

BOOK REVIEW

Museums of communism: new memory sites in Central and Eastern Europe

edited by Stephen M. Norris, Bloomington USA, Indiana University Press, 2020. 434 pp, \$40 (paperback), ISBN: 9780253050328; \$100 (hardback), ISBN: 9780253050304; \$39.99 (ebook), ISBN: 9780253052346

This book is not so much about museums of communism, but rather about how museums established in the post-communist period deal with the communist/socialist past. As such, it sits within an established body of research into issues of memory, remembering and commemoration in the post-communist/post-socialist period. The 14 chapters in this book (mostly written by historians and anthropologists) examine individual museums in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine (2 chapters), Russia, Georgia and (in rather a flexible definition of Central and Eastern Europe) Kazakhstan. However, none of the chapters cover the countries of south-east Europe. All but one of the case study museums were opened in the post-socialist period (although one has not progressed beyond the planning stage).

The volume is entertainingly organised into 5 sections (or 'Halls') each dealing with a different issue, and each introduced by the editor. Hall A is about museums of genocide, occupation and terror and includes chapters about the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (Vilnius); the House of Terror (Budapest); the National Memorial Museum to the Victims of Occupying Regimes (L'viv); the Museum of Memory of the Victims of Repression in the Dolinka Settlement (Dolinka, Kazakhstan), and the Cheka House (Riga).

Hall B is focused on national tragedies with chapters about the Warsaw Uprising Museum, and the National Museum Holodomor Victims Memorial (Kiev). Hall C is about everyday life with chapters about the Museum of Communism (Prague) and the DDR Museum (Berlin). Hall D is centred on Russian memory and the chapters examine the State Museum of GULAG History (Moscow); a planned museum at the Butovskii poligon (a mass grave site) also in Moscow; and the Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines, again in Moscow. Finally, Hall E is entitled 'Rotating Exhibits' and includes chapters about the Joseph Stalin State Museum (Gori, Georgia) and the Museum of Occupations/Vabamu (Tallinn).

Each chapter introduces the museum in question and gives the background to its historical development. The reader is then taken on a 'walk through' of the various galleries and presentations, and the chapters present a close reading (some closer than others) of the museum's approach to display and the principal messages presented to visitors (along with what is omitted from those messages). Various well-established themes recur throughout the volume: the dilemma of how a post-communist state should interpret the communist past; selective remembering of the communist era; the nation as 'victim' of oppression by a foreign power and post-communist national rebirth; remembering events about which communist regimes were silent; and the challenges of interpreting everyday life under communism. It always seems impolite when reviewing an edited book to pick out individual chapters, but three contributions stood out for me. Julie Redor and Thomas Sniegon examine a planned but unrealised museum of a Soviet-era mass grave and argue that the Russian state has effectively handed over responsibility for remembering Stalinist terror to the Russian Orthodox Church. Roman Abramov examines the unexpected popularity of Soviet-era arcade games (many of which are salvaged from scrapyards) and highlights the physicality and embodied experience of playing them. And Lorraine Weekes focuses on the attempts by Tallinn's Museum of Occupation (a site which is mostly visited by foreign tourists) to change

the focus and emphasis of its displays, something which generated a hostile reaction among Estonian commentators.

There is some stimulating discussion in many of the chapters, but one thing that struck me about this volume is how detached it is from wider debates about the roles of museums within memorialisation projects. Historians are not the only people who are studying (post-communist) museums: instead there has been extensive debate within both Museum Studies and Heritage Studies into how museums (in various contexts) deal with ‘difficult history’ (including post-communism). Thus, many of the themes of this volume are not new. Issues such as the role of museums in the making and remaking of national identities; their ideological agendas; selective interpretation and simplified messages; a focus on emotional rather than cognitive experiences; and attempts to instil empathy among visitors, have been widely debated in Museum/Heritage studies. The book’s back cover states that what the chapters have in common is that “rather than focusing on artifacts and historical documents, these museums often privilege memories and stories” but this is hardly surprising given that the museums profession has been moving away from a focus on artifacts since the 1980s. Indeed, a focus on memories is central to the concept of the ‘memorial museum’, a new form of experiential museum which puts suffering and victims at the centre of its displays. Yet, while memorial museums have received considerable scrutiny over the past decade, only a handful of the chapters engage with Paul Williams’ *Memorial Museums* (2007) and none with Amy Sodaro’s *Exhibiting Atrocity* (2018). Furthermore, beyond occasional references to “never again”, few of the chapters engage with a parallel literature about the role of museums within transitional justice projects.

Something else that is curiously absent is a consideration of the people who visit these museums. Most of the chapters adopt the tried and tested approach of reading the displays with reference to the agenda of the museum’s sponsors, managers and curators. Important

though this undoubtedly is, such a focus on the ‘production’ of knowledge in post-communist museums is only half the story: museums ‘work’ through the encounters, experiences, responses and interactions of visitors. Yet many of the chapters barely acknowledge their museum’s visitors and we hear little about who they might be (or even whether they are domestic citizens, international tourists, or educational groups). Little consideration is given to how visitors might respond to the messages they encounter, although there is sometimes an unstated assumption that visitors are gullible dupes who are taken in by the selective or simplified messages with which they are presented. There is little possibility allowed for visitors as critical and active agents who can negotiate and sometimes contest the messages which they encounter in post-communist memorial museums.

Overall, this volume is an interesting and coherent collection of chapters (notwithstanding the lack of coverage of some parts of the post-socialist world) which shows evidence of careful editorial coordination. While it does not greatly advance debate about the role of museums in post-communist memorialisation, the chapters do present a series of stimulating (and sometimes provocative) case studies about the situation in particular countries. It is a book which will be of interest to postgraduate students and researchers with interests in the post-socialist world and more broadly in issues of post-socialist memory politics.

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References

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