has attracted many visitors. This is claimed to be caused by its dramatic and recent nature, “not so much because of its content”. However, according to the paper, the Soviet heritage is currently not used to its full potential. This refers to still intact sights, for instance the luxurious Soviet spa hotel Auska in Palanga and the Academy

³ The article is based on personal visits to the sites in April–July 2007.
of Science building in Riga. The paper suggests that the Soviet heritage should be used wisely to attract more tourists. This could be done by giving visitors a glimpse into the contrasts of Soviet life. In other words, at the present the Soviet heritage concentrates in dark tourism precisely for the reasons of its content.

Occupation Museums – Education and Commemoration

Each capital city of the Baltic states has a museum presenting the Soviet occupation. The first was the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius Lithuania founded in 1992. It was set up on an order from the Minister of Culture and Education and the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees. In 1997 the responsibility of the museum was given to the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania.

The Latvian and Estonian museums have been initiated and maintained by private foundations. The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia was founded in Riga in 1993. The major support for the Occupation Museum Foundation comes from foreign donations. The Museum of Occupation and of Fight for Freedom in Tallinn was set up in 2003 by an expatriate organisation Kistler-Risto Foundation. The modern building is designed for this specific purpose. The museum in Vilnius is located in former KGB headquarters and the one in Riga in a disputed ugly Soviet era black windowless cubicle from 1970. The latter was built to commemorate the Latvian Red Riflemen of 1917–20.

Education and information distribution are major missions for each museum. The exhibitions present very detailed facts. These include authentic audiovisual material – in the Estonian exhibition one could watch film compilations for several hours. By the entrance of the museums a selection of literature is sold: academic research work, survivor anthologies, and pocket-size theme booklets with high quality graphic design. In the oldest museums there are also exhaustive printed catalogues available.

Authenticity, disclosure, and objectivity are emphasized. The Lithuanian museum wants to help the nation to reconstruct its authentic history, to find out and to inform the public about the sufferings it endured during the years of the occupation, about the resistance, about perpetrators of the reprisals and about the methods they resorted to and for that purpose “to provide comprehensive information”. The primary aim of the Latvian museum is “to uncover and illuminate the 51 years of occupation” and the most important elements of the museum’s content are “the exposure of Latvia’s human, material and political losses and of the degradation of Latvian culture, language, society and spiritual life”. The Estonian museum seeks to give an objective cross section of life in the Estonian society during the three occupation periods.

4 Baltic Cultural Tourism Policy Paper, 34, 51.
5 Nollendorfs 2005.
6 The Museum of Genocide Victims, 3.
7 Nollendorfs 2005, 12.
8 The Museum of Occupation and of Fight for Freedom, leaflet.
In addition, there are other important values. The museums aim to commemorate, to share the memories of their own people and to help not to forget the memories for the sake of future. The exhibition of the Vilnius museum begins with a reference to collective experience of Lithuanians: “This experience [persecutions of 1940 and 1941] is still alive in the memories of people of that generation, and to others through stories of grand parents or parents. It has affected their fate and the fate of succeeding generations...” In one of the last rooms the reason for the exhibition is made clear: “This is how it was. We are showing all this so as not to allow it to sink into oblivion.”

In similar tones the Latvian museum is concerned about the future: “the forgetting, denial, and failure to know and understand the occupation period threatens Latvia’s future”. The author of the Museum’s conception Paulis Lazda quotes Santayana: “if we forget our past or allow someone else to steal it we will be condemned to repeat it”. The idea is suggestive of the writings of Dominick LaCapra on two different kinds of memory connected to significant historical anxieties. He has developed psychoanalytic concepts of Freud for the purpose of historical studies. The problematic memory, the traumatic one, is the process of “acting out”. It means compulsive repetition, flashbacks with no distance taking from the past. At worst it is destructive or self-destructive. The desirable memory is the process of “working through”. It contains a critical distance on a problem and a distinction between the past, the present, and the future. LaCapra wants to take psychoanalysis in more ethical and political directions and sees “working through” as a countervailing force. According to him “it is via working through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical and political agent”.

Another type of memory process is presented by the Estonian museum. The museum is commemorative, but it also is meant to be a connection between the past and the future. The exhibition space is claimed to have a memorial function: it simulates the atmosphere and state of mind of the past – it takes the visitor into the historical past. This is done by presenting things and artefacts from the daily life of the Soviet era in the museum. However, the selection of the items has been careful – I will discuss this later in this article.

The message of the museums carries open political tones in some instances. The Latvian museum complains that not all of Latvian society fully understands the occupation. Consequently, “if the history of occupation is not recognised, the inheritors and successors of the occupation powers evade their responsibility about the wrongdoings of their predecessors.” In the same introductory text, however, the museum opposes narrow prejudices and recognizes that only criminal regimes and individuals bear responsibility for the crimes committed, not ethnic groups or social classes.

This brings up the issue of inclusion and exclusion of dark heritage. In Budapest when the House of Terror Museum was opened in 2002, a controversy emerged about the rela-
tive weight of the two perpetrating regimes, the Nazis and the communists. According to a journalist the Hungarian Jews were very upset:

By presenting all victims as equal, and all victimizers as equal, the museum diminishes the uniqueness of the Holocaust, not to mention the Communist era; by painting Hungary as one of Germany's victims rather than an accomplice, it continues a trend in which right-wing Hungarian historians are whitewashing Hungary's role in death of some 550 000 Hungarian Jews; and by devoting only one of nearly two dozen rooms exclusively to the Holocaust, it implies that communism was far worse than the Holocaust.\(^\text{13}\)

The Estonian and the Latvian museums include the German occupation in their exhibitions. The Lithuanian Museum of Genocide Victims has made a different decision. In the exhibition there is a three year gap between the beginning of the war between Germany and the USSR and the Partisan War beginning in 1944. The destiny of the Lithuanian Jewish population is not undertaken. However it is not totally absent: it is mentioned in the recorded headphone tour, in the printed museum catalogue and also a theme booklet on the subject is available. The local collaboration in the killing of over 200 000 Jews is a sensitive issue in Lithuania – especially because it is intertwined with the Soviet occupation: the Jews were accused of communism and cooperation with the Soviets.\(^\text{14}\)

All the three Baltic museums are experience and emotion oriented to some extent. In the Latvian museum the informative exhibition is in the form of a line of glass cabinets. The printed guide explains that "like a scar left by a knife wound" it "reminds the visitor of the most painful events of occupation and the most painful memories from that time". The exhibition begins at a reconstruction of gulag barracks room and ends with self-made suitcases containing the few belongings of the survivors returning home from Siberia.\(^\text{15}\)

The Estonian museum has impressive arrangements of old suitcases, of prison doors and of radios in its open exhibition room. The basement floor is like a huge piece of art in itself. The stairway walls are covered with red velvet. In the plain concrete room stand a few huge Soviet sculptures and a giant head of Lenin seems abandoned in a storage room. One sculpture is standing next to a prison door and a doorway into an open area with a concrete washbasin. Behind it are the toilets.

The Lithuanian museum is the largest with two floors of carefully and creatively displayed exhibitions. The design of the museum is of top quality. However, the most important part of the museum – and a significant dark tourism attraction – is the old NKVD/MGB/KGB prison in the basement. It was established in the building in 1940

\(^{13}\) Jordan 2002. Recent Finnish attitudes to remaining Soviet landmarks are discussed by Joni Krekola 2008.

\(^{14}\) Bubnys 2005, 3, 42.

\(^{15}\) Nollendorfs 2005, 125.
after Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet regime. At first the prison contained 50 cells, and about 20 cells remained in prison use until 1991.¹⁶

At present the prison is still preserved in the condition the KGB left it in August 1991. The authenticity and the recent use of the prison for the imprisonment of dissidents and fighters for human rights reinforce the experience of the machinery of terror and violence. In the prison over ten different cells or rooms are presented. The last one is the execution chamber, where more than a thousand people were killed. One cell contains piles of big brown bags filled with shredded documents. The documents were destroyed in 1988–91 by KGB executives to cover the tracks of their activities. They are authentic remnants of a totalitarian regime and also of the collapse of it. The huge amount of paper shred causes anxiety. That is just a peak of an iceberg – other KGB documents were burned or taken to Russia.¹⁷

Horror, Entertainment and Experimental Culture

January 14, 2005 the Estonian Minister of Justice unveiled a memorial plaque on the wall of the former Patarei Prison to commemorate the thousands who were oppressed in the building during the occupation. The initiative came from the Occupations Museum. Previously other memorial plaques commemorating the Jews executed there had been hanged on the prison wall. The Minister stated that the present Estonians are greatly indebted to the political prisoners of their freedom and that by commemorating them they wouldn't forget their recent history, which “unfortunately was too closely connected to that Patarei building”.¹⁸

The Patarei is a coastal fortress complex in front of Tallinn built in the 1830s. It was transformed into a prison in 1919 and during the Soviet occupation it operated as the headquarters for the abhorred NKVD prison. From there the political prisoners were sent to gulag prison camps. The outdated buildings served as a prison until 2003. In September 2005 they were opened for the general public as a temporary museum by the Museums of Virumaa.

After one year the Patarei museum had to be closed due to the detection of a dangerous fungus, Stachybotrys chartarum.¹⁹ However, the part open for visitors proved to be safe and the museum was reopened in the following spring. The Museums of Virumaa withdrew from there in July 2006 and the state owned Patarei complex was rented by a project company OÜ Bellhouse. The company has several museums as partners.²⁰ The new Culture Park Patarei aims to host concerts, parties, theatre performances, exhibitions and handicraft making. It has also opened an outdoor cafeteria and advertises a lunch restaurant.²¹

¹⁶ The Museum of Genocide Victims, 7.
²¹ Patarei.
The present state of the Patarei will be temporary. In May 2007 the Estonian State Real Estate Ltd., in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Culture and the Union of Estonian Architects, launched a contest to find designer for volumetric planning of the Patarei and the near Lennusadam Port area. The Patarei defence barrack has been registered immovable and the state is interested in developing functional use of it. The purpose of the contest is to find a conceptual design for a basis for further planning of the area and buildings.

In the early 2000s the fate of the huge fortress complex was under heated discussion. It was suggested that the buildings are given to the Estonian Academy of Arts, but the plan was rejected because of the expenses. The art historians became concerned about the destiny of the monumental building. A historian of architecture Epp Lankots has discussed the possibilities for rehabilitation of the buildings having a negative symbolic value. The first is the “domestication” of the building by giving it a different, positive usage serving the public interest. The other is to leave it as a document or museum, functioning as a warning. The costs of renovation and maintenance are always central issues when these two options are weighed.

The present situation (and potentially also, the future one) has elements from both these options. Art exhibitions and dance performances have been arranged in the Culture Park Patarei. Several concerts of popular music have been introduced. A recreational shooting range is opened. In addition, the museum activities started by the Museums of Virumaa continue, including individual visits and organized group tours and prison adventures.

The Patarei Seafortress and Prison Museum were claimed by the Museums of Virumaa to be meant “for those visitors, who were interested in sea fortress with international importance”. In addition, there was “also possibility to get acquainted with a prison, which was founded in 1919, but represents now severe prison of the Soviet times”. In this way the prison function was stated to be a secondary attraction, but in reality the historical sea fortress was only briefly presented in the beginning of the guided prison tour. For the most part the visitors became acquainted with the life in the prison and the conditions of detention and they were shown an exposition of prison equipment. The tour ended in the execution room with an effect of shooting.

Those who wanted a longer tour than the standard of one hour could arrange a three or five hour prison adventure for a group. The Museum directed it to those interested in experiences, since it was “suitable for teamwork and for better understanding of the value of freedom”. It included a simulation of the transportation of the prisoners, official registering, rummage, taking photos and fingerprints, taking prisoners into transit chambers and into cells. Prison food was given and prisoners were interrogated. In the end the prisoners were taken to the execution room and their sentence and execution was read out. Then they were called to the director’s office, given their dossier and made to write a promise not to commit any crimes ever again. The Museum promised complete security and a possibility to quit the adventure any moment.

22 Riigi Kinnisvara AS.
23 Lankots 2005.
24 The Virumaa Museums (information on Patarei taken off after July 2006).
25 The Virumaa Museums (information on Patarei taken off after July 2006).
The Museums of Virumaa is a complex of several museums and architectural monuments in Eastern Estonia. It has stood out as operating effectively and has been one of the introducers of the new concept of entertaining museums. Consequently, the head Ants Leemets has been accused of “tivolisation” or “disneylandisation”.²⁶ He is a former minister and deputy major, who grasped the idea of visitor-centred museum from “a lecture in Luxemburg in 2002”. Since then he has developed the museum in the direction of entertainment: role playing, historical feasts, craft workshops etc. The success has been impressive, for example the visitor numbers in Rakvere Castle tripled from 40,000 to 120,000 in three years.²⁷ Leemets has aroused anger among the museum professionals with his market-oriented standpoints. In his opinion museums should strive to attract paying visitors and the state support could be lowered significantly.²⁸

²⁶ Lankots 2005.
²⁷ Jürgen 2006.
²⁸ Leemets 2006. In this article Leemets’s opinions are commented by several museum profes-
The present Culture Park Patarei continues to offer several excursion packages and a three hour prison adventure. The price for the latter is 35 € per person. Individual visits are also possible. Ticket (2 €) allows admission to three prison floors, the execution room and outdoor walking boxes. Individual visitors will have no other guide than a few plain signs, stating for example Hanging Room or Patarei Spa.

The experience to wander freely around along the endless deserted prison corridors is rather extreme as such. The smelly, dirty, humid and cold facilities create a sense of authenticity. The broken and decaying chaos narrates its own influential story. Repression and humiliation are really present in the space, in its concrete layout and in its condition. It makes the visitor ask who on earth wants to act a prisoner in the complex, even in the warm and bright daylight, let alone after the sunset.

One group for which the prison adventures are targeted is bashing stag tourists seeking liminal experiences. A British tour operator, from a company of “experts in planning and organizing stag nights and weekends” advertised their tour in Tallinn:

> So, what exactly does Talinn has that is so uniquely exciting? Well, if you are looking for a gruesome and bold adventure, there is the Mass Kidnap & Banged Up in a Russian Clink session. Perfect for a group stag weekend in Tallinn, everyone in your group will be “kidnapped” by a group of Russian soldiers, placed under arrest and taken to the Patarei Prison. There you’ll be subjected to prison procedure typical of prisoners and taken to a cell by warders. Amidst the occasional prison screams and cries, you are taken to a darkroom with practically no hint of daylight. This is as close as you can get in experiencing a day in prison!

Similar tours are marketed to wider audiences as well. An Estonian tour operator East Express offers customised entertainment programs for international and local business and leisure travellers. They have several types of tours in their program and claim to be “Your guide to the heart of the magnificent old town of Tallinn and other Estonian treasures”. The sightseeing tours are based on historical facts and are entertaining and informative. Premium products are sightseeing tours, in which the guide provides “a historical narrative which musicians and actors bring to life through rousing performances”. The repertoire consists of six different tours, several with a medieval theme, and a Soviet TV Tower’s Tour:

> The group is taken to the TV tower in an authentic Soviet bus. On the way, Soviet soldiers/militia conduct a sightseeing tour in Tallinn. In the bus, participants enjoy entertainment and small surprises typical of the Soviet Union: participants prepare for passport control and fill out papers, answer questions, etc. Participants stand at attention on the square and a soldier reports to the commander who makes a speech and delivers a medal to a guest while the Soviet hymn is played. At the gate, participants undergo inspection before entering the TV tower.

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There are two packages available, the enhanced and basic package. Both packages have the same route but the performance differs. In the enhanced package, there is a Ukrainian folk band and visit of prison included.  

The whole idea of the culture park has aroused mixed feelings. One of the major concerts held there recently was a charity event NordFest against AIDS and HIV. This event made a commentator ask if there were rock concerts in Auschwitz? On the other hand, the nature of the cultural and entertaining activities is inevitably affected by the strongly influential surroundings. How does it feel to practise recreational shooting in the range formerly a penal complex in which prisoners were executed? In the art exhibition the feelings of anxiety and repression are multiplied by the site itself. One could ask if the powerful environment gets the artistic expression off easily, since it creates such strong feelings in itself.

For example in May 2007 the Tallinn University and University of Art and Design Helsinki arranged a student festival of contemporary art, AHNE 2007 in Patarei. The chosen site had a significance in itself, according to the organisers: “the prison is both the site and the content of the festival, and is its sole activity”. The festival aimed to analyse the Patarei in pedagogic and disciplinary discourse. Referring to Foucault it wanted to “address the mechanisms employed by power structures such as prison, university, and media, and examine an ideological force within this framework”. In this sense the festival “advanced creativity as a means of individual and social empowerment”. Furthermore, the main emphasis was on “the hermeneutically and interdisciplinarily oriented cultural analysis, the critique and theory of visual culture”.  

An Estonian art critic Siram pointed out the controversy between the theoretical starting point, the works of the students and the milieu itself. According to him the surroundings were monumental and inspiring in their own horrible chaos and overshadowed both visualization and meanings of the exposition. Foucault and theoretical analysis was too much for him.” It is a good point of view: is the long row of the small roofless concrete boxes – the exercise courtyards – a discourse to be theoretically analysed. Do traces of open repression and violence need hermeneutics?

The uncertain reactions seem to be due to the multiple functions of the present Patarei complex. It aims both to document the dark history of the prison and to domesticate it by creating new cultural uses in the huge building with an excellent seaside location. Furthermore, the contents of the heritage are layered. Patarei is an ancient fortress built by the Russian czar to protect from enemies. After 1919 every regime has used it as a prison. In the collective historical memory it is the centre of the Soviet terror. The most recent physical remains of the occupation are the steel ribs attached to the windows facing the sea during the Moscow Olympics in 1980. The purpose of the ribbing was to prevent any eye contact between the political prisoners and the international participants of the

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30 East Express (2006).
31 Eesti Päevaleht online 15.8.2007.
33 Siram 2007.
yachting regatta. In addition, Patarei was an outdated and criticized central prison for criminals. Some very angry reactions concerning the role play of life and death of the prison adventures had come from the former criminal prisoners.

However, the ethical grounds of this marketed dark tourist attraction have not prompted any major debate – unlike a theme park for Soviet monuments in Lithuania.

A Satirical Theme Park

The Lithuanian Ministry of Culture organized a competition in 1998 to find a solution to the storage of dismantled monumental Soviet sculptures. It was won by Viliumas Malinauskas, one of Lithuania’s leading businessmen, a former manager of a Soviet collective farm who had made his fortunes by exporting mushrooms. The statues were given into the care of Malinauskas for two reasons: he would display the giant sculptures with private money and the new tourist attraction would be important for the development of that specific region of Lithuania.

The Grutas Park, an outdoor exposition of 86 Soviet sculptures in a 20 ha theme park, was opened in 2001. It is situated in the countryside eight kilometres from the well-known Druskininkai spa resort. The sandy soil does not offer many choices for living, but the beautiful landscape and the mineral springs were thought to be able to bring tourists. The interest to attract tourists was a crucial starting point for the sculpture park.

The park museum became a success. Since the opening it has had over 400,000 visitors. But it did not come into existence without controversies. Many thought a theme park would be a tasteless ridicule, and “an affront to the hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians deported or shot by Soviet police during the Stalinist era”. There was also a fear it would create nostalgia for the Soviet era amongst the youth or trivialize history. The outrage was strongest amongst the gulag survivors. Malinauskas was blamed to be a hypocrite because he had done well under the Soviet farming system. His father’s deportation did not make a difference for the accusations of tacky profit making.

The dispute was taken to the parliament. The opposition was led by a loose coalition of religious and political groups called Labora. Several of their members were even in a hunger strike against the park. A group of legislators aimed to shut the park down. A parliament member and a former minister Juozas Galdikas stated that such a suffering should not be used for show business. Leonas Kerosierius, a veteran of Lithuania’s independence movement said in the National Post:

34 Treufeldt 2005.
38 Smith 2000.
Imagine yourself as a resident in a small village, and someone came and attacked your village, killed your brother and raped your daughter. Would you allow your neighbour to build a park to these executioners and rapists, or make money off these crimes.\(^9\)

The original plans were altered, but despite the opposition the park was opened. Malinauskas had had a plan to build a railway from Vilnius (120 km) and transport the visitors by train in cattle cars used as deportation wagons. The Siberian experience would have been further simulated by the trail being surrounded by a barbed wire in the birch forest, with real looking guards, towers and noises of barking dogs and firing. The rail transportation was not realized. But the two kilometres long sculpture exhibition has been put next to barbed wires in a Siberian type forest with guard towers playing Soviet music. Malinauskas’s counter-attack to his loudest opponents was to add Lithuanian style wooden sculptures in the park caricaturing “them”. There is also a museum in the area, as well as a lecture hall and library building and a picture gallery. After the walk one can visit the cafeteria and have an old-fashioned lunch, for example a “Nostalgija borsch”. Children can enjoy a little zoo or play in a Soviet style playground.

\(^9\) Quoted e.g. by Nelson 2001.
The park organizes special events. Once in a year there is a caricature feast with “live characters of the Soviet period”. This includes Lenin, Stalin, pioneers, partisans and secretaries of the central committee. In addition, entertaining programs, like “Holidays of the socialist period” are arranged for tourist groups by special order. They have become popular amongst the Lithuanians as well as foreigners.40

Despite the satirical tone, the mission of the Grutas Park is serious. The ultimate aim is to show “the naked Soviet ideology which suppressed and hurt the spirit of our nation for many decades” The ideological content of the monumental sculptures is claimed to have been altered by the exhibition technique and the exposition is said to “disclose the negative content of the Soviet ideology and its impact on the value system”.41 Malinauskas himself has emphasized the importance of memorizing the past, however bad it was: “We do not have the right to forget!”42 He has also pointed out that a good way to overcome the fears of the past is to use humour.43 Several times he has described his intentions to combine the best of Disneyland with the worst of the gulag.44

The museum of the park is called information centre and it resembles the wooden cultural houses built in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to the information on the occupation similar to the museums in capital cities, it presents the life in Soviet times in a wider way. With sound, film and photo documentary material it demonstrates the Soviet ideology and propaganda from various sides. There is a reconstruction of a small village library with educational books for adults and children, the award system for all kinds of activities is displayed— for example a medal for “the best milker of the village” – and the campaigns for solidarity between the diversified ethnic groups in the Soviet Union are presented. A separate gallery of Soviet style art, consisting for instance of paintings on socialist agricultural practices and graphics reflecting the idealized communist society, is open for visitors.

In the sculpture park there are also Soviet memorials of victims amongst the statues of the Soviet local leaders. For example a memorial plaque for a 19 years old girl from countryside is displayed. Stefanija Greičiūtė was a student and a member of the Komsomol youth organisation. She was shot by the anti-Soviet resistance partisans in 1951.

Despite the outspoken message, the Grutas Park has aroused dubious feelings. A journalist blamed the park itself for this confusion:

Gruto Park is full of historical memorabilia, but it is not a museum. Set on a placid lake amid forests of birch and pine and fir, with a children’s playground and a petting zoo, it is no vacation resort. Gruto Park is, well, Gruto Park does not seem quite sure what it is. [...] The park is intriguing not only because it is odd. It also shows the difficulties faced by any effort in the former Soviet Union to explore the past so recent and so painful.

40 The Grutas Park.
41 The Grutas Park.
42 Gilham 2005.
44 E.g. Smith 2000.
The effect of the monuments and displays is lessened by the whole kitschy tone of Stalin World. After visitors have read about what a bloodthirsty tyrant Stalin was, they can pop over to the gift shop and pick up a vodka tumbler with his likeness on it.45

The forest landscape is really picturesque and the pleasant atmosphere in the fresh air is emphasized with mellow Russian music from guard tower loudspeakers. Any child would love the colourful and large Soviet era playground. The Soviet style soup tastes good – it is traditional Russian food. These types of messages could be easily considered contradictory, but preferably, they could be understood as multiple simultaneous messages. This is a distinctive character of a postmodern museum: a simultaneity of a beautiful nature and a horrible historical past – serious in both cases, not mocking or trivializing the other. It is a very demanding task for the visitor to shift between these different realities. Also the mixture of serious representation and kitsch is difficult to deal with.

The Attraction for Dark Heritage

John Lennon and Malcolm Foley have explained the growth of the dark tourism as an intimation of postmodernity. First of all, the global communication technologies have made the sites familiar to wide audiences through documentary and fictive media. Secondly, the sites of dark tourism themselves seem to introduce anxiety and doubt about the project of modernity. Finally, the educative elements and the elements of commodification and commercial ethic are not interpreted as controversial, but accepted as an opportunity to develop a tourist product.46

Other scholars, for example Ashworth and Hartmann seek the explanation from the growth of "special interest tourism". Tourism markets have fragmented into diverse niches. Also the general interest in past has increased and heritage consumption expanded. The heritage of atrocity contains the elements of the past that sell the best: spectacular, extraordinary and unique.47

In both of these explanations the central question remains: why are tourists attracted by atrocity? Ashworth and Hartmann discuss this from a wider perspective: why are people in general attracted by atrocity? Is it normal human behaviour, a normal character trait or deviant social behaviour breaking the social norms and a sign of psychological unbalance? They present three main arguments, which place atrocity within a more unexceptional context: curiosity, empathy and horror.48

The experiences of the visitors to the sites presented can be glimpsed from the visitor books.49 There was one in the museum of the Grutas Park, but the Patarei prison in its

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45 McMahon 2002.
46 Lennon & Foley 2004, 11.
49 I have to refer only to the comments in the language I can read: English, French, Spanish, Scan-
transitional phase didn’t have anything alike. Of the occupation museums the Latvian and Estonian ones did have visitor books. The significance of the book came up in the Lithuanian museum when some single visitors had a need to discuss the exhibition with the guard. It is not easy to transit back to the world outside without reflecting the experience. A great part of the comments in the visitor books in the other museum were very personal and emotional. The books functioned as an important arena of sharing and expressing feelings.

One of the apparent reasons to visit the sites was “roots tourism”. Ashworth and Hartmann explain the overall growing interest in heritage with a need for self-understanding and identity seeking. In market terms “roots tourism” occurs when the visitors purchase their own heritage. A significant part of the overseas tourism to the Baltic states is this kind of search for roots.

In the visitor books of the museums many travellers wanted to present their family history. A Canadian visitor told her family was originally from Latvia and she was the first one to return since World War Two. She was grateful “for helping her to understand the past”. The experience was especially touching for these visitors in identity and roots seeking process. Strong emotional reactions were recorded:

My father escaped fleeing to England in 1944 after 4 horrific years some of which was spent in a concentration camp. I was born in 1952 and only two years ago found my half-sister Elvira who was born in Riga in 1935. This has been a very moving day for me. I hope to return and find the graves of my grandparents when I have more information. Long live Latvia!

Another type of emotional reaction was expression for solidarity. This was possible also for the visitors who didn’t have any personal relations to the exhibition. Interestingly, in the available visitor books pure empathy and feelings of compassion for the victims were rare. Instead, solidarity for the nation freed from the occupation was expressed. Solidarity was future oriented: “we will always support you” or “the New Lithuanians have family in America, and will always be in our hearts and minds”. The expressions for solidarity took sometimes shapes of a slogan: “The exposition learned me a lot about the terrible occupations. Freedom to Estonian People! I wish your country happiness, stability, freedom and prosperity forever!”

Also the emotional response could be sensed from the reactions of the visitors. It is possible to take a one hour recorded headphone tour in the KGB cells in the Lithuanian mu-

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50 Ashworth & Hartmann 2005, 5.
54 The Grutas Park museum, visitor book 15.9.06.

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dinavian languages, Estonian and Finnish. This emphasizes comments by foreign visitors.
seum. The many silent, serious-faced listening visitors wandering in the narrow prison corridors transformed the individual tour into a collective experience in a peculiar way. The impressions of sharing and human compassion seemed to be important while listening to the same terrifying story. In the Latvian museum the silence compared to the great number of visitors was noticeable. Everyone was concentrating in reading the exhibition texts with a serious face by oneself.

The exhibitions aroused desire to have similar museums in other post Soviet countries, for example in Prague and in Warsaw, within the visitors from those countries. Sometimes the contents of the museum awaked political visions and hope for different future in the visitor’s homeland. For instance a Scot wrote: “A truly emotional, informative & gives an understanding of oppression. As a Scot I hope one day to also see my country gain its independence”.57

Thanking for the educative, detailed and informative exhibition was one of the major reactions. Telling the truth was appreciated by many. The museums pleased little school girls – “It was interesting to see how the Russian period was like”58 – and professionals of history alike:

Thank you for not forgetting. As a student of history and history teacher it is important to keep the history true and to bring this knowledge to others. One has to learn history to not repeat it! The memories of those who suffered will not be forgotten.59

In addition, there were other kind of responses surely not so welcomed by the museums or a wider public. The first was criticism. An Italian traveller in the Grutas Park was angry about the content of the museum: “This is no respect at all, you simplify complex things, this is for stupid Americans with no knowledge.”60 A student from Stanford University criticized the lack of presenting the life during the Soviet era more generally in the Estonian museum:

I wonder what life was like for an average Estonian in these days other than the strong political sentiments. The DDR museum in Berlin in comparison did a much better job on depicting the daily life of East Germany during socialist reign.61

A response afraid by the opponents of the Grutas Park was humour and jokes. Several comments from obviously young visitors in the park represent this type of attitude. A couple of Swedish girls wrote: “We are here and say hello to Lenin!” with a drawing of hammer and sickle.62 Somebody from Gdansk had drawn a heart and written “Love Sta-

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59 The Grutas Park museum, visitor book, from the U.S. 15.9.06.
lin Lenin” in the middle.63 The multiple modality of the site created different reactions, which crystallized in a comment: “sobering but entertaining”.64

The only comment in Lithuanian language I could understand in the Grutas Park had one word, “Nostalgija”.65 The careful handwriting seemed to belong to someone who had lived through several regimes of power. Nostalgia for the Soviet era is a phenomenon feared very much in the Baltic states. The sentiments associated with German “nostalgia” for the GDR are not welcomed.

The display of the artefacts in the Estonian Museum of Occupation and of Fight for Freedom is interesting in this sense. The museum claims to take the visitor to the historical past by exhibiting daily life items from the Soviet period. However, the artefacts chosen are very symbolic. Different devices of telecommunication and mass media – telephones and radios – form the major part of the everyday objects. In addition, there is a meat mincer, a chain saw and different chairs for the confinement of the client at the dentist’s or at the hairdresser’s. In a clever way the artefacts narrate a story. This gives the impression that the potential for nostalgia is kept consciously as low as possible.

Professor Margit Sutrop, the head of the Centre for Ethics of the University of Tartu, wrote an article on the dangers of admiration of the Soviet times in a major Estonian newspaper in 2006. The online-version of the article got over 350 comments – the subject really interested the public. Sutrop was worried about poll results showing a number of people longing for the Soviet period. According to her it was useless, because the living standard was low and the era was full of lies and inequality. Romantic nostalgia was pointless and potentially dangerous for the national independence.66

A problem may occur with different understandings of the concept of nostalgia. Nostalgia is often equated with a desire to return to the old times. However, nostalgic feeling means rather experiencing the past in the present, than longing to get the past back. Nostalgia can deal with one’s private memories. The collective recovery from a trauma requires the acknowledgement of ambivalent feelings in the personal level – whatever is agreed in the collective level. An example can be taken from a journalist’s observation in the Grutas Park. A Lithuanian couple recognized a sculpture:

Oh, look, there’s the Lenin in Palanga. Do you remember the bakery nearby and the wonderful smell of the bread. Remember, our children would play nearby.67

Another way to relate to the past in a personal way can be seen in the behaviour of the visitors looking at the socialist sculptures. The local visitors liked to pose for photographs with them. In the Soviet era any poses beyond formal standing beside the monument were strictly forbidden. At present different postures of leaning and sign-making were

63 The Grutas Park museum, visitor book, 1.5.06.
64 The Grutas Park museum, visitor book, 31.12.05.
65 The Grutas Park museum, visitor book, 4.9.05.
frequent source of amusement for the locals — especially for the elder visitors. A journalist had witnessed a young man from Vilnius raising his bottle of lager to the lips of another party hero, which would have been, according to Malinauskas, an express ticket to Siberia. These small gestures can be interpreted as moments of empowerment — the statues representing the occupation are forced to collapse also in a personal way.

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