

## ANOTHER PAST, ANOTHER CONTEXT. REFLECTIONS ON MODERN EUROPEAN DISPLAY

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The aim of this article is to present various ways of presenting in museums located in Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Latvia. A common motive for the selected museums was the past. Exhibiting ways took different methods depending on factors such as the approach of highlighting the aesthetics of objects or knowledge about them, or choosing the content of the curator about the object's history and its original context more authentic than the origin of the object itself. On the other hand, it seems to depend on the roles of a museum, recognized as a national, regional or private museum. It brings general insights into how modern museums visited in 2016–2018 answer questions that matter the most: who exhibits, what is exhibited, where and for whom.

**Keywords:** exhibiting, idea of display, objects versus context, museums, state, regional, private, Eastern Europe.

Questions on urban space generally<sup>1</sup> involve a wide scope of issues: architecture, technologies, achievements, variety of mediatization of modernity, each of which may, on the one hand, be considered as a separate story, on the other, however, belonging to the same cluster of the modernity channel in the form of the urban space. One should not forget to take this perspective into consideration. Among these, diverse other mediums of modernity developed, such as electrification, new urban architecture, trams, hygiene (the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden in 1911<sup>2</sup>), new forms of communication, photography, theatre, museums, cinema, color press, and radio. In the urban environment, the idea of exhibiting was born, in this trend of Western tradition, museums emerged, and then became part of the metropolitan landscape of the whole Europe, and later also of the world.

I seek to investigate how the idea of display is currently implemented in various ways. I am interested in the relationship between the object and the context in which it arose and evolved. Following this train of thought, I draw attention to the diversity of presentation, and I draw conclusions based on the comparison of

<sup>1</sup> A.C.T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> E. Reichardt, *Health, 'Race' and Empire: Popular-Scientific Spectacles and National Identity in Imperial Germany, 1871–1914*, Lulu.com, Milton Keynes, 2008.

expositions visited in both metropolises as well as small towns in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Latvia. Their common denominator is to present the past, but with what intent, how, and where affects the final result available to the viewer. A general question arises as to whether museums serve as the agencies of governance, by means of which they represent and construct imagined communities (Sherman 1994; Bennett 1995; 1998); or the focus is rather on the political work of museums; or they represent local regional or minority groups to the broader national audience (Karp, Lavine, and Kreamer 1992; Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Simpson 1996; Sandell 2002; Kreps 2003, Peers and Brown 2003, Witcomb 2003), or presented from the tourism perspective (Crouch 2008). Perhaps, from the analysis of these expositions, a different picture of the modern museum reality in the Eastern part of Europe will emerge.

The article is based on research conducted in 2015–2018, on ethnographic interviews, participatory observations, informal conversations with the museum staff, visitors and local tourist guides.

Before I go into the source material, I present the background on which contemporary museum practices have evolved. The development of the idea of display has found its new expression in connection to the development of cities in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, it should be noted that the history of museums is much older and dates back to the distant past<sup>3</sup>, although most of the renowned museums were created in the eighteenth century<sup>4</sup>. The oldest museums of Eastern Europe<sup>5</sup> probably stem from the same century.

Interest in distant countries and cultures dates back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century in Poland, and in practice a much earlier period. A new kind of public museum appeared after the French Revolution<sup>6</sup> along with social changes emphasizing equality. This social trend has led to many changes, such as emancipation of other groups of society and granting them civil rights. If we look at well-known modern museums, a large part of them was created in the nineteenth century, which can be considered a period of establishing new museums<sup>7</sup> in cities that underwent transformation, often going themselves beyond the old walls and expanding to open out. The process of urbanization was accompanied by industrialization, the creation of modern infrastructure, as well as space for the latest achievements of technology and culture.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the Vatican Museum was founded in 1506.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg was founded in 1717, and officially opened in 1727; the British Museum in London was founded in 1753 and opened to public in 1759; the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great, and opened to public in 1852; the Belvedere Palace of the Habsburg Monarchs in Vienna was opened in 1781.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu – the first collection was completed in 1790, and the museum was opened to public in 1817; the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation was founded and opened to public in 1773, the same as the Himsel Museum.

<sup>6</sup> The Louvre Museum was founded in 1793.

<sup>7</sup> Art museums are not included here. It is worth mentioning, that the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (1679), and the British Museum (1759) are among the oldest museums in the world.

The oldest museums in Poland were founded in 1870s, for example, the Czartoryski Museum (*Muzeum Książąt Czartoryskich*) was opened in 1876, after moving the collection from Puławy<sup>8</sup>, the National Museum in Krakow was established in 1878 and in 1911 the Ethnographic Museum was created. In 1870, the Lubomirski Museum (*Muzeum Książąt Lubomirskich*) was opened for public use in Lwów, which is now part of Ossoliński Institute (*Zakładu im. Ossolińskich*). In the following years, the Industrial Museum (1874) and the Historical Museum of the City of Lwów (*Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Lwowa*) (1892) were established. In 1907, the National Gallery was opened, and a year later the National Museum named after King Jan III Sobieski. Under the Russian Partition, in 1860 the collections of the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts in Warsaw were made available to the general public. During this period, the Museum of Industry (1875) and the Museum of Fine Arts (*Towarzystwa Zachęty Sztuk Pięknych*) (1862) were also established in Warsaw, later renamed the National Museum. As we can see, the museums were founded on the basis of collections that were created earlier at the royal or aristocratic courts, at the ecclesiastical centers or by wealthy bourgeoisie.

Regaining independence in 1918 in Poland – and in Central and Eastern European countries – brought structural changes to the museums<sup>9</sup>. Old collections were transformed, or new collections were founded, and they gained a more national and Polish character. For example, museums were founded in Poznań in 1919, among them the Greater Poland Museum (*Wielkopolskie Muzeum*, later transformed into national) and Greater Poland Military Museum (*Wielkopolskie Muzeum Wojskowe*). However, some institutions, such as the Archaeological Museum in Poznań had been established as early as 1857.

The interest in the past meant exposing not only national themes but, more broadly, archeology, prehistory and ethnography. In a broader sense the first ethnographic institutions in Poland are the Anthropological Commission of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Anthropological Department dating back to 1902 and later transformed into the Anthropological Section of the Warsaw Scientific Society, as well as the Folklore Society in Lviv, where the Institute of Ethnology was founded in 1910. Specialist magazines “*Wisła. Miesięcznik Etnograficzno-Geograficzny*” (1888) and “*Lud*” (1895) were also published.

The above examples prove that interest in the past, or – in a sense – otherness, determined by time or space, was widespread and growing. This is also evidenced by the increasing number of institutions whose function was to gather knowledge and present it to the public. The exhibitions were undoubtedly an instrument of conveying knowledge about ‘the other’, a first lesson of world science open to the broader audience. Objects from the past or distant reality were

<sup>8</sup> The museum dates back to 1801 and was based on the collection of Princess Izabela Czartoryska.

<sup>9</sup> Similar changes can be observed in other countries that appeared on the map of Europe after World War I.

available and existed in the collective imagination. As demonstrated above the idea of collecting past objects, artifacts, elements of old beliefs, songs and behaviors was well-known. Excursions and trips outside of the city were not rare, and overseas expeditions were covered by the press.

#### **IDEA OF DISPLAY, AND DEPENDENCE BETWEEN THE OBJECT AND THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT WAS CREATED AND DEVELOPED**

Rooted in a changing urban environment, modernity has brought a new look at reality. On the one hand, colonial expansion widened the contact with the rest of the world and its diversity, and on the other – goods brought from all over the world and stored in cities could be shown to the public. The materials became a testimony to the existence of a world previously unknown to the public. This world had to be shown.

This activity – showing – took on a new meaning in the urban environment. Materials and objects became “witnesses” of another era, a distant culture. These were not copies or images, only elements brought directly from another reality. Collecting material and non-material artifacts slowly gathered importance in various circles. Fragments abstracted from distant realities<sup>10</sup> stimulated imagination and fueled curiosity. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett an ethnographic object is created by the fact of having been abstracted from its context. It becomes a replica of a distant culture, a part of a story about a foreign culture. All of these materials were transported to the context of a middle-sized European city. On the one hand, they were abstracted from their context, through which they became an ethnographic ‘fragment’, however, on the other hand their presence introduced an additional dimension of the ‘physical encounter’<sup>11</sup>.

Peter Burke encouraged us to be aware of the context of images seen today in museums – “the image [...] needs to be imagined in its original position in a church or palace”<sup>12</sup>. In the urban environment new displaying conventions developed, in which the object was uprooted from its former context. In the context of this analysis, a “museum object” should be understood as an object of special scientific, historical, artistic or cultural value, stored and displayed in museums for educational or commemorative purposes.

Summing up the topic of the display, I want to emphasize that interest in the world in the 19th century caused the creation of specific institutions in European cities, that is, places for presenting things, representing reality unknown directly to the inhabitants. The museum space was a new kind of modern space in which

<sup>10</sup> B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> P. Burke, “Interrogating the Eyewitness”, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 7(4), 2001, p. 440.

objects were presented and representations of the old world were created, which faded into oblivion, or a world too distant to have direct access to it. The exhibiting place as interaction space, was a field in which different forces were operating, and they were filled with specific unusual foreign content. Space became manipulated more often, transforming the first forms of encounters with the objects of the unknown world into forms of 'contact', i.e., a kind of interaction between the audience's expectations and the visitors' repertoire. The exposition as an organized exhibition, presentation of a subject or a given group of objects, carried out mainly in art galleries, museums, etc., is characterized by a thoughtful composition, planned lighting points and appropriately selected background, which aims to highlight the features of the exhibited objects.

The first museums were expositions of objects unknown to the everyday life of the city's inhabitants at that time, however, the idea of display developed in general, successively placing larger objects under the open sky, etc. Interactions between exhibition and the visitors occurred in a number of ways. For example, museum objects influenced the visitors themselves or as part of the museum's narrative<sup>13</sup>. In case of a museal display of the object, even when representing the character, it was seen in a perspective, and from a distance, with the interest focused mainly on the features of the object and eventually on the story. The objects were judged through the prism of 'telling' the whole story, and the character was perceived as detached from the context of the performed story. An object can be evoking a sense, spirit, time, emotions, in various ways, in the form of a museum arrangement, and outside the museum it becomes an element of action, in order to go from object to theatricalization.

I am interested in the relationship between the object and the context in which it arose and evolved. After a short introduction, I will present my reflections on a dozen or so museum exhibitions that I visited in 2015–2018. These exhibitions were organized in various museal institutions, which: 1) were located in such countries as Poland, Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria; 2) on the one hand, these were museums located in metropolises, on the other hand in small towns; 3) in terms of their location in the organizational structure, they were managed by both state authorities as well as private legal and physical entities. From the comparison of goals, material possibilities, exhibition forms, as well as the museum measures used, and finally from the contexts in which exhibitions and museums operate, I will try to present, in my opinion, the main subjects, elements of composition, and accents related to the creation of museum representations organized in a similar way and period in various countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Ultimately,

<sup>13</sup> Firstly, in case of live performance, among characters performing a certain story. Secondly, between the audience and the fictitious characters and their world, thirdly, between the actors and the audience. In the case of shows of "exotic people" initially the interactions happened between story characters and the audience, while the actors were perceived as the story of the chief's family, or the princess, or the brave or cruel warriors. This is how particular displays were understood. The boundary between exhibition as a museum or stage and the place for the audience was distinctive.

I want to formulate some of the emerging comparisons between the object and the context in which the object is presented. I realize that I am drawing conclusions based on field material collected in selected countries, so they may not be of a universal nature.

As I have already mentioned, the common denominator of selected museum exhibitions is the dependence of an object on the context of displaying. Therefore, a number of questions arise. Object or context, which is superior? There is no single answer to this question. Anyway, an exhibition has to be regarded as a medium of and setting for representation, and as a vehicle for the display of objects or a space for telling a story<sup>14</sup>.

What then determines the message that the viewer receives, what matters? A mode of installation, messages through design, arrangement, and assemblage? That is for sure. Who controls the means of representing, struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them? We as researchers are aware that museums moved from neutrality to instrumentality, if they were ever neutral at all. Historically, the museums have been instruments for articulating national identity, education and experience.

Such questions arose while visiting the next museums and exhibitions. Most of the exhibitions left me with the conviction that display not only shows and speaks, it also does<sup>15</sup>, i.e. it affects the viewer's beliefs. It is therefore important to consider representational intentions of the makers when analyzing the exhibition.

### EXHIBITIONS REPRESENTING IDENTITY

Museums have long been understood as sites of politics and culture, where studies addressed the process of nation building, constructing imagined communities on state or regional level. Probably we will also find some examples showing that some exhibitions or museum institutions may represent other interests than state and official ones. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett „exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural ‘others’ are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps, most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and ‘other’.<sup>16</sup> The collective identity is built on the level of state, region or minority. To capture the dependencies between an object and the context in which it is exposed, I compare exhibitions belonging to different orders. If you presume this assumption, questions such as the following arise: who is exhibiting? (state/private, regional, centre versus border area); what is exhibited? (local history, unwanted past, military

<sup>14</sup> B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

occupation, favorite past or great past, recent victims or other meaningful events); where the exhibition is held? (museum, dark place, commemorating place); who is a target, ours or foreign? The adoption of these categories is crucial to my analysis and serves to organize the material, and the attitude to the past and reaction to the unacceptable parts of our past. Do reactions at the state level always coincide with reactions at lower levels; whether the process of identity forming works at any level, and maybe not always.

By presenting exhibitions from several selected museums, operating in different countries and belonging to various institutions, I try to answer two basic questions. First of all, do they always focus on telling stories? And secondly, to what extent objects become representations, where the thin boundary between the object remaining and the constructed representation lies? What kinds of exposure causes the transformation of objects into representations?

Our past is presented both in national, historical and other museums, both in metropolises as well as in regional cities. The exhibitions present the point of view of state central authorities as well as local communities. Such a difference was seen, among others, in expositions devoted to World War I.<sup>17</sup> I do not present the exhibitions in chronological or geographical terms, and my choice does not exhaust the richness of possibilities.

#### OUR PAST – STATE CONTEXT

Our past can be presented in a state context. An example is the temporary exposition dedicated to the First World War National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest. I omit here the permanent exhibition, in which objects and columns from Roman times are presented. It makes a huge impression – focusing on the objects that represent this very era – showing the size of the Roman civilization as well as its connections with territory of today's Romania.

For the viewer, it contains an interesting factual part and can arouse the curiosity of visitors interested in the theme of war, I must admit that the set of information on the course of fighting in Romania was exhaustive. The exhibition was created on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the war, hence the wealth of information. The narrative focuses on telling about the participation of Romanians in military operations, accentuating various manifestations of war, images of heroism and the courage of the Romanian army, and war victims are noticed, not only the killed enemy soldiers or the own soldiers, but also the civilian casualties.

<sup>17</sup> About WWI in Polish context, see D. Czarnecka, "World War I «Cartographies»: Mapping the Polish Landscape of Forgetting in Legnica", *Traditiones*, vol. 47, n° 1, 2018, p. 135–151; D. Demski "Dispersed World, Dispersed Legacy. Photographic Narratives of the First World War on the Basis of Polish «Archives»", *Traditiones*, vol. 47, n° 1, 2018, p. 153–165. I visited exhibitions on WWI also during field research in 2017 in Bucharest and Riga.

There are objects, in not very large numbers, accompanied by photographs, maps, texts explaining individual episodes. In a separate room on the floor, a mock-up of the battlefield is constructed. There are mostly photographs and maps, which in their entirety create an interesting story about the first war activities in the region of **present**-day Romania. The museum objects have been woven and are clearly part of the story here, they serve the narrative more than they interact with each other. Certainly, the reception of the story depends on the knowledge and perception abilities of the viewer, in this case, the viewer leaves the exhibition more with the memorized history than with the memory of individual objects.

National museums accept the tasks of promoting culture and presenting the past of the community in which they function. This aspect to promote relationships between museums and source communities, where the source communities were positioned as authoritative and often controlling agents (Clifford 1997; Ames 2000; Kreps 2003; Peers and Brown 2003) is emphasized in literature about museums.

State Museum context can be a part of identity forming, presenting a great past state context in Sofia. The exhibition entitled “Treasures of Thracia” was opened in this museum in Sofia. The discovered treasures of Thracian culture present themselves as extraordinary examples of a refined culture, visible in the richness of artefacts, evoking admiration among contemporary viewers. On the one hand, gold products, richly decorated jewelry, testify to the extraordinary past of this land (Thrace), on the other hand, they themselves constitute a source of delight. The exhibition presents extraordinary objects belonging to the distant past, and refers to the outlines of the reconstruction of the life of residents belonging to the Thracian culture. There are no direct references to the connections of this community with the modern inhabitants of Bulgaria. However, in the discussions of scientists, as well as in the press, the topic of certain connections of Bulgarians not only to the nomadic Bulgarians who came to these lands in the seventh-eighth century, but also cultural heritage with existing sedentary peoples is suggested. The story and the level of the Thracian culture offered by the museum has caused discussions about contemporary identities. The discussion takes place at the elite level, creating the image from the state’s position<sup>18</sup>.

In the case of the exhibition of the treasures of the Thracian culture, the past has been exposed and, as a result, transformed into a presentation of unusual artefacts. In this case, the objects themselves were in the foreground. The culture to which they refer is so distant that it does not create many associations, but the objects themselves remain in the memory. The way objects are arranged in the context focuses more on the objects’ details, than on their wider cultural background.

<sup>18</sup> E. Troeva, “Representations of the Medieval Past in Socialist Bulgaria”, in D. Demski, A. Kassabova, I. Sz. Kristof, L. Laineste, K. Baraniecka-Olszewska (eds.), *The Multi-mediatized Other. The construction of reality in East-Central Europe, 1945–1980*, Budapest, 2017, p. 556–569.



Another case is exposition in The National History Museum of Latvia in Riga entitled “Exhibition of «ethnographical exhibition» in Riga 1896 (1–31 August)”. It was an ethnographic exhibition, but for the Latvians the exhibition also has national connotations. It tells the story of the preparation of the first anthropological and ethnographic exhibition in Riga. On the one hand, it shows the interests of the city’s inhabitants at that time, and thus the level of civilization and craftsmanship, and on the other, the ethnographic exhibition presenting the Latvian culture, songs, and artefacts referring to the national awakening of Latvians who did not have their own country at the time.

Objects collected at the exhibition, such as clothes from that period, newspapers, announcements, posters, objects from housing equipment, etc., were just as important as the story told. Narration created a way of arranging objects, but also mock-ups, notes explaining what individual objects are, and what they meant in the context at the time. In my opinion, objects and stories about the past were equivalent.

The museums described here are located in capital cities and represent the part of the discourse at the state level. Even though the past is also presented in smaller towns and villages, I present only one example that belongs to this category.

An example of a past and regional context was the museum in Cēsis, in which the castle, tower and castle ruins were also included. There is no chronology in individual rooms, and exhibitions in the style of 19th century cabinets of curiosities have been set up. They tell separate local stories, for example in a room about blowing up a castle so that it would not fall into the hands of Ivan the Terrible, 300 people killed, but also the story of a woman and two children who hid under the basement that buried them. Skeletons were found, they have been reconstructed, which is innovative, and at the same time marks the place. The organizers put a lot of imagination in creating the exhibition, which should be considered a modern approach to the display, so that during the visit the viewer could use different senses. This is confirmed by various small elements – for example a lamp with a candle at the descent to the underground. Among other threads, you can find the history of the Latvian national flag, contemporary and old times appear together, as well as the proprietor’s office and library.

History breaks through, as do the threads of struggle and sacrifice. For the Latvian viewer, the individual scattered episodes create a whole, and in this sense, they might play a role in building a sense of nationality, social cohesion, and improved citizenship (Message 2006; Newman and Selwood 2008). On the regional scale, an example of which is the museum in Cēsis, one gets the impression that these local stories, broken up into more or less detached fragments, make up the Latvian puzzle. For the viewer from outside of this culture the exhibition and objects remain more kaleidoscopic images than concise history lectures. In my opinion, in this way, they creatively combine local and state perspectives.

### UNWANTED PAST – STATE OR REGIONAL CONTEXT

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, “museums perform knowledge they create”<sup>19</sup>. What, however, is created when the past is not treated as a basis of pride? Moreover, if the past is unwanted, then for whom is it unwanted? We try to forget about it, marginalize it, but in any case we face a dilemma how to refer to this fragment of our past. Many museums face such a problem.

The Krustpils Castle and Jēkabpils History Museum in Latvia in Krustpils (former castle and then headquarter of Soviet Army) is an example of the collision of two pasts, its own Latvian history related to the cultural predominance of the Baltic barons in most Latvian territories. The palaces have been renovated and are now part of the cultural heritage of Latvia. At the same time, in the area of the estate, in the surrounding buildings, there are barracks of the Soviet Army, and in the castle at one time also the headquarters of the Army staff and the headquarters of the local KGB (the Committee of State Security). As part of the exhibition, one room is being kept in the original Soviet style, the rest are devoted to the family of the past long-time castle owners. The “Soviet epoch” belongs for the Latvians to the unwanted past, which adequate formula is still being sought for in Latvia. In the latest approaches to the period of being part of the Soviet Union (1944–1993), it is considered as an invented Soviet tradition. The period of the Soviet Union is presented as unwanted past also in the regional context. According to Ilze Boldāne-Zeļenkova, the Soviet legacy<sup>20</sup> – either material or intangible – has been perceived by most members of society as a burden, as something that society has to learn to deal with and that has negative associations: pollution, unwanted neighbours, changes in Latvian landscape, and unimpressive architecture.

The main exposed building is the castle building, which has survived and is being restored. Rooms do not have many objects, large space is striking. This space and the building itself testify to a difficult past. One can see overlapping clearances of two realities, a layer from before World War II (palace, remnants of objects), and a post-war layer with a room that housed the staff of the Soviet Army (1944–1993). In the Staff Room there are numerous objects preserved from this period, a desk, wardrobes, chairs, flags, and paintings. The space of the headquarters of the KGB staff filled with objects from the period contrasts with the almost empty halls of the palace from the previous era. This contrast tells the story of the place. Destroyed, stripped of old details, but the renewed building of the palace with the emptiness inside on one hand, and the fullness of the KGB room on the other hand becomes a representation of history. Objects testify to the passage of time and tell about the difficult, tragic turn of the city’s history.

<sup>19</sup> B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, “Mārciena – between legacy and nostalgia”, *Folklore*, vol. 71, 2017, p. 149–170.

Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, 21), considering the issues of heritage, claimed that heritage is dissonant because the messages, values, and meanings that different people create about heritage and the pasts it represents are always going to be interpreted and understood differently by individuals and groups with different backgrounds, experiences, interests, and agendas<sup>21</sup>. There are many such places in Central and Eastern Europe.

Another example unwanted is Karosta Prison Museum and former Navy port (Karosta) in Liepāja/Latvia<sup>22</sup>. The port was built at the end of the 19th century by Tsar Alexander III as the main military port on the non-freezing part of the Baltic Sea. But it was also used by the Soviet Army. It is a tourist attraction, not fully developed, just because or only in this part of the building erected in the period before the Soviet. Here is a similar situation as in Krustpils, where the objects built before the Soviet times are treated as heritage, and those created after World War II are left to themselves.

An example of an unwanted past is the local museum in the former naval prison, founded in the tsarist years, but it also functioned during the Soviet period. These focus on telling stories. The former military port, a closed space until recently, is located in a large area overgrown with forest, with a residential part, like barracks, a strictly military part, fortified buildings along the shore. Among the remnants of the buildings, those built in the time of Tsarist Russia, the Orthodox church of Alexander Nevsky, the ruins of the barracks, and finally the building of the prison for sailors deserve attention. This is a museum that tells the story of prisoners, both seafarers from before the First World War and soldiers from the period of the Soviet Army stationing here. There are not many objects in the prison, rather empty cells and the prison director's office with maps, wardrobes, and portraits of Soviet leaders, which are building a story in a climate of horror.

This is a specific selective approach to the material past. The Soviet military objects built in Latvia during the years of the communist regime do not have any cultural-historical value in the eyes of the Latvian state. They are not classified as state-protected historical monuments<sup>23</sup>.

## UNWANTED PAST AND SUBJECTIVE CONTEXT

I will not describe here the cases of city museums, which emphasize other than state values. I am going to turn to the last category of presentations of the

<sup>21</sup> J.E. Tunbridge, G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a resource in Conflict*, London, 1996, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Military facilities that were built before the Soviet occupation and represented architecture of other epochs had higher status in the independent Latvian state. I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, "Mārciena – between legacy and nostalgia", *Folklore*, vol. 71, 2017, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> A different situation involves the Daugavgrīvas fortress, the Daugavpils fortress, Liepājas Karosta ('War Port'), and other complexes used by the Soviet army, which were built during previous historical periods: when Latvia was a part of the Russian Empire, and during the twentieth century inter-war period. I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

unwanted past in the subjective context – and therefore different, if often not opposed to, the official state context.

A separate category are places related to the presence and activity of the Soviet Army in Latvia – in several Central and Eastern European countries – the former Soviet military bases (nuclear missile launchers). Most of these places are not protected, and they are deteriorating. They are an attraction for tourists who find them through private contacts. I would call this category an unwanted past and subjective context because it has no institutional form. There are no official guides, no programs, no marked places on the map. They exist only in pictures in private albums, and nowadays also in tourism advertisements on the Internet.

There are no objects, you can see only the traces left by rockets with nuclear warheads. There is only open space, the forest separating the place from the city and the village, the various quarters of the forest have preserved the remnants of the former military infrastructure, mainly in ruins. The lack of objects tells a remarkable and dangerous tale, and its horror is marked by the ruins.

The question remains whether in this case the facilities have an agency on us. There is no institution, there is no framework for visiting these places, no written information and guides, that is, there is no museum context, and yet presence in such places – sometimes without in-depth information – evoke emotions in us, scare us, surprise us. Who creates knowledge? Does this also indicate the need to go beyond the usual experience of looking at objects and matters offered by museum frames? Perhaps we are able to open ourselves to other meanings than those usually offered in museums by display. In this case, the sole materiality of places or landscapes – ruins or object traces, for instance missile storage facilities rather than missiles themselves – leads to associations, feelings and interpretations. The museum context leads and is not open for ambiguity.

These objects in a sense remained in place, they were not removed out of their context in order to be shown. These type of remnants of the past that do not have the status of museums, but which enjoy a certain interest of tourists, still cause Latvia more problems than buildings from the Tsarist period. The notion “legacy” is a proper term and discursive practice referring to the remnants of the Soviet past. However, in the view of Latvian researchers, the difficulty is expressed by another definition used by Boldāne-Zeļenkova,<sup>24</sup> who says that “legacy is what you keep on life support because you can’t afford to kill it off”.<sup>25</sup>

The same unwanted past can be portrayed from subjective perspectives. An example of this is a private museum located in the garage, where you can find exhibits from the Nazi Army (1933–1945) and Soviet Army (1945–1993). The owner’s approach is purely subjective and focused on the expectations of tourists, including Poles and Germans.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Noyes (2016: 388) as cited by I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, 2017, *op.cit.*, p. 149–170.

<sup>25</sup> I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

The owner arrived in Borne Sulinowo shortly after the previously restricted area reopened to the general public. Responding to the demand of the tourism industry, he came up with the idea of opening a private museum chamber after the year 2000, which became the first place of that kind in Borne Sulinowo. Most post-German military exhibits were retrieved from the neighboring forests and the remnants of the Red Army collected from the abandoned buildings of the former military base. This quasi-museum offers military-style excursions and shares his own narratives of the place's past, which do not always adhere to historical facts. We had a chance to experience this while visiting the museum and having a conversation with its owner, who plays the role of a guide there. What appears most important in this quasi-museum, though, are the artefacts themselves and how powerfully they affect the visitors, and not the actual history ascribed to them<sup>26</sup>.

The local subjective context is also represented in the exposition of the local state museum in Międzyrzecz (Muzeum Ziemi Międzyrzeckiej). There are examples of archeology, references to Slavs partly from the position of the current state narrative, but also pictures from the period of German occupation and the interwar period (the city belonged to Germany). It is an attempt to show the history of the city including the unwanted or uncomfortable past.

Some expositions or even museums focus on telling stories, while others present objects, either ordered in chronological or in thematic terms. An example is a private museum in Borne Sulinowo. As a result, it is difficult to say what focuses the viewer's attention, the viewer is not guided by anyone (hints, logic), so is he guided by his own logic, his own attitude? Objects become representations, however, without the story told, they interact only depending on the knowledge and imagination of the viewers. A large part of objects is not associated with anything specific except generalizations that belong to a given era. Where lies the thin line between the object remaining and the object that is not objects? In this case, the viewers themselves enliven the objects by searching for stories in their memory.

New forms of performances appear and are discussed in the literature devoted to museums. There is a trend to go beyond governmentality, and museums emerge not as discursive, but rather affective in character. Whether private museum in Borne Sulinowo can be included in this type of category, it is difficult to say, certainly it is in the perspective of research on tourism.

## CONCLUSIONS

Putting culture into display. What does it mean to us today? The examples of exhibitions that I give you are only a fragment of the multitude, certainly worth a visit. Due to the lack of space, I did not include here the analysis of the expositions

<sup>26</sup> D. Demski, D. Czarnecka, "A Site Shaped by Discontinuity: The Practices of Place-Making in a Post-Soviet Military Base in Poland", *Suomen Antropologi*, 2018.

of the city museums, in which metropolitan aspects appear, referring to values other **than** the state ones.

Setting up museums belongs to the category of practices of displaying the past. My attention was drawn to the aspect of the contemporary exhibiting politics of museums. Presented case studies are a contribution to the discussion to understanding and challenging ideas about the interrelationships between display and politics. Museums are a kind of resonant places, and in them, as in a lens, the image of current reality is focused, corresponding to the objectives of the institution, its class, belonging, and “the other” depends on the location, the city, employees and the public who visits these centers.

Perhaps museums in small towns present the regional point of view, but you can also talk about ‘sense of place’. The metropolitanism of the big cities is expressed in the display the great past; the nation, the state, and the contents become objects selected from the position of the state. Small towns present their own point of view. A sense of place in the case of small towns focuses more on specifics than in forms<sup>27</sup>. They do not have urban or metropolitan rules, where the form should correspond to the form of civilization, modernity. The term “senses of place” herein is understood as products of the creative imagination of the individual and of the society. Different people at different times and for different reasons create different narratives of belonging; thus heritage is as much about forgetting as about remembering the past (Ashword & Graham 2005: 3), about the potential and the missed opportunities.

As we have seen, the practice of display is different. Showing this diversity based on the selected subjectively material also reveals various practices of achieving the purpose of the exhibition. The viewer is confronted with examples of exciting imagination, unusual stories important for the nation, serving identity projects, as well as individual extraordinary stories. The viewer is unable to determine what has not been said, what has not been exposed, and what remains the invisibilized parts of the visited community and place. Not to mention why and by whom.

As to the question about what is important – the object or the context, what is superior – there is no unambiguous answer. As we can see, the possibilities to answer this are many. The choice between the object and the context depends on one’s intentions. And yet the examples given here confirm that the object may have more meaning than the presented context, sometimes equivalent, and in the case of anniversaries or the presentation of specific events, the object may become part of the narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> Gorodok continues to exist in the memories of Mārciena residents as a symbol of a certain space of time. I. Boldāne-Zeļenkova, *op.cit.*, p. 164.