

Staging Soviet (Hi)Story in Lithuania:

Museum Representations of the Second World War in Lithuania

by Ekaterina Makhotina, LMU Munich

While I was undertaking research in Lithuanian archives and museums many local people took pity on me when they heard about my topic.ⁱ ‘Why the Second World War?’ was the question they typically asked me. On many occasions I was told that the topic was of no relevance to Lithuania: “It wasn’t our war and we don’t see it as our history”. When I wondered about the total absence of World War II in the War Museum in Kaunas, one of the museum’s historians told me that “there was no war in Lithuania”. When I then asked him about the Lithuanian Division of the Soviet Army, the same historian advised me to visit the Jewish Museum in Vilnius “because the 16th Lithuanian Rifle Division comprised only Jews”. Another historian, a member of staff at the National Museum, insisted that the politics of history during the Soviet period – like the whole cultural sphere – was in Jewish hands and it therefore made no sense to have a museum dedicated to the war because it was strictly speaking not part of Lithuanian history.

The history of the years from 1941 to 1945 in Lithuania is not one of victorious battles. It is first and foremost the story of the annihilation of the Jewish population. In Lithuania about 220,000 Jews were killed, most of them in the first three months of the Nazi occupation; many Lithuanians participated in the killings. And it was in Lithuania that Soviet POWs suffered a tragic fate. Many died in Lithuanian prisoner camps and those who managed to escape received no help from the Lithuanians as they were denounced as ‘red terrorists’.

At the moment, there are only a few museums dealing with the events of World War II. Like all Soviet museums, almost all of them were closed after Lithuania regained its independence in 1990.

To reveal certain tendencies of the state-supported politics of history in contemporary Lithuania – and the main “memory players” – I would like to describe three different museums.

1. The Ponar Memorial Museum (1960 to the present)

The Museum of Ponar is one of only two surviving museums from the Soviet era. Ponar is a former site of mass executions near Vilnius. From 1941 to 1943 approximately 100,000 people were killed here,

most of them Jews. In 1960 a branch of the Museum of the Revolution in Vilnius (the main propaganda institution of the LSSR) was established here. Since 1990 the Ponar museum has been a branch of the Jewish State museum of Lithuania.

In the globalized memory of the Holocaust – for example in Yad Vashem and WHMM – Ponar is a site of remembrance similar to Auschwitz and Majdanek. Yet to what extent one can see Ponar as a “Lithuanian” Counter-Memorial, to use James E. Young’s definition? To what extent is it a part of the national – Lithuanian - complex of responsibility and mourning?

I would like to argue that Ponar is a contested memory site where different remembering communities are trying to install their exclusive stories of victimhood.

2. Kaunas’ Ninth Fortress Museum (1959 to the present)

The second museum, that persisted after the Soviet time, was the Museum of the Fortress of Kaunas Ninth Fortress.

The historical site of the Fortress of Kaunas is connected with the violent history of different political regimes, but first and foremost with the Holocaust. Jews from several European countries were brought to Kaunas Ninth Fort for execution. The area and the prison cells were used by Nazis to imprison Jews, Russians, Poles etc. A museum was founded at the fortress in 1959 to commemorate the victims of Nazi violence and Lithuanian fighters for the socialist revolution (as opponents of the Smetona regime were then perceived). In 1990 a site of national martyrdom was constructed here, now called the “The Museum of Occupations.” It was guided by the notion that both communism and Nazism are systems of horrific illegality.

When I return to this example I’ll discuss a second tendency - the mixing of narratives of victimhood. Here, at an ambiguous, multilayered historical site, a museum space was constructed that supports a mono-national victimary identity.

3. Pirčiupis Museum of the Victims of Fascism (1960 – 2000):

Pirčiupis is one of 21 villages that were burnt down by the Nazis during the occupation. It is situated in the Varena District in southeast Lithuania, 44 kilometres away from Vilnius. On 3 June 1944 the German SS locked the inhabitants of the village in barns before burning them down. This was a

typical Nazi 'pay-back' action – a partisan action against the SS had been carried out near the village the day before.

Like the Museum of Ponar, Pirčiupis was established as a branch of the Museum of the Revolution in 1960, a boom time for war museums in Soviet Lithuania. This museum was closed in 2000 and the last remaining exhibition was dismantled in 2010. At present, it is an immaterial, "imaginary" museum, that one can "visit" only by speaking with the former museum's staff. During my visit there, the only chance to explore the vanished museum was to converse with the librarian Ona, who had managed to save some remnants of museums' archive and store them in her house. Using this example, I'll discuss the 'failed' project to remember (national) Lithuanian victims of the War.

Framing the memory of World War II in the Soviet era

Before starting my analysis of the aforementioned museums, let me briefly point to some key features of Soviet discourse on the Great Patriotic War in Lithuania.

To underline the historical continuity of the conflict between West and East, Soviet cultural policy looked to the victorious Battle of Grunwald in 1410, where German Teutonic Crusaders were beaten by a coalition of Poles, Slavs, and Lithuanians. Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was set in the context of the Germans' "eternal Drang nach Osten" since the Middle Ages and seen as another attempt to colonize the freedom-loving Lithuanians and erase their nation and culture. The Battle of Grunwald became a symbol of the successful resistance shown by 'working' people to the German 'feudalists' resulting in their triumphant victory guided by the 'Great Russian brother'. Above all in the early 1960s, at a peak in Cold War rhetoric and East-West antagonism, the Grunwald Battle was seen as a prototype of cooperation and friendship between Russians and Lithuanians in their common struggle against the "cruel enemy from the west". It allegedly evidenced the invincibility of the eastern lands: "Grunwald 1410 – Berlin 1945" was the manifesto of the war propaganda and a common motif in exhibitions.

In discussions of the united struggle of Russian and Lithuanian soldiers and partisans against German fascists, it was important to stress the heroism and resistance of ethnically Lithuanian soldiers. Above all the soldiers of the 16th Lithuanian Division of the Soviet Army were presented as heroes. The Lithuanian underground resistance against the Nazis was presented as a very significant and broad-based movement. There was no mention of the fact that the majority of partisans had been Jews. Under German occupation, few Lithuanians had been willing to resist the Nazis.

As in all Soviet republics, in Lithuania too the specific fate of the Jews was not differentiated from the suffering of other victims. The Jews were presented as just one of the nations that suffered during the occupation. The Stalinist politics of remembrance stifled all attempts to show the local view of the war from the perspective of particular groups. The Jewish museum in Vilnius that was founded in 1944 by former partisans and ghetto fighters was closed down in 1949. Also, a Jewish monument in Ponar, funded by Jewish survivors in 1952, had been demolished by the authorities. Ten years later a typical Soviet war obelisk was installed at this site.

However, unofficial representations of the past also existed alongside the dominant memory culture. Jewish communities erected their own memorials on sites of mass executions. The fate of such memorials depended on the good will of local authorities in the provinces. Museums and historical literature had the task of presenting the Lithuanians' tragic fate under the Germans and their euphoria about the ultimate victory of socialism.

The very sensitive issue of the collaboration of Lithuanians with the German occupation forces was not broached in the public sphere. It can be seen as a kind of constructed loyalty that the participation of Lithuanians in Nazi crimes were silenced. Only those who managed to flee from Soviet Lithuania to the USA or Canada were accused of being war criminals. Otherwise, the participation of Lithuanians in Nazi crimes was shrouded in silence.

Loyalty was also invoked in public expressions of gratitude to the Soviet power for the liberation of Lithuania from the German occupation.

Liberation by Soviet soldiers was incorporated into the new "founding myth" of Vilnius and Klaipeda. The propaganda requiring Lithuanian gratitude for liberation also influenced the form of war memorials. Comparing with the monuments erected in the rest of the Soviet Union, they presented not so much heroic combatants as the figure of the "grateful motherland Lithuania" (Kryzkalnis).

From the 1960s onwards the aesthetics of representing the war became national in form, yet socialist in content. The monuments erected at this time reflected a traditional Lithuanian style, and commemorative ceremonies were always accompanied by Lithuanian folk music and young people in traditional Lithuanian dress.

In the later 1980s, the fascist-centered narrative was overturned by new oppositional narratives. The new nationalist stories were focused on communist crimes and the period of Nazi occupation was viewed as “less severe” than the Soviet one. The motifs of past suffering during the Second World War were regarded as reminiscent of Soviet propaganda. Thus, some Lithuanian memory researchers assert that Lithuanian society had perceived the war as a Soviet “project”, as a foreign experience. Hence the war never became part of “collective memory.”

There were several war museums in Lithuania: the Memorial Museum of the Partisan Maryte Melnikaite in Zarasai, the Memorial Museum of the Underground Partisan Movement in South Lithuania, the branches of the Museum of the Revolution in Ponar and Pirčiupis, and the Memorial Museum of the Dmitlag Concentration Camp. With the exception of Ponar and Pirčiupis, all were closed in 1990.

Pirčiupis

In the Soviet era Lithuania’s most famous war memorial was in Pirčiupis, the village burnt down by the Nazis. The story of Pirčiupis came to symbolize Lithuanian sorrow and suffering in World War II, not only in monuments, but also in film, literature, and the performing arts, above all in the internationally renowned engravings of Stasys Krasauskas. The most famous Lithuanian film on World War II presents the tragic fate of the village of Pirčiupis (Faktas, A. Grikevicius, 1980).

The Museum of the Victims of Fascism in Pirčiupis was Lithuania’s most visited museum – it attracted 120,000 visitors annually. It was also an obligatory port of call for foreign delegations because of its professed function of promoting peace and its portrayal of the Soviet Union as a peacekeeper. Inhabitants of the rebuilt village were ordered to write letters to the Head Office of the United Nations in the USA to describe the fate of Lithuanians during the war and their deliverance by the Soviet Army and to spread the message ‘It must never happen again!’ The transmission of the peaceful message of Pirčiupis may reflect the way Soviet cultural policy tried to come to terms with East-West antagonisms in the 1960s.

The stone sculpture of the Mother of Pirčiupis, erected here in 1960, was the first sculpture to symbolize the sorrow and pain of the victims. Similar tragic monuments were later built in Latvia (Salaspils) and Belorussia (Chatyn). This very mournful monument became the permanent backdrop of political meetings and commemorative ceremonies at the highest level.

In the first 15 years after the war no mention was made of Pirčiupis. It only began to be used for propaganda purposes in the 1960s when the new branch of the Museum of the Revolution was founded there. Initially members of the local community of remembrance – the relatives of those killed – tried to gather money to erect a monument at Pirčiupis. A school teacher, Kazys Ostaska, collected the personal belongings and photographs of his pupils. After the war the families of the victims built a memorial on the site of the mass graves and erected crosses in the traditional Lithuanian manner.

Like all Soviet museums of World War II, the museum in Pirčiupis wasn't a purely documentary site. The victims of the burnt village took centre stage with intimate details of their lives. Personal belongings found in the excavation of the graves – the „terrible byproducts“ in the definition of Paul Williams - were exhibited, including keys, glasses, shoes, and clothing. An urn containing the victims' ashes was presented at the centre of the exhibition space. The display suggested that the message “it must never happen again” was being invoked by the dead victims themselves. Visitors were confronted with strong emotions; the exhibition was designed to make them feel sad and angry, to hate the German invaders and empathise with the victims. For example, the toy of a 5-week old baby was exhibited. The museum also displayed objects with a strong symbolic meaning. Museologists define that approach to history as ‘hot interpretation’, i.e. interpretation with a strong emotional impact.

The reconstruction or symbolic ‘resurrection’ of the village after the war was another aspect of war remembrance. It was important to tell the story of the inhabitants of the new, restored village and present their life in the ‘new Pirčiupis’ as a symbol of the new life under the new socialist order. Furthermore, Pirčiupis' Museum was aimed to provide loyalty - in Soviet parlance “feelings of Soviet patriotism” - by praising the local partisans for their bravery and patriotism in fighting the Germans.

Heroic figures were also given an important place. Their sacrifice was displayed in medal galleries. The museum in Pirčiupis aimed to encourage loyalty, to stir “feelings of Soviet patriotism’ by praising local partisans for their bravery. It is therefore no surprise that the site was used for the ceremonies of initiation into the Young Pioneers.

As early as 1989 one can observe a rapid decline in the number of visitors to the Pirčiupis Museum. In 1990 only 600 visitors were recorded. Originally the principal war museum in Lithuania, its status was now akin to that of a provincial museum of local lore.

The Pirčiupis Museum reacted to the total collapse of the Soviet master narrative by presenting the Soviet partisans as those truly culpable for the tragedy of Pirčiupis. It was claimed that it was the “red partisans” who had provoked the Germans’ pay-back action with their attack on the SS near the village. The press suggested that the partisans had subsequently witnessed the burnings at Pirčiupis but hadn’t come to help. The *new heroes* of the region emerged as true patriots – the forest brothers, the anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters. Their activities in the Varena district were now interpreted as acts of true patriotism, while the actions of the Soviet partisans were seen as criminal acts.

Such strong emphasis on the anti-Soviet partisans activity played a large role in presenting the Soviet Union as a brutal dictatorship. In some cases, those who fought alongside Nazi Germans were remembered as having attempted to protect the nation from bolshevism. In Lithuania, memorials for those who fought against the Soviet Army were erected and a day commemorating the “heroes” of the anti-Soviet uprising – carried out by the pro-Nazi organization LAF (Lietuviu Aktivistu Frontas) – was almost established. (It was cancelled at the last minute because of the international scandal it caused).

However, this significant turnaround didn’t help the museum to survive. Despite the renovation of the exhibition, the decline in the museum’s public status was accompanied by a decline in funding. In 2000 the majority of the museum’s exhibits were transferred to the archive of the Lithuanian National Museum. Some of the remaining exhibits were shown in a small room at the local library. The library was closed in 2010 and the remaining the exhibits are now stored in the private home of a former museum staff member. I was able to visit this ‘underground’ museum. If we compare the Pirčiupis Museum with other memorials erected to remember the burning of the villages of Oradour-Sur-Glane, Lidice, or Chatyn, all of which are still prominent national memorials, many differences become clear. The site of Pirčiupis is no longer used as site for official commemorations. This indicates that the political imperative to commemorate national Lithuanian victimhood has subsided. Official ceremonies to remember the victims (attended by state leaders) now take place in Ponar, which I will discuss later.

However, Pirčiupis is still important for certain social groups. The veterans of the Soviet Army in today’s Lithuania see the recent politics of history as an attack on the memory of the war dead. In the 1990s they were confronted with questions regarding the morality of their own war service and with accusations that they were “occupiers”. Today they are met with ignorance rather than with negative

emotions. In this context they often see themselves as “marginal people”. As a kind of protest they reclaimed the memorial site at Pirčiupis as their own site of memory. Supported by the Russian Embassy and the Labour Party, they hold commemorative ceremonies every year on 3 June, the day on which the Priciupis tragedy occurred.

The veterans also reacted to the new discourse framing by changing its name from Soviet Veterans to the „Union of Veterans of the Second World War Who Fought at the Side of the Anti-Hitler Coalition“. Obviously, it is very important that the name “Soviet” does not figure in the title.

Let me now turn to another example of the transformation of a memorial site – the Museum of Ponar.

Ponar

In comparison to Pirčiupis the Ponar Museum was far less prominent in Soviet times. It was visited by an average of 6,000 people annually – even less than the Felix Dzerzhinsky Memorial Museum in Vilnius.

As a branch of the Museum of the Revolution the principle aim of the Ponar Museum was to show the cruelty of the Germans towards “peaceful Soviet citizens” and present evidence of German crimes. The execution pits that were part of the exhibition were meant to verify that “it really happened here.” The exhibition drew mainly on the Reports of the Extraordinary State Commission on German Atrocities in Occupied Countries and their documentary photographs. While the exhibition reconstructed the scene of Nazi crimes, it made no mention of the victims’ nationalities and was silent about Lithuanian perpetrators.

Archival documents show that the museum at Ponar was visited by Jews even before the end of the Soviet Union. It was known in Israel and among the Jewish diaspora as a site of mass Jewish executions. However, it was only in 1988 that the first officially accepted commemorative meetings of Lithuanian Jewish organisations took place.

In independent Lithuania, Ponar has transformed itself from a “local” realm of memory to a site of remembrance of international significance. The universal imperative to remember is fulfilled by an international community of remembrance intent on maintaining the memory of Holocaust victims.

The main ceremonial place at Ponar is the Jewish monument, which was funded by survivors and erected in 1990. In its form it recalls the very first monument erected in the years immediately after the War. The official commemorative ceremonies on 8 May or 23 September – the national day of commemoration for victims of the Holocaust in Lithuania – take place at this monument. Delegations from Israel visit Ponar every year for the so-called March of the Living.

The museum of Ponar is very small. It consists of just one exhibition hall. As in Soviet times, the current exhibition at the Ponar Museum cites statistics regarding different groups of victims. The museum presents the history of the annihilation that took place in Ponar without placing it in the context of the Holocaust in Europe. This is a legacy of the Soviet master narrative and a source of concern and frustration for colleagues from the Jewish Museum in Vilnius.

Yad Vashem takes a keen interest in the development and conceptualization of the memorial in Ponar as a site of Holocaust memory. This interference is not always welcomed. The museum's director – who has been working there for many years – would prefer to preserve the traditional presentation that plays down the Jewish identity of the victims.

Although the Jewish Museum of Vilnius and Yad Vashem have tried to influence work on the exhibition, nothing has changed. The issue of Lithuanian persecutors is still excluded from the exhibition.

Not only is globalized memory on the Holocaust presented at Ponar, but also the traumatic experiences of the different people who were killed there – the Polish soldiers of the Armija Krajowa, the soldiers of the Lithuanian Local Corps, and Soviet POWs. One can observe at this memorial how the tragic fate of the Soviet POWs remains that aspect of memory which receives the least attention. Obviously, it is the memory that still has the smallest memorial lobby group (Commemorating prisoners is somehow still marginal in Russia). Each of these groups has their own monument and their own commemorative day. Here one can see how various groups compete in this area for their particular commemorative work.

The perception of Holocaust memory as a “demand made by foreigners” is still widespread in Lithuanian everyday memory. The notion of commemorating Jewish victims is regarded as a foreign imposition and is associated with being integrated into European political norms.

The main memory players here are The EU and NATO. They insisted on commitments to particular forms of Holocaust remembrance as part of Lithuania joining the western club. Because of its desire to enter the EU, Lithuania incorporated the trappings of western Holocaust memory by establishing memorial days and educational programmes. It also established the International Commission for the Investigation of Nazi and Communist Crimes. (However, a number of scandals slowed the work of this commission.)

I will now discuss a third tendency in the contemporary representation of the war in museums, using as an example the Museum of the Occupations in Kaunas.

Kaunas' Ninth Forth Museum: The Museum of the Occupations

At this museum the whole period of Lithuanian history from 1940 to 1990 is represented as a dark chapter and communist rule and the Nazi regime of occupation are equal evils. The Museum of the Occupations seeks to elicit an emotional response from its visitors. It tells the story of Lithuanian suffering from 23 August 1939 to the restitution of Lithuanian independence on 11 March 1990 by presenting political posters with pictures of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The German-Soviet agreement is presented twice – it opens and closes the exhibition. At the beginning of the exhibition it symbolises the illegal incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet zone of influence, and at the end of the exhibition it is shown as a key symbol of the independence movement in the Baltics. One of the central claims of the Sajudis-Movement for Independence was that this agreement was illegal.

The history of violence is shown in photographs documenting the brutality of the retreating Soviet army shortly after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. The exhibition focuses on two specific events: the massacre at Rainiai Forest and the executions at the Praveniskes Prison. It is remarkable that this part of the exhibition uses the same photographs and documents that were presented at the temporary exhibition on the 'Red Terror' during the Nazi Occupation of Lithuania, an exhibition conceptualized at the Kaunas War Museum on behalf of the Nazis in 1942. Its propaganda function isn't mentioned. Its function is rather to convince the visitor of the atrocities, to make him feel strong empathy with victims and suggest their innocence.

The brutality of Stalinist/Soviet rule is transmitted using distinctive museological forms and images. The exhibition ensures an emotional response by presenting the victims' personal belongings, such as hand-made books, and handkerchiefs with national Lithuanian or religious symbols.

The personal effects of people killed by the NKVD, including shoes, glasses, keys, and clothing are also presented in glass vitrines. On the one hand they symbolize the presence of the victims, aiming to sacralize them, on the other they give evidence of the crimes committed against them. The museum encourages the empathetic identification of the visitor with primarily Lithuanian victims by showing objects with Lithuanian national symbols.

The museum tells the story of the Soviet "occupation" in sensory fashion - it makes the person viewing shocking pictures and "terrible byproducts" feel pain and alienation. Thus, visitors experience communism as a terrorist power in an emotional way rather than informing themselves about the context of repressions or postwar purges.

The Museum of the Occupations in Kaunas attempts to show a 'Soviet genocide' of Lithuanians. Soviet crimes are presented in a similar way regarding the Holocaust.

Objects that we usually associate with the visual chiffre of the Shoah, such as deportation trucks, trains, and the suitcases of the victims are also used in the presentation of Lithuanian suffering. The figure of the child plays a crucial role in this exhibition, symbolizing both the innocent victims of the alleged Lithuanian genocide and the future of the nation destroyed in Siberian camps.

Both stories of suffering – Lithuanian and Jewish – are presented in a similar way and use the same aesthetics; they tell the personal stories of the victims and demonstrate the bestial violence of the perpetrators. In doing so the museum presents an interpretation of the Soviet repression as genocide, the systematic annihilation of Lithuanians based on their ethnicity.

The comparability of the crimes of the Third Reich and Communist Russia is also implied in references to victim numbers. One diagram suggests that even though the period of communist rule was longer than the Nazi occupation, the same number of people were killed in both periods.

Was the communist crime genocide? This question touches upon the most controversial point of the debate in Lithuanian post-communist society. The term "genocide" had been used by diaspora historians and politicians since 1940 to describe the Stalinist-era repression and returned to usage in Lithuania in 1990 to define the crimes of the Communists. Originally, the term had been developed in regard to the Nazi propaganda to underscore the so-called "double genocide" – that it had been at first been the communists, i.e. Jews, that killed Lithuanians and that the Lithuanians took revenge. Up

until today, one can find radical right wing politicians who attempt to justify the crimes of Lithuanian collaborators by referring to the paradigm of the “double genocide.”

In many of the newly independent states of Eastern Europe, the museums of the early 1990s aimed to make the moral voice of the victims perceptible to Western audiences. Thus, the recent past was depicted in drastic ways. The West was supposed to accord communist victims the same respect as that of Nazi ones. Lithuania also chose to follow this path – even at the historical sites with an ambiguous past. The Museums of Occupations in Kaunas’ IX Fort Museum follows in this regard the main propaganda institution of Lithuania – the Museum of Genocide in Vilnius. This strategy is closely congruent with the interests of the dominant ethnic group in this post-communist nation. The Museum of Genocide Victims is a “performative Museum” (Paul Williams) that stages the Soviet story in the former KGB-prison. It was established upon the initiative of the Union of Prisoners and Deportees to evoke the criminal past of communism. As in the case of Kaunas Ninth Fort, it was a historical site which had witnessed the suffering of Jews and that had been transformed into a “temple” of Lithuanian martyrdom. The losses suffered by non-dominant minorities – Poles, Jews, and Russians – were viewed as competing stories of victimhood.

Anti-Soviet resistance is depicted as a heroic yet doomed battle for freedom from Soviet rule. In spite of the fact that among the anticommunist fighters there were also those who had undertaken mass executions of Jews, Poles, and Russians, the story of anti-Soviet resistance is presented as the heroic struggle of national martyrs for freedom. Visitors to this museum are meant to perceive Lithuanian independence as a kind of ‘salvation’ and view the struggle against the Soviet power as morally above all doubt.

The Holocaust is represented as a tragic, traumatic story with no concrete perpetrators: neither the roots of the Holocaust in the “final solution” engineered by the Nazis nor the readiness of Lithuanians to actively participate in the Holocaust are addressed.

The presentation leads visitors to see Jewish suffering as a ‘foreign matter’ in the Museum of the Occupations. Two aspects of the Holocaust in Lithuania are completely excluded – the role of Jews as soldiers in the Soviet Army and the partisan movement, and Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust. The former ‘heroes’ of the War – the soldiers of the Soviet Army, the partisan movement, and the Lithuanian division of the Soviet Army – are completely absent. Evidently, there is no place for positive memories of Soviet soldiers in the independent Lithuanian state.

The language of the exhibition is Lithuanian and English, despite the high percentage of Poles and Russians killed there. Excluding Russians from the group of victims has become part of the standard approach for telling an exclusive story of Lithuanian suffering. Significantly, no objects or testimonies in Russian are presented here.

Like many modern museums, the Museum of the Occupations believes it has a role not only to educate, but also to entertain visitors. In recent years visitors have been able to participate in 'reenactment' games at the site of mass executions. They decide which side they are on – the Germans or the Soviets. It is sometimes shocking to see participants dressed in SS-uniforms at this site of sorrow and mourning.

Conclusion

At the example of Pirčiupis we could see that the commemoration of Nazi victims disappeared because it didn't match the "appropriate history" of Lithuanian national victimhood under communism.

For the majority of Lithuanians the WWII now seems a much distant time and the Holocaust a very distant, if not a "foreignly imposed" event. The fact that the average Lithuanian has no consciousness of the Holocaust as a part of Lithuanian history is also a legacy of Soviet times, when Jewish memory was marginalized and Lithuanian culpability only accepted in the case of those who managed to emigrate.

Apart from references to the Holocaust, there is hardly any mention of World War II in the public sphere. The hegemony of the government-sponsored politics of history is being contested by members of society who have their own vision of the past. Thus, the articulation of memory of WWII didn't disappear completely – it was just transformed into particularistic attempts to remember.

Contemporary Lithuanian museums and exhibitions offer a very nationalistic interpretation of recent Lithuanian history. Guidelines developed in the late 1980s are still framing the muzealisation of the Soviet era. The "Soviet story" is represented using globalized imagery from the Holocaust in order to convince the visitor that genocide had taken place.

This approach is already out-dated in Lithuanian historiography, and the term genocide has been strongly criticized by both the Jewish community of Lithuania and the international community. Increasingly, academic historians are addressing the subject of Lithuanian victimhood in a more critical way. It is evident that Lithuanian academia is much more open now than it had been in the 1990s. Yet it seems that historians are unable to influence how this topic is represented in museums.

As the example of Pirčiupis demonstrates, the commemoration of Nazi victims disappeared because it didn't correspond to the "appropriate history" of Lithuanian national victimhood under communism. For the majority of Lithuanians WWII now seems a very distant time and the Holocaust a very distant, if not a "foreignly imposed" event.

Indeed, aside from memory of the Holocaust, one can hardly find any mention of WWII in the public sphere. But public remembrance of the annihilation of the Jews is in strong competition with the suffering of Lithuanians – the motif that is at the core of Lithuania's vision of the past.

The hegemony of the state politics of history is being contested by members of society who have their own vision of the past. Thus, the articulation of the memory of WWII didn't disappear completely – it was just transformed into particularistic attempts to remember.

Contemporary Lithuanian museums and exhibitions offer a very nationalistic frame for interpreting the recent history of Lithuania. The guidelines developed in the late 1980s are still framing the muzealization of the Soviet period. The "Soviet story" is represented using globalized imagery from Holocaust in order to convince the visitor that genocide had taken place.

This approach, as well as the use of the term "genocide" has been strongly criticized in the Jewish community of Lithuania and seems to be already outdated not only in Lithuanian academic historiography but also in contemporary society. The Lithuania academia is much more open now than it had been in the 90s. The nationalistic interpretation in the museums has also been challenged by counter-memories. It will be exciting to follow how the museums - as tools of identity politics - react to new social, political, and international challenges.

ⁱ The research was conducted 2009 - 2013. The PhD "Fragemnted Memories": The WWII in Memory Cultures of the Soviet and the Post-Soviet Lithuania was completed November 2014. This essay discuss the results of the research 2009- 2012.