Cultural Policies in Russian Museums

by Olga Zabalueva

The actual definition of the museum is articulated around different roles: the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage in addition to research on and communication of knowledge. Consequently, visitors need to trust museums with their interpretation of reality. Historical or national museums hold a central role, insofar as they strongly influence the identity of entire nations.

In this article, I will study the ways in which heritage is used to construct politically engaged collective memories and contemporary Russian cultural policies, which promote such uses. In particular, I will analyse the transformation of the 2013-2016 Moscow Manege exhibitions into an entertainment centre called ‘Russia—my (hi)story’, which is promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church and supported by the authorities. Another case presented herein is the Gulag History Museum in Moscow. My aim is to demonstrate how the cultural heritage is being ‘applied’ to construct historical narratives of the difficult past and what is the relation of cultural policies implemented by the state to this process.

Keywords: recent past, cultural policy, Russian museums, national museums, difficult heritage, Soviet period
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by Olga Zabalueva

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According to the ICOM museum definition, ‘[a] museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment’ (ICOM 2007). The modern concept of ‘museum’ results from a number of structural and vocational transformations, evolving from private art collections and cabinets of curiosities to today’s complex institution that focuses both on visitor experience and educational purposes. Historically, a specific museum form was developed since the second half of the 18th century, the very beginning of the development of the modern museum, which supersedes its primary aims (heritage preservation and exhibition) and elaborates on the political relations in which museums are entangled (Gray 2015). In this article, I will focus on national museums as an essential example of this form, and on the role that museum plays in nation- and/or state-building as an institution.

This role was studied thoroughly in recent decades. For example, Benedict Anderson (1991/2006) names the census, the map and the museum as three institutions of power that shape the construction of national state and create identities within it; Tony Bennett (1995) elaborates on the role of museum as a tool of popular instruction and discipline; and Peggy Levitt (2015) describes the processes of creating global citizens by the means of museums. Recently, the European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen 2010–2013 (Eunamus) research project has aimed to compare national museums on a European level. The project defines the national museum as ‘a knowledge-based socio-political institution, with corresponding collections and displays that ultimately claim, articulate and represent dominant national values and myths’ (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015, p.1). The Eunamus reports and scientific publications provide a theoretical framework to study similar cultural phenomena elsewhere related to the issue at stake in the present article: Russian museums and cultural policies imposed by State.
Historical overview: Russian museums and cultural policy

*Museums and the nation in the Russian Empire*

National museums are transnational by nature, in that many national museums of the West were inspired by their peers (Apor 2015; Berger 2015) and, as Péter Apor points out, some national museums are aiming to define national communities despite actual state borders by implying the ideas of ‘cultural nationalism’ (Apor 2015, p. 44). It was essential for Russian national museums to follow European patterns. The first Russian public museum, Kunstkamera, was established in 1714 by Peter the Great after he visited cabinets of curiosities during his European journey. Likewise, the tsars and the country’s social elites held famous art collections essentially made of European fine arts and antiquities. The interest in national history and heritage was to develop subsequently, leading to the flourishing Russian Revival style in the arts and in architecture.¹

The 19th century became a golden age for history and heritage studies in Russia. The relation to Russian antiquities has remarkably changed alongside a broader interest for national cultural heritage based on the 19th century historicism. The increasing number of scientific publications, local archaeological communities and historical ethnographical studies whose aim was to gather and preserve the ‘precious remains of the past’ brought to light the people’s demand for historical narratives.²

At the same time, a discussion on Russian national policy took place within genteel society in the 1850s, in the aftermath of the so-called Official Nationality (or ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’) theory, introduced in 1833. The debate resulted in two antagonistic intellectual movements—paternalistic and western-oriented.³ It was widely believed, at the time, that Peter the Great’s decision to favour diplomatic and cultural relations with European nations was decisive for the Russian history. As a consequence, narratives revolving around the pre-Petrine period were in high demand in the 19th century, during the construction of nation-state in Russia. The monuments connected to the history of the first Romanovs became a national treasure and restoration works were carried out upon the Emperor’s order.

The most prominent museum projects influenced by state policies were first undertaken in Moscow, the ancient capital of pre-Petrine Muscovy—the Russian State before the end of the 17th century. The Chambers of the Boyars Romanov (restored in 1856-1859 and opened in 1859 as a public museum that commemorated the first Romanov tsar) as well as the Imperial Historical Museum (inaugurated in 1883, now the State Historical Museum) both became the first Russian museums to present a national historical narrative.

At the same time, as in the case of Peter the Great's Kunstkamera, the heritage practices in other Western countries were taken into account. For example, during the restoration of the Chambers of the Boyars Romanov, European methods were used in the architectural conservation. German memorial projects from the first half of the 19th century that glorified a ‘heroic’ past, were also taken as a primary reference.⁴ Prince M.A. Obolensky, a chairman of the Academic Commission for the Renovation of the Chamber of the Romanov Boyars, wrote about ‘all the enlightened European states […] <where> ancient monuments are renewed’ (as cited in Batalov 2002, p. 231). In other words, in
Russian (architectural) conservation of the 19th century the Western practice was adopted for creation of historical narrative of the emerging nation-state which has articulated its non-Western origin.

*Early 20th century developments*

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, a new official discourse emerged with the inauguration of the V.I. Lenin Museum (opened in 1924 and closed in 1993) and the Museum of the Revolution (which was designed in 1917, inaugurated in 1922, and renamed the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia in 1998) in Moscow (once again the capital of the Socialist state). Stefan Berger (2015) points out that the nation states established in the 19th century were bound to inaugurate national museums in order to foster and strengthen an emerging national identity, unlike the older nations whose identity was solidly rooted in a common past.

In Soviet Russia, however, the focal point of the state-building was shifted from ‘nation’ to ideology, and central museums became, to a large extent, a didactic tool for the Communist party (for the shaping of this paradigm see Druzhinin 1931; Galkina *et al.* 1955). In addition to the traditional role of museums mentioned earlier, Soviet museums played an important part in informing the culture of the new Soviet State. Furthermore, early Soviet museum practices were considered to be advanced in Western Europe and became examples to follow in calls ‘for museums to be developed as instruments of popular democratic instruction’ (Bennett 2015, p. 69).

Another crucial point in Soviet policies for museums was the process of national secularisation. My argument is based on the complex relationships between museums and modern forms of governmentality as identified by Tony Bennett (2015). Bennett’s use of the Foucauldian notions of pastoral and governmental forms of power will be a central tenet in my approach to the subject here. Soviet museums were arguably conceived as places of ritual significance—and as an important part of propaganda system—and became foremost recipients of valuable objects extracted from their original context through expropriation and redistribution (for museum as a propaganda instrument see Krupskaya 1960).

*Post-Soviet nation-building*

According to Bennett (2015), ‘museums […] are always caught up in processes of either becoming national or […] of un-becoming and re-becoming national’ (Bennett 2015, p. 73). Therefore, depending on the position of museums in actual policy-making, or rather in the power relations around it, the post-Soviet space brought new challenges to this field. Some researchers consider the cult of the ‘Great Patriotic War’—the expression used in Russia to designate the Soviet engagement in the Second World War from 1941 to 1945—as a ‘possible “socialist” concept of the nation’ (Apor 2015, p. 33). However, the recent development of that cult, such as the valorisation of Great Patriotic War narratives both in the media and in the entertainment sector, shows that it is also inherent to modern Russian cultural policies, which differ from the ‘Socialist’ paradigm (for example, contemporary focus on the Russian Orthodox heritage and the Orthodox practices and believers during the war has emerged only in the 1990s). Thus, the Great Patriotic War became a meta-narrative that represents
the ‘shared values and symbols of the state’s citizens’ (Margalit and Halbertal 2004, p. 529) regardless of the political regime in place.

In the late 2000s, the state has intensified its presence in cultural policy-making, leading to the introduction of the National Cultural Policy project in 2014 and in 2016—the 2030 Strategy of National Cultural Policy. The former claims that the ‘Russian language and the great Russian culture’ (The Ministry of Culture 2014, p. 4, translated by the author) are the underlying mechanisms to build a strong sense of national identity. The latter delineates methods to implement the new policy *inter alia*: the ‘educational, patriotic and military-patriotic activities among adolescents performed in different institutions, including museums’ (The Russian Government 2016, p. 32, translated by the author). The ‘distortion of historical memory, <the> negative evaluation of important periods in Russian history and spreading false perceptions that Russian Federation is a historically underdeveloped state’ (The Russian Government 2016, p. 6, translated by the author) is regarded in this document as a sign of a humanitarian crisis, which the above proposed strategy intends to avert.

To claim that some perceptions are ‘false’ implies that there is a ‘true’ one: the ‘regime of truth’ (Bennett 2015) engendered by the politics and policies of the State. From 2007 to 2015 there were several attempts to rewrite history textbooks for high-school students and a unified concept for such a textbook was developed (Sherlock 2016). The power of museums as nation-binding instruments, which were generally underestimated in the times of transition (from the 1990s and during the 2000s) has also been rediscovered in the 2010s by policy makers, who focused their attention on Russian history.

*The entertaining history: ‘Russia – my (hi)story’ parks and exhibitions*

The historical multimedia exhibitions proposed by the Moscow Manege, *Romanovs* (2013), *Rurik Dynasty* (2014), *From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory. 1914–1945* (2015) and *Russia—my (hi)story. 1945–2016* (2016) were turned into a vast entertainment centre (the so-called ‘historical park’) also named ‘Russia—my (hi)story’ in Moscow. Its counterparts have spawn in other cities like St. Petersburg, Tyumen, Volgograd, Kazan, Stavropol, etc. The second centre was opened in Ufa in June 2017, and in December 2017 already 15 such enterprises existed all over Russia, from Makhachkala to Sakhalin.

The exhibitions and centres are promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church and widely supported by state authorities: in 2016, the Russian Ministry of Science and Education recommended that the ‘historical park’ in Moscow be used as a source for teaching history at the universities and to further the training of History teachers at the university level. Hence, alongside the national cultural policy, the official historical narrative approved by the State is being fixed in the public conscience and will be reproduced not only by the traditional media, but with all the power of the cultural institutions.

Although these historical centres do not fall under the strict definition of the museum institution holding authentic artefacts (which the historical centre exhibitions do not display), they are caught within the power play of relations between the official discourse and the public historical narrative. These huge multimedia entertainment centres appeal to the visitor’s emotions and create a relation of affect through the unravelling of a narrative, which is based on historical facts. Audio-visual and digital
technologies play an important role in contemporary popular culture, as well as in the popularisation and commercialisation of the national narrative through the cultural institutions.

However, their impact may be overestimated: as Péter Apor points out, in many new museums specialising in communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the use of such technologies ‘blurs the borders between authentic historical evidence and replica and installation’ (Apor 2015, p. 54). Mieke Bal compares museum narratives with the cinema, ‘the art of the masses’ and ‘an effective tool for political activism’ (2008, p. 22) which might be another interesting approach to analyse the multimedia exhibitions presented.

Entertainment historical parks have been conceived out of two principles: the recent ‘gamification’ and ‘edutainment’ trends and the solid Soviet tradition of cinematic and monumental propaganda, exemplified in Eisenstein’s work (Baloffet et al. 2014). Not unlike the 19th century museums, the ‘Russia—my (hi)story’ centres are showing how ‘the nation itself gets staged or is narrated in nationalism’s favourite genre, the epic’ (Bal 2008, p. 17). However, the participatory quality of the exhibition is limited to interactive information panels and applications, where a visitor’s role is passive, like a spectator, rather than active, like the player who takes part in the narrative.

This is a true shortcoming, therefore, since entertainment centres such as ‘Russia—my (hi)story’ are still a far cry from the modern conception of the museum as a place for public dialogue. The planned series of ‘historical entertainment parks’ is, arguably, a somewhat simplified substitution to this conception that emulates ‘exhibitions’ to implement current policies (specifically, the State’s narrative on national history)—the term incorporated into power relations within cultural and educational spheres. Museums, however, are more complex by nature, because museum narratives can be ‘conceived as a meaning-producing sequentiality emerging from the viewer’s walk through an exhibition’ (Bal 2008, p. 15). In addition, museum interpretation is usually based on a collection’s actual exhibits: it has an authenticity that narratives constructed out of multimedia materials do not.

In the text that follows, I will focus on a representation of a specific historical period (the Stalinist purges of 1930s), insofar as it remains the subject of much controversy to this very day and for which dialogue is urgently needed. I will describe the official discourse such as it is illustrated in two cases: first, one of the Russia—my (hi)story exhibitions, and then in the Gulag History Museum.

Representing troubled heritage
The Soviet period is one of the most contested eras of Russian history. It began with the ‘Great Upheavals’ of the 1917 revolutions in the aftermath of which came the Civil War and, later, intensified industrialisation. The 1930s were marked by economical, ideological, ethnic, and political repression, which culminated but did not end in 1937-1938 and followed by the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. The first half of the 20th century has thus imposed specific commemorative practices upon Russian society, both in terms of remembrance and forgetting (Duprat-Kushtanina 2013).

The early and mid-20th century is subject to contesting historical narratives. A Russian NGO quotes an interesting sociological survey published in March 2016, which evidenced that 71 per cent of respondents agreed that ‘no matter what mistakes or vices Josef Stalin is associated with, the most important is that under his rule the Soviet people won the Great Patriotic War in 1945’ (The Free
Historical Society 2017, p. 17, translated by the author). Furthermore, a more recent survey indicates that 38 per cent of respondents believe Stalin to be the most prominent figure in world history (Interfax 2017; see also Sullivan 2013). In this context, individuals will either adhere to the official interpretation approved by the State or turn into ‘liberal insurgents’ who is ‘trying to hinder Russia’s development’ as a nationalist writer Alexander Prokhanov entitles a group of activists who are commemorating the victims of Stalinism (as cited in Bennetts 2015). Preposterous as it might sound, the positioning of each citizen in the field of a (recent) historical narrative became a mundane practice in Russian media, for instance, in such contemporary matters as the ‘Krym nash’ (‘Crimea is ours’) slogan or in the stance towards historical rulers, from a 10th century prince Vladimir who Christianised the Kievan Rus’, to General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Josef Stalin.

Revisions of Stalinism
What constitutes this official narrative?

In 2011, Thomas Sherlock, a political scientist, studied anti-Stalinist politics in Russia, showing that attempts to rehabilitate Stalinism were blocked by both the Orthodox Church and the Russian people in the early years of Putin’s presidency (Sherlock 2011). A crucial part was played by the relative accessibility of the archives during the early post-Soviet years: any attempt to redeem Stalin’s era would be countered with material proving the atrocities committed by the regime. The International Memorial Human Rights Society in the late 1980s began collecting both documents and material objects related to the victims of Stalinist repressions; the Gulag History Museum in Moscow was inaugurated in 2004.

According to Sherlock, however, under Putin the Kremlin influenced the national historical narrative decisively: it concentrated on diminishing the anti-Soviet and anti-communist discourses in general. The essential idea became the ‘historical continuity’ of the Russian state, which culminated after a decade with the advent of the ‘Russia—my (hi)story’ historical entertainment parks (Sherlock 2011). In the narrative presented, the ‘great’ and ‘heroic’ eras are interchangeable, turning any extreme conflict in Russian history into a transition from one ‘good’ social structure to another even ‘better’ one. This is the case, for instance, for the way in which the 1917 revolutions are presented: a ‘good’ and flourishing tsarist empire preceded the advent of the progressive and future-oriented Soviets (epitomised in the rapid industrial development of the 1930s), which are portrayed as Russian Empire’s legitimate heirs.

The first ‘rehabilitation’ attempts were made in 2007; however, they were not actually appreciated by the people. Both academics and clergymen criticised a new discourse on history that depicted Stalinist purges as inevitable and ‘essential to the country’s rapid modernization’ (Sherlock 2011, p. 97). Under President Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), official discourse on Stalinism was altered once more by both Medvedev and Putin (who, at the time, served as Prime Minister). For example, Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago became a mandatory piece in the secondary school curriculum (Sherlock 2011, p. 99). In 2010, the State promised an official revision of the Stalinist purges. In 2015, the Conception of the State Policy for Commemorating the Victims of Political Repression was introduced (The Russian Government 2015). The intention underlying these changes, however, was
ambivalent: for example, while condemning the atrocities of Communism, Medvedev has merged the Bolsheviks Red Terror during the Civil War (1917–1922) and the Stalinist purges of the 1930s (Sherlock 2011, p. 99). In addition, Sherlock (2016) demonstrates that these controversies are incorporated into the new national meta-narrative, which consists of contradictory elements: a condemnation of political repressions alongside the appreciation of the success of industrialisation, where executioners and their victims are aligned in one heroic act of valour.

The political stance of the State continues to be highly ambiguous: for example, in July 2015 a house in Tver oblast, where Stalin stayed one night during the Great Patriotic War, was turned into a museum of the ‘dictator’s wartime role’ with the support of the Russian Ministry of Culture (Sherlock 2016, p. 47). In October 2016, the International Memorial Human Rights Society was declared a ‘foreign agent’, which impedes the NGO’s activities under the Russian legislation. At the same time, the aforementioned Commemoration Policy for the Victims of Political Repression was introduced in August 2015, and the monumental ‘Wall of Grief’ opened in October 2017 in Moscow as a memorial to those victims, with the president Vladimir Putin leading the inauguration ceremony and speaking of remembrance and reconciliation.

In the above discourse, contradictions coexist implicitly and underlie two stances towards memory: the condemnation of repressions and the glorification of Stalin’s rule. Russian sociologists Yudin and Khlevnyuk (2017) argue that we are witnessing the establishment of the ‘second memory’ or the ‘counter-memory’, rooted in civil society and distanced from the official propagandist model. In the space of the ‘second memory’, the local prevails over global, and the memory of each individual is valuable and unique whereas these individuals become the actors of memory themselves.

Museums in Russian society represent the ‘first memory’ or official discourse on history, where ‘misinterpreting history’ is the predominant rhetoric in national policy documents, in which the ‘attempts of the falsification of Russian and global history’ are considered to be a threat to national security (The Russian Government 2016, p. 7, translated by the author). This is also visible in speeches given by Russian politicians, as for instance, the current Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky’s observation that ‘history as a science should serve the national interests of Russia’ (Medinsky 2017, translated by the author). Museums, along with other educational forums, should therefore mediate the ‘unbiased’ history to the public. In some cases, however, the assessment of the ‘right’ historical bias is clear, as it is with victory in the Great Patriotic War, there is no predetermined position for others. This leads to uncertainties and omissions in the ‘continuous’ meta-narrative.

*From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory*

One of the examples of the official approach rooted in the ‘first memory’ structure is the multimedia exhibition *From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory. 1914–1945* (Moscow Manege 2015, entertainment historical park ‘Russia—my (hi)story’ 2016). The official discourse on history, which can be characterised as conservative and to some extent biased, perceives any revolutionary change in society as a threat. This is why the Bolshevik party, Vladimir Lenin and his associates essentially take the blame for the ‘Great Upheavals’ of 1917.
The exhibition provides considerable space to a detailed evocation of the terrors of the Civil War and the persecutions against the Orthodox clergymen in 1920-1930s, while Stalin’s Great Purge and the Gulag system are represented in a rather small alcove alongside the ‘great achievements of the Soviet industrialisation’ hall. Based on cinematography, the exhibition uses audiovisual and digital technologies to nurture an emotional response in the audience and perform different types of emotions as the narrative unravels (Bal 2008, p. 17). For example, the choice of poster colour has a special significance:

- red designates the revolutionary years, the Civil War and the Soviet Bolshevik government;
- blue and grey halls indicate industrialisation and socialism under Stalin;
- red and black are used to designate repression and the Great Patriotic War, in an echo to the terrors of the Civil War and revolution.

The overall exhibition design implies that the ‘great upheavals’ of the revolutionary years led to a strong and independent State under Josef Stalin’s rule. The heroic past culminates with victory in the Great Patriotic War and includes a video of the commemorative march on 9 May, 2016, alongside portraits of famous historical and contemporary figures. The exhibition ends with a digital quiz panel where the best result, 10 out of 10 right answers, shows the portrait of Josef Stalin with a text saying, ‘You’re a genius’.

In addition to the ambiguous message of the exhibition, a video is presented to visitors, which emphasises that the Russians themselves are responsible for the ‘calamities’ of the early 20th century. This contradicts a prior explanation given in the first section of the exhibition where the war-torn Russia of 1917-1918 is depicted in besiegement of the foreign nations whose intervention has exacerbated the civil conflict inside the State, and the exhibition texts emphasise the intention of foreign politics to disjoin the falling empire. Most of the exhibition space is dedicated to antireligious Soviet policies and persecution of clergymen, most of which were recognised recently as the New Martyrs by the church. Kathy Rousselet (2013) argues that the Russian Orthodox Church is trying to impose the religious notions of martyrdom, reconciliation and repentance on the difficult issues of Russian history. However, the veneration of victims does not say much about crimes or criminals, which makes the human tragedies of the recent past accidental and beyond control, like natural disasters or divine intervention.

Gulag History Museum: musealising the trauma

The Gulag History Museum has provided material that presents the Great Purge and Gulag history section in the ‘Russia — my (hi)story’ park. The new museum exhibition, which was reopened in 2015, is based on materials from former prisoners’ personal archives, collections, and artworks. It strives to cover Soviet repression as a whole but concentrates mainly on the Great Purge period. The Terror is presented metaphorically with an ‘Eclipse’ to introduce the 1930s policies that were aimed against the ‘enemies of the people’ and the ‘traitors to the motherland’; and ends with Khrushchev’s de-Stalinisation policy from 1956 onwards. Consequently, the Gulag History Museum’s evocation of the trauma focuses on a relatively short period of time although repression continued to exist under and
after Khrushchev’s rule. The ending sequence of the exhibition shows contemporary Russian officials talking about social cohesion and reconciliation.

The Gulag History Museum’s vision of the role of Soviet State in political repressions and the Great Terror is not obscure. However, memories of the Gulag are presented in a way that also evidences a structural flaw that is recurrent in such (re)construction efforts. Often, political repression is shown as the work of ‘villains’ (for instance, Stalin and NKVD high officials, or Lenin and the Bolsheviks) or driven by a generalised entity, as the whole Soviet penal system itself. The stories of the Gulag prisoners in the public historical narrative are mostly limited to the biographies of the well-known scientists, poets, artists, writers and military men, whereas the majority of victims are represented by statistics. In the Gulag History Museum, the emotional relationship with the exhibition’s narratives is induced by the figures provided. In almost every case, the number of victims is specified on posters or digital panels, and authentic objects strengthen the emotional response, such as the personal belongings of prisoners or of close relatives of enemies of the people, which are exhibited in cases that resemble coffins.

The museum’s stance towards Stalinism is unconditionally critical, and the exhibition remains an example of biased historical narrative—even if it is biased in a ‘positive’ way—instead of providing a critical analysis of the events. At the same time, the Gulag History Museum conducts exhibitions and educational projects, and supports public memory research and volunteer programmes. Being the only national museum of its kind in Russia, it promotes historical consciousness and stands for the de-Stalinisation of history, as the main instigator of the Conception of the State Policy for Commemorating the Victims of Political Repression. Insofar as it is a state-funded museum, however, it is incorporated into the traditional mechanism of identity production, which corresponds to the definition of a national museum as a ‘manifestation of cultural and political desires rather than a straightforward representation of historical or national “facts”’ (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015, p. 2).

Sherlock (2011) in his study on the eventual de-/re-Stalinisation of contemporary Russia suggests that one of the counter measures to the growing popularity of this particular historical agenda is the closer collaboration with the Western research institutes that deal with the issues of ‘troubled’ past. I would elaborate on this parallel and argue that the museums whose experience might be most valuable to any cultural institution that intends to represent the Soviet period historically are foremost European and American national museums. Indeed, their ethnographic collections are being reinterpreted due to the postcolonial turn in the modern world, and ‘the historiographical narrative as told from within parameters of a univocal point of view’ is currently under critical scrutiny (De Angelis et al. 2014, p. 2).

Common ground can indeed be found in the historical discourse adopted. In post-Soviet museums the Stalinist period is presented as part of a mundane, matter-of-fact global picture – just as the picture of colonialised world in the ethnographic collections. Similarly, the NKVD punishment system or the ‘superiority’ of the ‘white’ man were undeniable parts of an institutionalised ‘regime of truth’ and supported by cultural policies of the States. The main challenge for such institutions, therefore, is to defy the existing narrative rather than to preserve a memory of trauma. Speaking about normativity in
the museum space is a complex but powerful subject since the same institutions have played a major role in the elaboration of social and cultural norms in the course of the last centuries.

Russian nostalgia for the ‘Soviet Golden Age’ provides another challenge—the commodification of memory. Objects of the Soviet and post-Soviet period are becoming much sought-after collectibles or musealia and sold on the art market. As historical museums are ‘shifting between history and memory’ (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015, p.6), the recent past becomes a difficult issue due to its ambiguous position between the two, and to the many actors involved in the elaboration of collective memory and objects that can tell their own stories.

Recent past as a heritage: nostalgic commercialisation or a space for public dialogue?

The commodification of the troubled past is not unprecedented or unique to modern Russia. Laurence Coderre (2016) brought to light complicated moral issues behind the collecting process of the Chinese Cultural Revolution memorabilia, which risk effacing the memory of trauma that is inherent to them. Explaining the reasons for which violence and war tourism are extremely popular, Péter Apor argues that the answer is in the nature of tourism per se as an ‘authentic experience of being somewhere else’ (2015, p. 55). For the nation that is actively engaged in (re)construction of its own historical narrative (as in the case of the 2010s Russia), however, this ‘experience of being somewhere else’ turns into a nostalgic experience of coming home.

The growing popularity of everyday life in Soviet times influences museums as well as diverse businesses and media. Roman Abramov (2014) analyses museum practices in so-called ‘popular museums of the Soviet past’, which are often created by private collectors and whose stance towards Soviet everyday life is rather nostalgic. This is indicated in the choice to exhibit familiar and recognisable objects. While state museums present the recent past either as a narrative of significant political events and modernisation successes—as does the Museum of Contemporary History of Russia—or as typological reconstructions that represent a particular way of life during the period (period rooms, for example); the popular museums create an affective relation of nostalgia rather than of patriotic euphoria in the way they appeal to visitor emotions.

This approach is based on individual memories and experiences. Therefore, it is situated in the ‘second memory’ field; however, there are no signs of bridging the gap between the two manners of (re)presenting the recent past. As Avishai Margalit (2011) explains, the vulnerability of nostalgic positioning lies in the moral sentiment and idealisation of the object of nostalgia. The nostalgic collective memory can turn into the ‘vicarious memory’ that engenders conflicts as it contradicts the memory of other groups. In the situation where state-regulated discourse is solely based on the idea of ‘continuity’, which legitimises the current regime, and ‘reconciliation’, which does not produce any actual policy besides mixed signals, conflict of memories is still likely to happen in the near future. The reflective approach to the recent past would help contemplate the complexities and uncertainties that affect even current Russian politics and make the simmering tension in the society visible and arguable.

Insofar as nation building in Russia is still ongoing, the decisive role of museums as cultural institutions remains crucial in this field. Museums can be conceived as the mechanisms needed to
establish and rearrange power relations within society. Clive Gray (2015) defines museums as political institutions; the social role of the museums is therefore influenced by the state’s political agenda, but also with transnational movements, such as the work with difficult historical issues. For example, the theme for International Museum Day 2017, *Museums and Contested Histories: Saying the Unspeakable in Museums*, or the ICOM Germany and ICOM Nord conference on *Difficult Issues* in Sweden in September 2017 have spurred reflection on these issues. According to Margalit (2011), ‘the politics of memory is also the politics of forgetting; creating and maintaining social amnesia by political agencies’ (p. 275). Nostalgia in its turn ‘removes disturbing thoughts about the past and retains only the good ones’ (Margalit 2011, p. 280). Therefore, in the context of this article’s cases, the official discourse in Russia, that glorifies the past, and the nostalgic one, that is nurtured by private collectors, both contribute to elaborating an idealised image of the recent past.

The reinterpretation of the recent past is made possible through cultural institutions and inspires such initiatives as, for example, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network of historic sites that aims to inspire reflection on what constitutes a difficult or traumatic past. As Liz Sevcenko (2010), the Coalition’s former Director, points out, instead of focusing on plain representation, heritage sites can help develop public dialogue by identifying conflicts and providing a space to address them, as ‘[h]eritage managers can identify which issues are dividing their community’ (p. 24). Contested heritage, therefore, becomes a valuable resource not only for the group whose legacy it represents but for all stakeholders. The emotional response to representations of the recent past can bring new insight to the discussion, insofar as the subject implies that the general public participates.

**Conclusion**

In Russia, the use of heritage in the construction of politically engaged collective memories is not unusual. The cultural policies of the 19th century have led to the institutionalised idea of the Romanov legacy as part of the national heritage. The current political position of Russian museums has inherited practices from the Soviet period in addition to the problematic heritage it produced. The explanatory, didactic discourse based on historical essentialism is still taking place in many cultural institutions.

In this article, my purpose was to elicit the relation between contemporary cultural policies in Russia and historical representations in museums and museum-like institutions. Since the State’s stance towards certain issues such as the Stalin era or Soviet heritage in general is inherently contradictory, the historical interpretations vary from one institution to another. In times when public memory is being actively manipulated by the media, in Russia as well as in other parts of the world, a more informed approach to represent the recent past by cultural institutions is in demand. It is my contention that fostering new dialogue could find inspiration in the work done on ethnographical collections, by challenging the existing cultural norms and beliefs. The encouragement for the museum visitors to participate in such a dialogue can be also found in the concept of heritage as something being constructed by affective relation and emotional engagement (Smith and Campbell 2016), which allows to employ public historical narratives in the context of cultural institutions. This, however, is a subject for further separate research.
Notes

1 A contradictory assessment of the aesthetic results of the historical and cultural paradigm of the mid-19th century by different researchers created certain terminological difficulties. Some describe it as ‘eclecticism’, others as ‘Romantic historicism’. By contrast, the denomination of the ‘Russian revival’ implies the idea of a ‘renaissance’ or ‘renewal’ of any style in its integrity—namely, a style that usually played a decisive role in the national architectural tradition of the time.

2 The expression was used Fedor Solntsev, a Russian antiquarian, in 1876 to describe such objects (see Batalov 2001).

3 The author of this policy was Count Sergey Uvarov, the Russian National Education Minister under Nicholas I. It was implied in the ‘Nationality’ part that the Russian people, being deeply religious and devoted to the Emperor, should preserve national traditions and fight any foreign influences. Another prominent Russian statesman who implemented similar policies under the reign of Alexander III was Ober-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonostsev. He emphasised the importance of national and religious unity of Russian people, which were deemed threatened by liberal and democratic movements. These discourses were supported by the intellectual movement of Slavophilia which drew inspiration from early modern Russian history and society. The other intellectual movement often perceived as an antagonistic to slavophiles was the Western-oriented Zapadnichestvo (westernism) movement. This group argued that Russia’s further development depended on successful adoption of European liberal governmental system.

4 As early as 1843, a German architect, Leo von Klenze, built the Valhalla Gallery (also known as the Glory Gallery), a memorial dedicated to Bavarian history located near the city of Regensburg. It was commissioned by the king of Bavaria, Ludwig I. At the same time, the restoration of knight castles belonging to the Hohenzollern dynasty was carried out under the patronage of the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. The reconstruction of the royal dynasty’s heritage as a project of national history, therefore, was not something invented in Russia.

5 In Michel Foucault’s 1982 essay, entitled ‘The Subject and Power’, a pastoral form of power is identified as one deriving from Christian traditions, as opposed to monarchic power.

6 I am using this spelling because the Russian word ‘история’ means ‘story’ as well as ‘history’.

7 The Russian ‘foreign agent’ law (Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent, available at: http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/35748) suggests that the NGO labeled as such becomes subject to extensive supervision and audition from the State authorities and must declare the label in each publication or oral presentation.

8 The Gulag institution was closed in 1960, but forced labor colonies for political and criminal prisoners continued to exist. For example, political prisoners continued to be detained in one of the most famous camps, Perm-36, until 1987. See also Oleg Khlevniuk’s The History of the Gulag, published in 2004.

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