FREE BELARUS MUSEUM

Mieroszewski Centre

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL CONFERENCE | PROCEEDINGS

After Totalitarianism: Museum, Memory, and the Belarusian Perspective

8–9 October 2026 | Free Belarus Museum, Warsaw, Foksal 11/1

Пасля таталітарызму: музей, памяць і беларуская перспектыва
Po totalitaryzmie: muzeum, pamięć i perspektywa białoruska

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Proceedings of the international scientific and practical conference

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Po totalitaryzmie: muzeum, pamięć i perspektywa białoruska

About the conference

The international scientific and practical conference *After Totalitarianism: Museum, Memory, and the Belarusian Perspective* took place on 8–9 October 2026 at the Free Belarus Museum in Warsaw. It brought together historians, museum professionals, archivists, curators and researchers from across Europe and beyond to discuss how societies emerging from, or still living under, authoritarian rule remember repression, war and unfreedom, and what role museums play in this work.

Over two days the conference addressed the memory of repression and historical revisionism in the post-totalitarian world; difficult heritage and local memorial practices; the politics of memory, war and transnational narratives; Belarusian memory, identity and heritage preservation; the museum in exile; and the participation of refugees and displaced communities in museum practice.

This publication gathers the contributions submitted by the speakers. The texts are presented in English and edited for publication. Several were prepared by the editors on the basis of the authors' presentations and speeches delivered in Belarusian, Polish and Ukrainian; this is indicated at the end of each such text. Where a speaker did not submit materials, the talk is listed with its title. The full programme of the conference is reproduced in the following section.

8–9 October 2026 | Free Belarus Museum, Warsaw, Foksal 11/1

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Contents

Programme of the conference 6

MEMORY OF REPRESSION AND REVISIONISM IN THE POST-TOTALITARIAN WORLD

Klára Pinerová 10
Who Owns the Memory of Repression? The State, Victims' Organisations, and the Making of Museums of Communism in Germany and the Czech Republic

András Mink 15
Historical Revisionism in Post-Totalitarian Times: The Case of Hungary

Enriketa Papa Pandelejmoni 16
Sites of Memory and Musealisation: Shaping Albania's Post-Communist Memoryscape

Ludmila Cojocaru, Virgiliu Birladeanu 22
Soviet Political Repressions, Memory of Victims and the Reinterpretation of the Past in Moldova. Oral History and the Museum Representation of Victims' Memory

DIFFICULT HERITAGE AND LOCAL MEMORIAL PRACTICES

Liisi Ploom 28
What We Take, What We Keep: Objects, Memory and the Experience of Forced Displacement

Evita Feldentāle 34
Videotestimony Collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

Andrei Arkhipenka 37
Memory Culture of Political Repression in Taiwan

Paulina Vitushchanka 46
Modest Work as an Alternative to Heroic Narratives

Anna Gavina 50
Overview of Memorial's Activities

Zofia Wóycicka 52
From the Politics of Memory to Mnemonic Populism: Poland's Problems with the Past

Bartłomiej Sokołowski 53
The Museum of Independence and Its Branches in the Face of the Challenges of Difficult Heritage

Shalala Mammadova 54
Memory and Post-Stalinist / Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Mykhailo Kostiv 59
Digitization of Criminal Cases on Cannibalism in the Early 1930s as a Tool for Overcoming Totalitarian Silencing

Anna Gataleta 62
The Discursive Construction of Memory: War, Museums and Identity in Belarus

POLITICS OF MEMORY, WAR AND TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES

Stefan Donth 70
Commemorative Sites to the Victims of Communist Dictatorships

Kristiane Janeke 71
Military History and War Memory in Eastern Europe

Bozhena Kozakevych 75
German-Ukrainian-Polish Memory Triangle: Entanglements and Challenges

Paweł Kalisz 76
Sybir, Prison of Nations: Polish Deportees in Southern and Eastern Africa during the Second World War

BELARUSIAN MEMORY: REPRESSION, IDENTITY AND HERITAGE PRESERVATION PRACTICES

Volha Arkhipava 89
Deconstructing Belarusianness in Contemporary Belarusian Art

Stsiapan Zakharkevich 97
Discussing Violence: Repression against Belarusian Ethnographers in the Early 1930s as a Means of Scholarly Development in the Soviet Totalitarian System

Valieryja Charnamortsava 98
Contemporary Practices and Approaches to the Use of Oral-History Testimonies in European Museum Exhibitions and Online Projects on Soviet Repressions as a Basis for the Renewed Concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Ilia Magin 104
Between the Archive and the Audience: Popularising Heritage

FREE BELARUS MUSEUM: MEMORY OF UNFREEDOM, SPACE FOR FREEDOM

Hanna Zianovich 108
Museum in Exile as a Laboratory of Alternative Memory Culture: The Belarusian Experience in a European Perspective

MUSEUMS, REFUGEES AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Judith Depaule 113
Supporting Artists in Exile in France: A Look Back at 10 Years of Experience

Rob Sharp 116
REFUGE Project: Refugee Participation, Shared Authority and Participatory Museum Practice

Index of speakers and moderators 118

Programme

International scientific and practical conference

DAY 1 | 8 OCTOBER 2026, THURSDAY

09:30–10:00 Participant registration

10:00–10:30 Official opening of the conference

10:30–10:40 Coffee break

10:40–13:00 **Plenary session**

Theme: *Memory of Repression and Revisionism in the Post-Totalitarian World*

Moderator: **Pavel Tserashkovich**. Historian, cultural anthropologist and adviser to the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on education and science

Klára Pinerová CZECH REPUBLIC
Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences
Who Owns the Memory of Repression? The State, Victims' Organisations, and the Making of Museums of Communism in Germany and the Czech Republic

András Mink POLAND
Blinken OSA Archivum at Central European University
Historical Revisionism in Post-Totalitarian Times: The Case of Hungary

Enriketa Papa Pandelejmoni ALBANIA
University of Tirana
Sites of Memory and Musealisation: Shaping Albania's Post-Communist Memoryscape

Ludmila Cojocaru MOLDOVA
National Museum of History of Moldova, Museum of Victims of Deportations and Political Repressions
Stalinist Repressions, Deportations, Oral History and the Representation of Victims' Memory in Museums

Virgiliu Birladeanu MOLDOVA
Institute of History, Moldova State University
Soviet Political Repressions, Memory of Victims and the Reinterpretation of the Past in Moldova

13:00–14:00 Lunch

14:00–15:45 **Thematic session**

Theme: *Difficult Heritage and Local Memorial Practices*

Moderator: **Ala Stashkevich**. Independent expert in museology and cultural heritage

Liisi Ploom ESTONIA
Head of Collections, Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom
What We Take, What We Keep: Objects, Memory and the Experience of Forced Displacement

Evita Feldentāle LATVIA
Head of the Audiovisual Archive, Museum of the Occupation of Latvia
Videotestimony Collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

Andrei Arkhipenka BELARUS – TAIWAN – POLAND (DIASPORA)
Belarus–Taiwan and East Asia Platform, founder of the initiative and researcher
Memory Culture of Political Repression in Taiwan

Paulina Vitushchanka LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
Curator, Vilnius Belarusian Museum named after I. Luckievič
Modest Work as an Alternative to Heroic Narratives

Anna Gavina POLAND
President of the Management Board, Memorial Poland
Overview of Memorial's Activities

15:45–16:00 Coffee break

16:00–17:30 **Thematic session (continued)**
Theme: *Difficult Heritage and Local Memorial Practices*
Moderator: **Ala Stashkevich**. Independent expert in museology and cultural heritage

Zofia Wóycicka POLAND
German Historical Institute Warsaw
From the Politics of Memory to Mnemonic Populism: Poland's Problems with the Past

Bartłomiej Sokołowski POLAND
Museum of Independence in Warsaw
The Museum of Independence and Its Branches in the Face of the Challenges of Difficult Heritage

Shalala Mammadova AZERBAIJAN – UNITED KINGDOM (DIASPORA)
Independent researcher
Memory and Post-Stalinist / Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Mykhailo Kostiv UKRAINE
National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, Head of the Department for Research on Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes
Digitization of Criminal Cases on Cannibalism in the Early 1930s as a Tool for Overcoming Totalitarian Silencing

Anna Gataleta ITALY
Academy of Fine Arts of Macerata, postgraduate student
The Discursive Construction of Memory: War, Museums and Identity in Belarus

17:30–18:00 Summary of the first conference day

DAY 2 | 9 OCTOBER 2026, FRIDAY

10:00–11:30 **Thematic session**
Theme: *Politics of Memory, War and Transnational Narratives*
Moderator: **Joanna Wawrzyniak**. University of Warsaw, Centre for Research on Social Memory

Stefan Donth GERMANY
Head of the Department of Memorial Sites and Remembrance Culture, Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Germany
Commemorative Sites to the Victims of Communist Dictatorships

Kristiane Janeke GERMANY
Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences (ZMSBw)
Military History and War Memory in Eastern Europe

Bozhena Kozakevych POLAND
German-Polish House, Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Poznań
German-Ukrainian-Polish Memory Triangle: Entanglements and Challenges

Paweł Kalisz POLAND
Sybir Memorial Museum, Białystok
Sybir, Prison of Nations: Polish Deportees in Southern and Eastern Africa during the Second World War

11:30–11:40 Coffee break

11:40–13:00 **Thematic session**

Theme: *Belarusian Memory: Repression, Identity and Heritage Preservation Practices*

Moderator: **Stsiapan Stureika**. Historian, researcher and cultural heritage expert, Associate Professor at the European Humanities University, Vilnius

Volha Arkhipava BELARUS – POLAND (DIASPORA)
Cultural studies scholar, former research fellow at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus
Deconstructing Belarusianness in Contemporary Belarusian Art

Stsiapan Zakharkevich LITHUANIA
Associate Professor, Academic Department of Humanities and Arts, European Humanities University, Vilnius
Discussing Violence: Repression against Belarusian Ethnographers in the Early 1930s as a Means of Scholarly Development in the Soviet Totalitarian System

Valieryja Charnamortsava BELARUS – LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
Independent researcher, graduate of the EHU Master's programme, creator of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus
Contemporary Practices and Approaches to the Use of Oral-History Testimonies in European Museum Exhibitions and Online Projects on Soviet Repressions as a Basis for the Renewed Concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Ilia Magin LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
University of Tartu, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, PhD student; Vilnius Belarusian Museum
Between the Archive and the Audience: Popularising Heritage

13:00–14:00 Lunch

14:00–15:30 **Discussion panel**

Theme: *Free Belarus Museum: Memory of Unfreedom, Space for Freedom*

Moderator: **Stsiapan Stureika**. Historian, researcher and cultural heritage expert, Associate Professor at the European Humanities University, Vilnius

Hanna Zianovich
Museum in Exile as a Laboratory of Alternative Memory Culture: The Belarusian Experience in a European Perspective

15:30–16:00 Coffee break

16:00–17:00 **Presentation panel**

Theme: *Museums, Refugees and Community Participation*

Judith Depaule FRANCE
Founder and Director of l'atelier des artistes en exil
Supporting Artists in Exile in France: A Look Back at 10 Years of Experience

Rob Sharp UNITED KINGDOM
University of Sussex, REFUGE project
REFUGE Project: Refugee Participation, Shared Authority and Participatory Museum Practice

17:00–17:30 Conference summary and concluding discussion

DAY 1 | 8 OCTOBER 2026 | 10:40–13:00

Plenary session

Memory of Repression and Revisionism in the Post-Totalitarian World

Moderator: **Pavel Tserashkovich**
Historian, cultural anthropologist and adviser to the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on education and science

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Klára Pinerová CZECH REPUBLIC
Who Owns the Memory of Repression? The State, Victims' Organisations, and the Making of Museums of Communism in Germany and the Czech Republic

András Mink POLAND
Historical Revisionism in Post-Totalitarian Times: The Case of Hungary

Enriketa Papa Pandelejmoni ALBANIA
Sites of Memory and Musealisation: Shaping Albania's Post-Communist Memoryscape

Ludmila Cojocaru, Virgiliu Birladeanu MOLDOVA
Soviet Political Repressions, Memory of Victims and the Reinterpretation of the Past in Moldova. Oral History and the Museum Representation of Victims' Memory



CZECH REPUBLIC

Who Owns the Memory of Repression? The State, Victims' Organisations, and the Making of Museums of Communism in Germany and the Czech Republic

Klára Pinerová
Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of museums and memorials dedicated to communist repression in Germany and the Czech Republic after 1989. It focuses on the processes through which the memory of repression was institutionalised and on the actors who shaped these processes, including state institutions, victims' organisations and other civil society initiatives.

The paper compares the different trajectories through which memorials and museums of communist repression emerged in the two countries, with particular attention to the changing roles of the state, victims' organisations and the historical community. It asks how victims perceived the establishment of these institutions, to what extent they were able to influence their conceptualisation, and which narratives of repression and victimhood ultimately came to be represented.

The paper argues that state involvement and financial support did not necessarily lead to the recognition of victims' perspectives or to their identification with the resulting institutions. Even where the state invested significantly in commemorative projects, victims could feel unheard, marginalised or disappointed by the narratives and forms of remembrance that emerged. The comparison thus highlights the tensions between institutional memory, political interests and victims' claims to recognition.

The institutionalisation of museums and memorials

Four main actors took part in the institutionalisation of museums and memorials of communist repression: the state; victims' organisations; the historical and museum community; and civil society more broadly. Their relations were never stable, and the starting thesis of this paper is that the institutionalisation of a museum or memorial does not necessarily mean recognition for those whose experience it represents.

Political contexts after 1989

In the Czech Republic, the political transformation was accompanied by demands for a rapid moral and legal cleansing of society. These demands found expression in lustration and in the law on the illegality of the communist regime. The area of memory itself, however, remained largely unregulated and decentralised. This left space for victims and their initiatives to act on their own.

In Germany, the context was unification. Memory policy was linked to parliamentary commissions of inquiry and to extensive state support programmes, above all through the Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung) and a network of memorial sites (Gedenkstätten). Victims had a voice here, but always within the framework of a state-controlled discourse.

Two cultures of remembrance

The comparison reveals two distinct cultures of remembrance: a Czech "spontaneous" memory culture and a German "institutionalised" one. Each has its strengths and its vulnerabilities, and both are visible in the stories of particular sites.

Czech Republic: the Museum of the Third Resistance in Příbram

The museum in Příbram was created on the initiative of former political prisoners, who donated valuable personal items, documents and memoirs. Its exhibition had a strong emotional accent and a direct authenticity that no professionally curated display could reproduce. After 2000, however, it faced the problem of generational change, as the founders grew old and passed away. In 2021 the city of Příbram stopped providing space for the museum, and its unique collection of objects is currently missing.

Czech Republic: the Uherské Hradiště Prison National Memorial

The former prison in Uherské Hradiště became the subject of a citizens' initiative and of the organisation Memoria. Between 2014 and 2019 it functioned as a "provisional museum", hosting guided tours, themed exhibitions, concerts, performances and other events. Today the Moravian Regional Museum is preparing an exhibition for the Uherské Hradiště Prison National Memorial, whose opening is expected in 2028–2029.

Germany: the Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum

Sachsenhausen was a Nazi concentration camp and, after 1945, a Soviet special camp. Its double history provoked intense discussion about a hierarchy of victims and about the risk of relativising the Holocaust. Two conflicts became visible here: competition between the memory of the Nazi and the socialist dictatorships, and tension between the testimony of victims and professional historical interpretation.

Germany: the Cottbus Human Rights Centre and Prison Memorial

In Cottbus, former political prisoners associated with the Menschenrechtszentrum Cottbus protested against plans to convert the former prison into a commercial property. The memorial began without state support. Today the victims are involved in running it, while at the same time recognising the need to respect museological standards – an example of a negotiated balance between authenticity and professionalism.

Conclusion

First, institutionalisation is a negotiated process. Second, victims are active actors in the process of memory, but their influence varies from case to case. Third, state support does not necessarily translate into victims feeling heard or satisfied with the resulting outcome.
















LIKVIDACE KLÁŠTERŮ















Museums and memorials of communist repression in the Czech Republic and Germany. From the author's presentation

POLAND

Historical Revisionism in Post-Totalitarian Times: The Case of Hungary

András Mink
Blinken OSA Archivum at Central European University

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.



ALBANIA

Sites of Memory and Musealisation: Shaping Albania's Post-Communist Memoryscape

Enriketa Papa Pandelejmoni
University of Tirana

From communist space to post-communist memoryscape

The collapse of the communist regime in 1990–1991 left Albania with an extensive material landscape of dictatorship: prisons and detention sites, State Security buildings, military bunkers, monuments, administrative structures and spaces of everyday socialism.

During the first post-communist decade, communist sites followed different trajectories: continued use, abandonment, destruction, symbolic removal, functional adaptation and, only gradually, memorialisation.

The making of a post-communist memoryscape

After 1991, Albania did not develop a coherent narrative of the communist past. Remembrance emerged through a fragmented and contested process of reinterpretation. Victims' demands for recognition, debates over lustration and State Security files, historical research and commemorative initiatives gradually reshaped public engagement with the dictatorship. From the 2010s, sites associated with communist rule were increasingly preserved, reinterpreted and transformed into museums and sites of memory.

Albania's post-communist memoryscape thus developed gradually, through different ways of confronting and representing the communist past:

1990s – de-communisation: removal of communist symbols, renaming of public spaces, reuse or abandonment of former communist sites.

2000s – documentation and recognition: growing attention to victims, historical research, testimonies, transitional justice and debates over responsibility and the communist legacy.

2010s – musealisation: former sites of dictatorship increasingly became places of commemoration and historical interpretation, while new museums brought repression, surveillance and state violence into public view.

Museums and post-communist memory

Post-communist museums are situated at the intersection of history, commemoration and victimisation. As Pierre Nora observed, "lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations." Museums of communism often privilege memories and stories over artefacts and documents, shifting attention from guilt or collaboration towards narratives of shared victimisation under communist rule (Stephen M. Norris, ed., *Museums of Communism: New Memory Sites in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2020).

Memorial museums have emerged as a means of confronting histories of political violence. Amy Sodaro places them within broader processes of dealing with past trauma, alongside truth commissions, trials and reparations, and examines their relationship to democracy and human rights (*Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, 2018).

Albania: the museum landscape

In Albania, the musealisation of communism has developed through different types of sites and different narratives of the dictatorship. The National Historical Museum incorporated political persecution into the national historical narrative through documents, photographs and objects. The Site of Witness and Memory in Shkodër, an authentic site of detention and interrogation, is centred on victims, testimony and the material space of repression; it was established as a memorial museum in 2014. The House of Leaves, a former State Security surveillance centre, was transformed into a museum in 2017, making the mechanisms of surveillance and control publicly visible. Bunk'Art 1, opened in 2014 in the former underground bunker of the communist leadership, is reframed around militarisation, isolation and aspects of everyday life. Bunk'Art 2, opened in 2016, is a museum centred on the Ministry of Interior, the Sigurimi and political repression.

The National Historical Museum

The Communist Persecution Pavilion at the National Historical Museum, opened in 2012, marked an important step in integrating the history of communist repression into Albania's official national narrative. Through documents, photographs and objects, it foregrounded political persecution, state violence and the experience of victims.

The National Historical Museum has been closed since March 2024 for restoration and re-musealisation, which means that this representation of the communist period is itself currently being reconsidered. The place assigned to the communist past within national history remains open to reinterpretation.

Site of Witness and Memory, Shkodër

Located in the former local branch of the communist Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Site of Witness and Memory preserves a space directly associated with detention, interrogation and political repression. Cells and interrogation spaces, combined with documents, photographs and testimonies, connect individual experiences of persecution to the institutional machinery of repression.

Unlike the National Historical Museum, which incorporated persecution into a broader national narrative, Shkodër constructs memory from within the historical site itself. Its interpretative authority rests on the relationship between place, testimony and victim experience, making repression the principal lens through which the communist past is encountered.

House of Leaves

Built in 1931 as an obstetric clinic, the building was appropriated by the Gestapo in 1943 and subsequently by the communist security apparatus. From the 1950s until 1991, it housed the technical-scientific branch of the State Security (Sigurimi), responsible for electronic interception and other forms of surveillance.

Opened as a museum in 2017, the House of Leaves turned the infrastructure of secrecy itself into historical evidence: listening devices, interception technologies, documents and the building reveal how surveillance extended political control into private and everyday life.

Its musealisation reverses the function of the site: a space created to observe society secretly has become a space through which society can examine the mechanisms of surveillance and control.

Bunk'Art 1 and 2

Bunk'Art 1, opened in November 2014, transformed the underground anti-nuclear complex built for Albania's political and military leadership into a museum. The bunker itself embodies the regime's militarisation, isolation and security doctrine, while its exhibitions extend the narrative to political history and aspects of everyday life.

Bunk'Art 2, opened on 19 November 2016, shifts the perspective from external defence to internal security and coercion, focusing on the Ministry of Interior, State Security, political policing and persecution. Documents and objects are combined with reconstructed environments and multimedia to produce a more experiential encounter with repression.

Both museums reveal complementary dimensions of communist power: the militarisation of society around the perceived external enemy, and the apparatus of surveillance and repression directed against the internal enemy. Their conversion into museums also represents a distinctive form of post-communist memory-making, in which the architecture of the regime becomes both historical evidence and the setting through which its history is interpreted.

What kind of communist past is being musealised?

These sites demonstrate a significant transformation in Albania's post-communist memoryscape: spaces once associated with secrecy, coercion and political power have been converted into spaces of public interpretation. This has made the mechanisms and human consequences of dictatorship substantially more visible.

Yet musealisation is necessarily selective. Across these institutions, persecution, surveillance, political violence and victimhood provide the dominant interpretative framework. This emphasis has been essential to restoring experiences that the communist regime itself suppressed, but it can also narrow the history of communism to a relationship between a repressive state and a victimised society.

What remains less developed is the more difficult social history between these poles: participation and accommodation, conformity and negotiation, social mobility, work and everyday life, and the changing relationships between individuals, institutions and the regime.

Albania's museums have therefore become powerful sites for remembering the violence of communist rule, but only partially sites for interpreting communist society in its historical complexity.



National Historical Museum, Tirana



Exhibition on communist persecution



House of Leaves – Museum of Secret Surveillance, Tirana



Bunk'Art 1, Tirana



Bunk'Art 2, Tirana



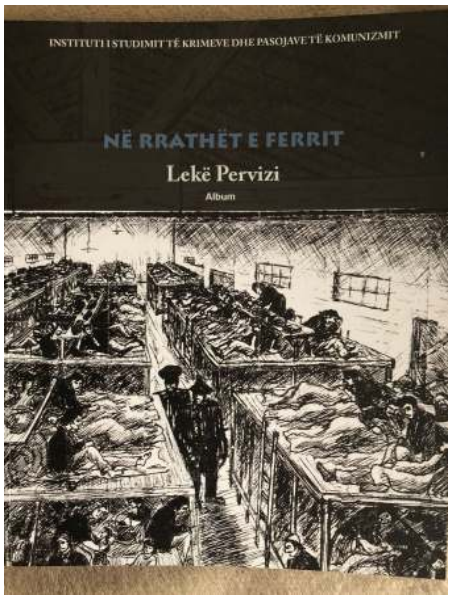
Bunk'Art exhibition space



Executed political prisoners. Memorial wall



Portraits of former political prisoners



Lekë Pervizi, "Në bratnët e ferrit", album



MOLDOVA

Soviet Political Repressions, Memory of Victims and the Reinterpretation of the Past in Moldova. Oral History and the Museum Representation of Victims' Memory

Ludmila Cojocaru, Virgiliu Birladeanu

National Museum of History of Moldova; Institute of History, Moldova State University

Introduction

The joint presentation by Ludmila Cojocaru (National Museum of History of Moldova, Museum of Victims of Deportations and Political Repressions) and Virgiliu Birladeanu (Institute of History, Moldova State University) addressed Soviet political repressions in the Moldavian SSR, the memory of their victims, and the ways in which this past is reinterpreted in Moldova today. Particular attention was given to oral history and to the representation of victims' memory in museums.

The waves of deportation

Three great waves of deportation shaped the memory of Soviet repression in Moldova. On 12–13 June 1941, 29,839 people were deported from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina; of them, 5,479 were arrested and 24,360 deported. On 5–6 July 1949, during Operation "Iug" ("South"), 11,293 families – 35,796 people – were deported. On 31 March – 1 April 1951, a further 5,917 people were deported.

Behind these numbers stand archival case files of the NKVD and MGB, execution protocols, memorial books and lists of the repressed compiled village by village. Documents of this kind form the evidential basis of the history of repression and of the work of reconstructing individual fates.

Oral history and the many forms of silence

Oral history shows that silence was not one thing but many. For Pavel Curoș, deported on 6 July 1949 from the commune of Șeptelici in Soroca district to the Kurgan region, silence took the form of an emotional blockage: an experience that could not be put into words for decades.

For Nadejda Pascal, deported in 1949 from Durlești, Ialoveni district, to the Tyumen region, poetry and drawing became a means of mnemonic recovery. "I cannot forgive the communists – they deprived me of my native language," she says. Her hand-drawn map records a micro-topography of exile – Golodnoe, Gorestnoe, Bednoe ("Hungry", "Grievous", "Poor") – localities that have since been erased from the face of the earth.

Silence in individual commemorations

Commemoration of the deported often takes individual and local forms. In many villages it is expressed through Orthodox Christian practices – crosses and church services. In the village of Bravicea, Călărași district, a "Holy Cross" was erected in 2010 by the family of Vasile and Larisa Harea and their sons in memory of the dozens of families deported from the village by the Soviet authorities. On 22 June 2021 a cross was consecrated at the grave of Simeon Galițchi, a deputy of the Sfatul Țării.

Museums and mnemonic regimes

Moldovan museums increasingly reinterpret the Soviet heritage critically. They are moving from the role of a repository to that of a reflexive actor, through exhibitions devoted to the deportations, the Gulag, childhood in the Gulag, the famine of 1946–1947 and the myths of Soviet Moldova. At the same time they face polarisation of society, disinformation and political pressure.

Material traces – the shoes and personal belongings of victims found during exhumations, documents of execution, photographs of deportees in Siberia – together with recorded testimonies allow museums to show both the scale of repression and its human dimension, including to young visitors.



Paderino, Dalmatovskij district, Kurgan region, 1951



Irkutsk region, 1954/1955



NKVD case files



"Cartea Memoriei" – The Book of Memory and lists of the repressed



A micro-topography of the deportations. Drawing by Nadejda Pascal



"Here a monument to the victims of Stalinist repressions will be erected"



Shoes of victims found during exhumation



Students at a museum exhibition

This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Education and Research, CCCDI-UEFISCDI, project number PN-IV-PCB-RO-MD-2024-0039, within PNCDI IV.

DAY 1 | 8 OCTOBER 2026 | 14:00–15:45, 16:00–17:30

Thematic session

Difficult Heritage and Local Memorial Practices

Moderator: **Ala Stashkevich**
Independent expert in museology and cultural heritage

Liisi Ploom ESTONIA
What We Take, What We Keep: Objects, Memory and the Experience of Forced Displacement

Evita Feldentāle LATVIA
Videotestimony Collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

Andrei Arkhipenka BELARUS – TAIWAN – POLAND (DIASPORA)
Memory Culture of Political Repression in Taiwan

Paulina Vitushchanka LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
Modest Work as an Alternative to Heroic Narratives

Anna Gavina POLAND
Overview of Memorial's Activities

Zofia Wóycicka POLAND
From the Politics of Memory to Mnemonic Populism: Poland's Problems with the Past

Bartłomiej Sokołowski POLAND
The Museum of Independence and Its Branches in the Face of the Challenges of Difficult Heritage

Shalala Mammadova AZERBAIJAN – UNITED KINGDOM (DIASPORA)
Memory and Post-Stalinist / Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Mykhailo Kostiv UKRAINE
Digitization of Criminal Cases on Cannibalism in the Early 1930s as a Tool for Overcoming Totalitarian Silencing

Anna Gataleta ITALY
The Discursive Construction of Memory: War, Museums and Identity in Belarus



ESTONIA

What We Take, What We Keep: Objects, Memory and the Experience of Forced Displacement

Liisi Ploom

Head of Collections, Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom

Today I would like to talk about something very ordinary: personal belongings. Not monuments, not official documents, and not objects that were originally made to become museum objects. Instead, I want to look at things that people simply had in their everyday lives – things they wore, packed, carried or used when they were forced to leave their homes. And I want to ask: what happens to an ordinary personal belonging when it becomes a museum object?

When people are forced to leave, they usually cannot take everything with them. They have to choose what they can carry. Sometimes they choose something useful. Sometimes something valuable. And sometimes something that simply feels familiar. Decades later, some of these belongings may enter a museum collection. But by then, the object has changed. It is no longer only something that belonged to a person. It has become evidence of a life, of a journey, and of a historical event.

From belonging to museum object

At Vabamu, many personal objects have followed a path something like this: a personal belonging becomes connected to displacement. It survives. It carries memories and associations. And eventually, it enters a museum collection. But there is one more step that is essential: documentation. Because the object itself cannot tell us everything.

A hat cannot tell us who wore it. A pillowcase cannot tell us what was packed inside it. A fork cannot tell us where it travelled. A sewing machine cannot tell us why it was sent thousands of kilometres away. And even a diary needs a person, a context and a history around it to be fully understood. So for me, the central idea is this: an object cannot carry its entire story by itself. The museum must preserve the connections that make that story legible. I would like to look at five objects from the Vabamu collection.

Worn: a woollen hat

The first object is a woollen hat. It was made from wartime yarn and belonged to Silvia Airik-Priuhka. In 1944, when she was eighteen years old, she escaped Estonia across the Baltic Sea to Sweden. The acquisition record contains one very simple but powerful piece of information: “The hat was on her head in the refugee boat.”

That sentence completely changes how we see the object. Without it, we see a knitted woollen hat. With it, we can connect the object to a particular person, a particular moment, and the experience of crossing the Baltic Sea as a refugee. The hat also contains another layer of its biography. The braid attached to it is newer and was braided in Sweden. So even the physical object contains traces of different moments in the person’s journey: wartime materials, the escape from Estonia, and life in Sweden. The object has changed over time together with the life of its owner.

Packed: a linen pillowcase

The second object is a linen pillowcase. At first glance, this is perhaps even more ordinary: a simple rectangular white linen pillowcase with buttons. But in 1944 it was used by Emilie and Liidia Lavrov to pack their personal belongings when fleeing Estonia to the West. And that is what gives the object its significance.

The pillowcase was not valuable because of its material or appearance. Its significance comes from what it was used for. It became a container for the things that could be taken along. In a situation where people had to leave their homes and decide what they could carry with them, an ordinary household textile became part of that process. It allows us to approach displacement through a very domestic perspective – not through political decisions or military events, but through the practical question: what can I put into this, and what can I take with me?

Carried: twelve forks

The third object is a set of twelve stainless-steel forks. The forks were taken along during the evacuation from Narva. They were then carried from Tallinn by ship to Germany and onwards to Denmark during the flight into exile. So these twelve forks have a documented geographical journey: Narva – Tallinn – Germany – Denmark.

I think this is important because displacement is often described through large movements of people. Here, we can follow that movement through something extremely small. A fork. The forks are also a reminder that people did not stop being people during displacement. They still needed to eat. They still needed ordinary household objects. And sometimes those ordinary objects travelled with them through several countries.

Used: a Stoewer sewing machine

The fourth object is very different in scale. It is a Stoewer sewing machine belonging to the Pragi family. Ly, Olaf and Elli Pragi were deported to the Omsk region in 1949. Ly was sixteen, Olaf was seventeen, and Elli was only eight. Their father had already died, and their mother was later arrested and sent to Siberia as well. Ly worked on a sheep farm at a collective farm, and at a very young age she had to take responsibility for the family.

The sewing machine was not taken with them when they were deported. Instead, it was sent from Estonia to Siberia afterwards, in separate parts. And there, it became much more than a household appliance. Estonian handicraft skills were highly valued in Siberia. Knitting and sewing could be exchanged for food and other necessities. Ly's sewing work was in high demand. So the machine became an important practical tool for supporting the family. It helped turn a skill into a means of survival.

The family gradually returned to Estonia in the late 1950s. The sewing machine remained with them and continued to be used for many years, including for the children's schoolwork. Even a piece of fabric sewn with the machine and a spool of thread have survived with it. So the biography of this machine is not simply Estonia – Siberia – Estonia. It is also: home – deportation – survival – return – everyday life.

Documented: Kaljo Külv's diary

The fifth object is a diary kept by Kaljo Külv. Külv was born in 1928. His diary begins on 14 June 1941 – the day of the June deportation. This makes the diary fundamentally different from an object that was remembered or described decades later. The first entries were written at the time. The diary begins with the deportation itself and continues with observations of his experiences as a deportee.

It is handwritten and partly in Russian. It has no covers anymore, many of its pages are loose, and the paper is worn and damaged. The physical condition is therefore also part of the object's biography. The diary is not simply a container of information; its survival as a physical object is itself part of its history. Perhaps this is the most direct example in this group of an object on which the experience has literally been recorded. But even here, we still need documentation. We need to know who wrote it, when it was written, what happened to the author, and how the diary eventually reached the museum.

Five objects, five relationships

So we have five objects. A hat that was worn. A pillowcase that was packed. Forks that were carried. A sewing machine that was used. And a diary that documented. They are very different objects, with different materials, different functions and completely different physical biographies. But they have something in common. They all became meaningful because of their relationship to people and to particular historical experiences. And that brings me back to the question: what exactly are we preserving when we preserve an object?

The object is not the whole story

When an object enters a museum, we usually record what it is: its material, its dimensions, its condition. But for objects connected with forced displacement, this is only the beginning. We also need to preserve provenance, people, memory, documentation and historical context. These relationships transform an object from a thing into a historical source.

And these relationships can be fragile. They may exist in a donor's memory. In an acquisition document. In a photograph. In a family archive. Or in a sentence written decades ago. If those connections disappear, the object may survive physically while becoming much harder to understand.

The sewing machine – behind the scenes

The Stoewer sewing machine is a particularly good example. If you look only at its public museum record, the description is very short. It essentially tells us: this sewing machine has been in Siberia. That is true. But it is not the whole story.

The acquisition documentation gives us much more. We learn about the Pragi family. We learn that the children were deported in 1949. We learn that the sewing machine was sent from Estonia to Siberia in separate parts. We learn about Ly's work and her responsibility for the family, and how sewing became a practical way of obtaining food and supporting the family. We also know that the machine remained with the family after their return to Estonia and was used for years afterwards.

So we have two different levels of documentation. The object record tells us what the object is. The wider documentation allows us to understand what the object meant. And this leads to another question: how much of an object's biography is visible in the catalogue, and how much remains in the documentation surrounding it?

What does the museum actually preserve?

For me, this is the central issue. A museum does not preserve only the physical object. We preserve the object, but alongside it we need to preserve its provenance, its documentation, its context, its connections to people and, where possible, the memories associated with it. Together, these layers create what we might call an object biography.

Object biographies are not necessarily complete. Sometimes we have very rich documentation. Sometimes we have only fragments. Sometimes information can be added decades later, when a new family member comes forward or when another document is discovered. This means that collections documentation is not simply administrative work. It is part of how historical memory is preserved.

From personal experience to shared memory

All five objects began as part of someone's personal life. The hat belonged to one person. The pillowcase was used by a family. The forks travelled with a family. The sewing machine helped another family survive. And the diary recorded one person's experience of deportation. But once these objects enter a museum, their meaning changes again. They move from personal experience into a space where they can contribute to shared memory. They can help visitors understand experiences they did not personally live through, and they can make large historical events tangible.

Statistics can tell us how many people were deported. Maps can show us where they were taken. Documents can tell us what the authorities did. But a hat, a pillowcase, a fork, a sewing machine or a handwritten diary can help us approach what it meant to actually live through that experience.

So, what happens when an ordinary personal belonging becomes a museum object? It becomes evidence. It becomes a connection between an individual life and a larger historical event. But only if we preserve the relationships that give it meaning. And that is perhaps the most important lesson I take from these five objects. Museums do not only preserve things. They preserve the relationships that make things meaningful.



WORN. Woollen hat (VBM 9016 TO). "The hat was on her head in the refugee boat." 1944, Estonia to Sweden



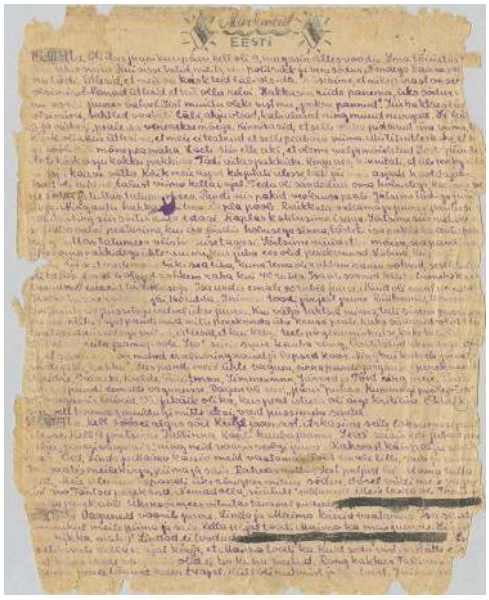
PACKED. Linen pillowcase (VBM 18550 TV), used to pack personal belongings during the flight. 1944, Estonia to the West



CARRIED. Twelve forks (VBM 19024:1 AE). Narva – Tallinn – Germany – Denmark



USED. Stoewer sewing machine (VBM 21551 AE). “A household object became a means of survival.” Estonia – Siberia – Estonia



DOCUMENTED. Kaljo Külv’s diary (VBM 10630:1 D). “The diary begins on the day of deportation.” 14 June 1941



LATVIA

Videotestimony Collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

Evita Feldentāle

Head of the Audiovisual Archive, Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

A timeline of silence

The occupation of Latvia – in 1940–1941 and again from 1944/1945 to 1991 – was a long period of silence. There was no appropriate education about political repressions, and personal experiences could not be shared publicly.

The period of sharing personal stories began during glasnost and perestroika, followed by the Third Latvian National Awakening at the end of the 1980s. People began to name their experiences in Soviet filtration camps, the Gulag, labour camps and places of special settlement, among them the victims of the mass deportations of 1941 and 1949. Narratives shifted: those once called "bandits", for example, became national partisans. From the foundation of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, one of its main aims has been to listen to those silenced people and to keep their memories alive.

The museum

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia was founded in 1993 as a private initiative supported by donors. Today it is partly funded by the state, but independent in its research, and it is part of the state protocol. Its motto is: Remember. Commemorate. Remind.

The Audiovisual Archive

The Audiovisual Archive was founded in 1994, and the collection of videotestimonies started in 1996. The archive now holds 2,630 recorded videotestimonies – approximately 4,900 hours – and the work is ongoing. The average length of a testimony is two hours; the longest are over twenty hours long.

Videotestimonies have been recorded not only in Latvia, but also in Germany, Great Britain, Canada, the USA, Australia and the Krasnoyarsk region of Russia, in different languages – Latvian, Russian, German, English and others – and dialects. In cooperation with Stanford University Libraries the collection was digitised in 2015–2016, and copies are stored in the USA for safety. Because of the sensitivity of the topics covered, each testimony is accompanied by an agreement with the witness, and access may be restricted.

A videotestimony is understood as a historical source: the narrative, the life story, of a person whose life was dramatically influenced by Soviet and/or Nazi occupation policies.

Main topics

The testimonies cover the mass deportations of 1941 and 1949 and the lives of those born in places of special settlement; the Holocaust; Latvians in the Second World War – legionnaires and soldiers of the Red Army, volunteers and conscripts; national partisans, the national resistance movement and members of the anti-Soviet youth movement, many of them Gulag survivors; the refugee movement, exile and those born outside Latvia; and eyewitnesses of many other events.

Database and contents

Each videotestimony is described in a database that records the topics covered, the camps, people, territories in Latvia and abroad, institutions mentioned, items, photographs and objects shown, geographical names and other important episodes. This makes it possible to search the collection across thousands of hours of recordings.

The collection as difficult heritage

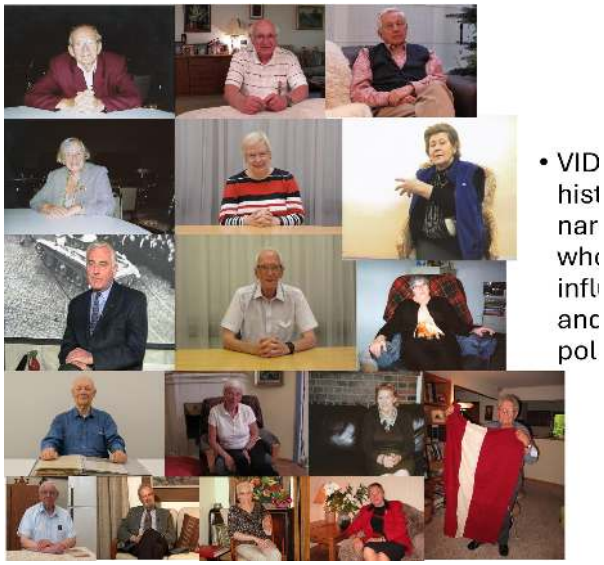
The collection is itself a form of difficult heritage. Oral history is criticised in general, especially after long years of life under propaganda; testimonies may contain inaccuracies or even lies. The long years of silence mean that recalling becomes a reliving of traumatic experiences. The experiences of legionnaires open up different possibilities of interpreting history. The emphasis on victims' experience raises the question of whether only a one-sided story is being told. And the very existence of the collection can serve as a tool to accuse perpetrators.

Conclusions

The significance of the collection continues to grow as direct victims pass away. It can be used in many ways – as video, audio or text. Storing copies in the USA is an attempt to prevent threats to the collection, and to the museum. The work is still ongoing, and the collection is an example of work done with difficult historical heritage. Fragments of documentaries based on the videotestimonies, with English subtitles, are available on the museum's YouTube channel.



The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, Riga



Witnesses recorded by the Audiovisual Archive



BELARUS – TAIWAN – POLAND (DIASPORA)

Memory Culture of Political Repression in Taiwan

Andrei Arkhipenka

Belarus–Taiwan and East Asia Platform, founder of the initiative and researcher

Road to the Democratic Times Museum, former Provincial Assembly, Wufeng, Taichung

My paper is devoted to the culture of memory of political repression in Taiwan. I will consider how the experience of state violence becomes the subject of museum work, public discussion and artistic reflection. For our conference this example is interesting because it allows us to look at difficult heritage beyond the European context.

Taiwan is a little-known subject for Belarusians, and my work is aimed at building bridges between our two peoples. The main idea of my paper is this: recognising victims and creating state institutions do not complete the work with the past. A living culture of memory preserves the possibility of verifying the official account, returning missing names and including different voices. The Taiwanese experience shows how museums can take part in this process together with victims' families, researchers and artists.

Why Taiwan?

Taiwan offers an experience of transitional justice – of moving from authoritarianism to democracy and dealing with the past. There are parallels with Belarus: memory preserved in the diaspora, archives in the hands of the security services, repression that continues. Taiwan is barely studied in Belarusian scholarship. It can serve as a bridge between Belarus and Taiwan, between two societies. And Taiwan's memory politics unfold under external pressure, amid the "unity" policy of the People's Republic of China.

Question and approach

I am interested not only in the history of repression, but in who obtains the right to tell it after democratisation. On what basis does a museum select stories? How do a state document and a family testimony relate to each other? What happens to memory when its bearers hold different political convictions?

The research draws on scholarly literature, official documents and materials of memory institutions. It also includes my field observations in Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung. Other places are considered mainly on the basis of open sources – an important distinction: I do not claim to have visited all the memorials mentioned. Methodologically, I use approaches from the study of collective memory and transitional justice. The material allows us to discuss the link between memory and democratic identity, but it does not prove that museum policy by itself changes national self-identification. The year 2027 will mark the 80th anniversary of the 228 Incident.

Historical context

The name "228 Incident" comes from a date: 28 February 1947. Protests began after violence by tobacco-monopoly officers in Taipei and spread to other cities. The authorities responded with military force. The suppression was accompanied by arrests and extrajudicial killings.

The White Terror denotes a longer system of political persecution. It is usually dated 1949–1987 and linked to the period of martial law, although its boundaries vary in research, and the lifting of martial law did not mean the immediate disappearance of all mechanisms of control.

After democratisation came public investigations, apologies and the creation of memorial institutions. In 1995 President Lee Teng-hui offered an official apology. In 1997, 28 February became a national memorial day.

Two trajectories of memory

At the centre of this research are two connected but different trajectories of memory. The 228 Incident has a clear date that allows annual commemoration. Around it a memorial foundation, monuments and a museum network were formed. This helped transform the event into one of the central symbols of Taiwan's post-war history.

Memory of the White Terror is more fragmented. Repression lasted for decades and affected people of different views: leftists, supporters of independence, students, military officers and people convicted on the basis of denunciations. A shared experience of persecution did not mean a shared vision of the political future.

Recognising a person as a victim therefore does not mean ascribing to them a later official identity. For a museum this is essential: it must show the differences among those who suffered and must not reproduce the stigma created by the repressive authorities. Memory of the White Terror requires work with individual biographies and cases.

Memory in urban space

The 228 Peace Memorial Park in Taipei shows how memory enters everyday urban space. The monument and museum stand in the city centre. This makes the repressive past visible beyond a special memorial ceremony.

For museum practice, location itself matters. Victims return to the public space from which they were once excluded. The place becomes accessible to a school excursion, a researcher and a chance passer-by. State recognition thus takes material form and can become an occasion for conversation between generations. Yet the presence of a monument does not mean that all stories have been heard. The question of whose names are included and who takes part in interpretation remains open.

The 228 museum network

The museum network of 228 memory includes institutions of different scale. The first specialised museum opened in Chiayi in 1996. The Taipei museum began work a year later, and the National 228 Memorial Museum in 2011.

Such a network cannot be reduced to the repetition of one exhibition in different cities. A local museum can return names, specific streets and family stories that are lost in a general overview. A national institution, in turn, helps connect these stories and make them visible to a wider audience. During my visit to the National Museum my attention was drawn to a map of memorial sites. It presents memory as a geographical network – and, importantly, a network that includes different types of places, not only individual monuments.

Places of imprisonment as museums

For the White Terror, preserved places of imprisonment are particularly important. The National Human Rights Museum unites the Jing-Mei and Green Island memorial parks. This is a different museum model: the space in which the repressive system operated becomes the exhibit itself.

Walls, cells and the routes along which prisoners were moved give concreteness to the notions of political trial and state control. Yet a material site does not speak for itself. It must be linked with documents and testimonies, so that visitors see people and not only prison architecture. These complexes should not be called simply two more 228 museums; they represent an independent infrastructure of memory of the White Terror. Both networks meet in the language of human rights, but they preserve different historical subjects. For comparison with the Belarusian experience, this is an important example of preserving sites of political violence.

Archives and the right to know

The museum narrative requires a documentary basis. In Taiwan, the opening of political archives became a long struggle for access to evidence of state violence. The Act on Promoting Transitional Justice and the special Political Archives Act created mechanisms for identifying and transferring documents. But their adoption did not end the resistance of the security agencies or the disputes over the Kuomintang party archives.

According to the National Archives, in 2026 more than 2.1 million pages of de-identified images of political documents were available online. This is a significant expansion of access, but declassification, transfer, description and actual accessibility are different stages.

There is also an ethical problem. A political surveillance file contains other people's judgements, errors and intimate information gathered without the person's consent. An open document therefore cannot be taken as the final truth. It must be compared with other sources, and publication must be organised so that it does not cause the victim renewed harm.

Local memory in Puli

The memorial to the battle of Wuniulan in Puli, Nantou County, matters for my paper because the general history of 228 acquires here a concrete local anchor. A national symbol is made up of many different places and experiences. The memory of a single episode can be especially important for a local community, even if it is little known to a foreign visitor. The museum's task is to explain the connection between this place and the general history while preserving its distinctiveness.

The exhibition "Cracks and Light"

The exhibition "Cracks and Light" in Kaohsiung links the 228 Incident, the White Terror and the Formosa (Meilidao) Incident in a local narrative of democratisation. I came across it by chance, while walking through the city, in an underground metro passage. This approach shows how museums go out into public spaces to present the memory of past events – which makes the local exhibition useful for a comparative conversation about work on civic self-awareness.

The path to recognition

A stand from this exhibition presents the stage of official recognition in the first half of the 1990s. Investigation, apologies and a compensation mechanism changed the status of the subject: what had once been a dangerous family memory became a matter of state responsibility. It is important to show that this turn had a prehistory. It became possible thanks to many years of work by families, the diaspora and civic movements. If the story begins only with the decision of the state, these participants may disappear from the exhibition. Beside the official document we therefore need the history of the demand that forced the authorities to acknowledge past violence.

“Flowers of Freedom”

The exhibition “Flowers of Freedom” in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei opened on 24 November 2025 and is devoted to the path to freedom and human rights. Here the problem of difficult heritage is especially visible. A space created to honour a political leader is now divided: half of the memorial is devoted to Chiang Kai-shek, while the other half contains a critical account of authoritarianism and the struggle for freedom of speech. Such coexistence does not remove the contradiction, but it makes the contradiction the subject of museum conversation.

For me this example matters as an opportunity to rethink existing infrastructure. Changing an exhibition does not necessarily mean the complete disappearance of an earlier symbol. We therefore need to analyse how visitors understand the relationship between honouring the leader and the testimonies of people who suffered under his regime. Debates continue over removing the last monument to Chiang Kai-shek; there is also a special park where monuments of the authoritarian era have been gathered.

“Ark of Democracy”

The exhibition “Ark of Democracy” in the Presidential Office Building presents another form of public representation: the path to democracy shown in an accessible, visual form in the building where the president’s administration works. For memory studies this is an example of how the history of political change becomes part of the self-presentation of a modern state. Such an exhibition should be distinguished from a museum of victims of repression.
Its function is broader: to present the country and its values to the visitor. This distinction helps avoid confusing the memorialisation of violence with the official account of democratic achievement.

The Democratic Times Museum

The road to the Democratic Times Museum in Wufeng, Taichung, leads to the grounds of the former provincial assembly. Here the political space itself and its place in the history of democratisation become the subject of reinterpretation. This example widens our understanding of heritage: it includes not only prisons and sites of mass violence, but also buildings of power in which political institutions operated. The museum can show how representation and the relationship between society and the state changed. The history of repression thus gains a connection with the history of political transformation while retaining its own subject.

Literature and cinema

Art in Taiwan's culture of memory is an independent way of making sense of the past. A museum can explain the chronology, while a work of art lets us see how state violence changes family relations and continues to act after the repression ends. Hou Hsiao-hsien's film *A City of Sadness* (1989) presents the 228 Incident through the story of a family and the difficulty of testimony. In Shawna Yang Ryan's novel *Green Island*, memory passes between generations and through the experience of emigration. The film *Untold Herstory* (2022) addresses women's prison experience. These works have different political and artistic optics. They cannot be used merely as illustrations of a ready-made historical account: we must ask whose view they offer, what they make visible and what they leave out of the frame. Artistic persuasiveness does not cancel the need to verify historical claims.

Image and public performance

Visual art and music offer other forms of working with memory. Huang Rong-can's woodcut *The Terrible Inspection* (1947) became an artistic response to the violence of the 228 Incident – not simply a record, but an interpretation and a language of condemnation. Tyzen Hsiao's *1947 Overture*, regarded as an anthem of independence supporters, and Ko Fang-lung's *228 Requiem* link memory with public performance. When a work is performed at a commemoration, remembrance becomes a shared experience, transmitted through music, voice and the presence of people in one space.

Theatre and dance can combine archival materials with the voices of witnesses and the body of the performer. These forms are especially interesting for museums seeking ways of working with traumatic experience beyond the usual text panel. Emotional impact, however, demands responsibility: a production must preserve the dignity of those who suffered and indicate clearly where the document ends and artistic reinterpretation begins. During my visit to the National Human Rights Museum a festival was under way, with sold-out theatre performances about political repression.

Interactive memory

Video games and graphic novels deserve separate mention. The game *Detention* (2017) places the player in a school during the White Terror, where ordinary life intersects with censorship, denunciation and fear; a film and a television series followed. The player acts within a system of restrictions, searches for materials and faces the consequences of prohibitions – which distinguishes the game from watching a film, although interactivity in itself does not guarantee historical understanding. The graphic novel *Son of Formosa* presents the biography of the political prisoner Tsai Kun-lin through a sequence of images and text. For young audiences such forms can become a first encounter with the subject and lead them to a museum or a documentary source.

Memory from below and public oversight

Behind the state museums stands the work of people who preserved memory when it was still dangerous. Families collected letters and photographs, searched for burial sites and corrected names. The diaspora supported public commemoration outside Taiwan. Former political prisoners founded organisations and gave testimony.

This work continues after the creation of state institutions. Oral history helps us see the life of a family after an arrest, the discrimination against children and the silence between generations. Civic organisations monitor the completeness of archival disclosure, the content of exhibitions and the rules of rehabilitation. But civil society does not speak with one voice. Different groups of victims may disagree with each other, and this too is part of the subject of research.
A museum must create conditions of participation in which the witness does not become merely a supplier of material; their opinion about how their own story is presented must also be heard.

The Belarusian perspective

In conclusion, let me return to the Belarusian perspective. The Taiwanese experience does not offer a ready-made model that could be mechanically transferred to another country.
It helps us see more clearly the tasks of working with a repressive past.

The first task is already urgent today: to preserve testimonies, documents and names while the bearers of experience are alive. Families, independent initiatives and the diaspora have a special role here. The second task is to link museum work with access to archives and support for victims; a single memorial date or commission is not enough. Finally, recognising victims must not mean incorporating them into one obligatory political narrative. Different convictions and contradictory testimonies require research and open discussion.

This is what I see as the main significance of the Taiwanese example for our conference.
A museum can be a place of commemoration and, at the same time, a space where society re-examines its understanding of the past. The resilience of a memory culture is determined by its ability to continue this work.



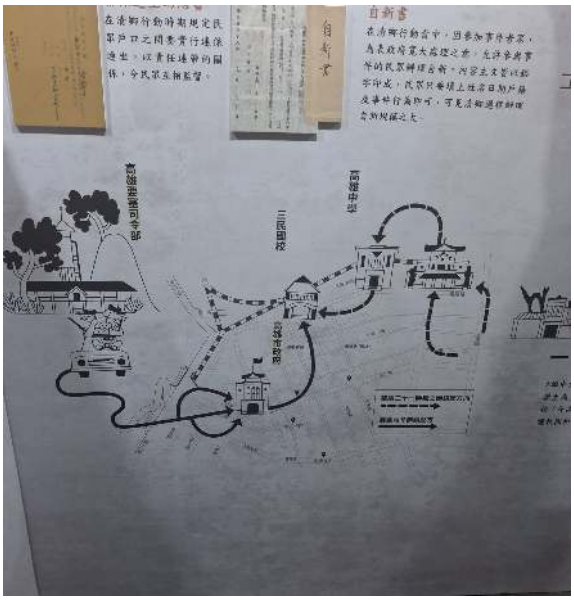
228 Memorial, Nantou County: monument to the battle of Wuniulan, Puli



Exhibition “Cracks and Light” on Kaohsiung’s path to democracy, October 2025



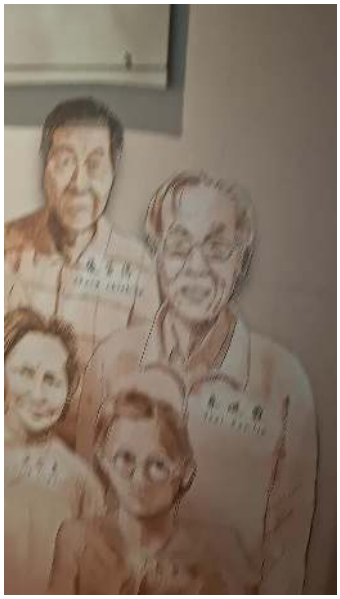
The road to recognition, 1991–1995: Lee Teng-hui’s apology, the compensation law, the 228 Foundation



Suppression in Kaohsiung, 1947: routes of the troops



"Flowers of Freedom", Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Taipei



"Flowers of Freedom", permanent exhibition since 24 November 2025, Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Taipei



"Ark of Democracy", exhibition in the Presidential Office Building, Taipei



LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)

Modest Work as an Alternative to Heroic Narratives

Paulina Vitushchanka
Curator, Vilnius Belarusian Museum named after I. Luckievič

What are heroic narratives?

Heroic narratives are cultural constructs that are embodied in a person or a group of people. They usually create a boundary between that person and the rest of their surroundings: the person is worthy of attention, while everything around, before or after them does not have the same significance. Such narratives are strongly characteristic of Belarusian culture. The question is whether they are strongly productive.

Heroic work and modest work

Heroic work is important because it is special, unique, first. Other things cannot be equally special, unique and first – ergo, they are not important.

Heroisation endows a person with specialness and creates an aura around them. Counter-heroisation re-evaluates a person's deeds or qualities from positive to negative and dissolves the aura. De-heroisation occurs when, after a change in the cultural situation, the constructs that created a heroic narrative are no longer relevant, and the person disappears from the cultural field. This is normal for a large culture. For a small culture it is risky, because it diminishes that culture still further.

Against heroic work stands modest work: work that is not special, not unique, not first – and nonetheless important. Its importance can be distributed widely, which is both possible and logical. In our case, modest work can be (the list is far from complete): recording memories; collecting oral history; collecting home archives; organising celebrations at home; teaching at school or outside it; giving legal advice to Belarusians.

What heroisation looks like in practice

The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk originally had an exhibition focused on modest, everyday experience. It was judged not to reflect Polish heroism sufficiently; the original team was dismissed and a new director, Karol Nawrocki, was appointed. The old team lost two court cases seeking a return to the original exhibition. After Nawrocki left the post, the new team gradually began returning the exhibition to its original form (Martin Sander, "Hero Worship at All Costs? The Dispute over the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk", 2018).

Over the past five years Vilnius has been actively removing Soviet heritage – for example, sculptures and street names honouring Lithuanian writers who actively collaborated with the Soviets. One of them, Salomėja Nėris, is a cult author, and her de-canonisation caused a huge conflict in Lithuanian society and widened the gap between Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania. Moreover, this decolonising process was carried out very hastily and with significant procedural violations, so that some of the changes will apparently have to be reversed and done anew (Dovilė Budrytė and Violeta Davoliūtė, "Continuity or Change? The Russo-Ukrainian War and Decolonization of Memory in Lithuania", 2025).

Collective heroism in Russia is exemplified by the heroic image of the Siege of Leningrad. In an approach where everyone who lived through the siege is a hero, no critical narrative is possible. Nor does this correspond to the inner understanding of that time, and the contemporary narrative becomes more important than authentic sources (Yvonne Pörzgen,

"Siege Memory – Besieged Memory?", 2016).

A similar contrast appears in the treatment of everyday life under dictatorship. The genre often called *come eravamo*, "the way we were", offers a nostalgic, even sugary reference to a shared national experience of the Fascist period in Italy, in which ideology and inconvenient facts are pushed into the background. German *Alltagsgeschichte*, by contrast, is a careful study of everyday life that offers a more precise understanding on which a more critical assessment can be built (Joshua Arthurs and Kate Ferris, "'The Way We Were': Everyday Life in Fascist Italy and Lessons of Alltagsgeschichte", 2024).

Heroisation also creates a space of gradation that provokes conflict where there seemed to be nothing to argue about. Andrzej Poczobut paid for a monument to Jan Karski and, as often happens, the monument names its benefactor. Through heroic discourse, however, this was read quite differently – as if the monument had been erected to Poczobut, prompting a debate over whether he deserved it.

Museums and the making of heroes

"Heroism manifests itself through representations… it must be articulated and communicated." "Heroism is created through cultural conventions which may change, but which may also be passed on to subsequent generations as traditions" (Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948, *Compendium heroicum*, 2024).

The affordance of museums gives them the possibility to present a complex narrative, to take it apart, to show complexity and to invite feedback – unlike, say, a sculpture. Heroisation does not happen automatically: museums and other forms of cultural production create and dissolve heroic figures.

Perspectives of a critical approach to heroic figures

A more dispersed, unfocused gaze also opens the possibility of speaking more in cultural space about women, whose work is especially often invisible (Ludmilla Jordanova, "On Heroism", 2014). Jordanova recalls hearing a well-known scientist ask: why study the second, not the first? Historians of science, she notes, have precise answers to such questions, ranging from a refusal to project anachronistic judgements onto people of the past to a deep commitment to showing science in the richest possible contexts. A focus on heroism also generates a rather unnecessary conflict between museums and academic texts, which are often "rooted in critical distance, in scepticism, even cynicism."

Alternatives to heroisation

"A community must recognise itself and its needs in the hero… heroisms are collective reappropriations of projections placed onto a personal figuration" (Ralf von den Hoff et al., 2019). A dispersed gaze still allows us to follow this mechanism of heroisation while creating a far more inclusive representation of the past.

The problem with cultivating heroes is that where there is heroisation, there is also de- and counter-heroisation. A revision of values is always useful, but radical overturning of heroes does not suit a culture whose main aim at this moment is to secure its own continuity

and resilience.

An alternative view is offered by Norbert Elias's concept of figuration. A figuration is a network of people whose relations make possible a person's action – for example, something heroic – and the interpretation of that action, that is, the judgement that it was heroic. A hero is not something cut off from context; they are part of an interdependent, mutually influencing social network around them.

By showing the whole network – including not only the person of the hero, but also the modest work that was most likely carried on tirelessly around them – we understand and convey the context better. This has its difficulties: a museum may have no evidence at all of that modest work, because it was never preserved. But such an approach pushes us towards a more archival model of collecting the present.



Adolf and Veronika Klimovič with friends at the piano. Collection of the Vilnius Belarusian Museum



The monument to Jan Karski funded by Poczobut. Photo: Belarusian Service of Polish Radio



POLAND

Overview of Memorial's Activities

Anna Gavina
President of the Management Board, Memorial Poland

Letters and documents in a family archive. From the author's presentation













Images from the presentation “Przegląd działalności Memoriału” (Overview of Memorial’s activities)

POLAND

From the Politics of Memory to Mnemonic Populism: Poland's Problems with the Past

Zofia Wóycicka
German Historical Institute Warsaw

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.

POLAND

The Museum of Independence and Its Branches in the Face of the Challenges of Difficult Heritage

Bartłomiej Sokołowski
Museum of Independence in Warsaw

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.

AZERBAIJAN – UNITED KINGDOM (DIASPORA)

Memory and Post-Stalinist / Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Shalala Mammadova
Independent researcher

Memory and society

The presentation, subtitled "Post-Stalinist Azerbaijan: A View from Modern Azerbaijan", looked at how the Soviet past is remembered in Azerbaijani society today. It drew on two surveys, conducted in 2014 and in 2019, which compared the answers of the older and the younger generation.

What the surveys asked

Respondents were asked whether they had a positive or a negative view of the Soviet regime, or no view at all. They were then asked to name its advantages – education, housing and job opportunities – and its disadvantages – discrimination, corruption and police brutality.
The charts reproduced on the following pages show how the two generations answered in each of the two surveys.

The main contradiction: history versus memory

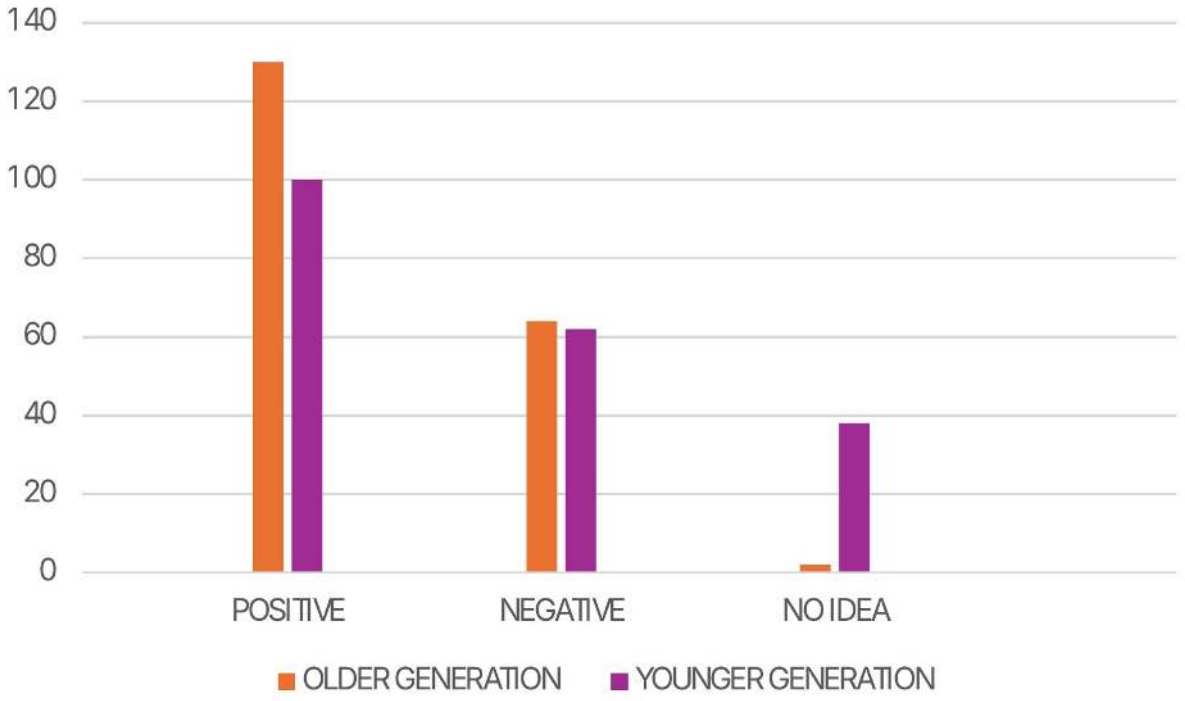
The central argument of the paper concerned the gap between history and memory. Primary sources on the late Soviet period describe a highly corrupt political establishment, a gap between ordinary people and the party leadership, food shortages and poor social welfare, social discrimination and unfair distribution of social housing, and corruption in medical services and education.

In present-day memory, however, these social grievances have been transformed into a sense of social satisfaction. The presentation linked this transformation to present-day grievances: the corruption of the national government, the gap between society and the elite, a high rate of unemployment and social projects perceived as unfair.

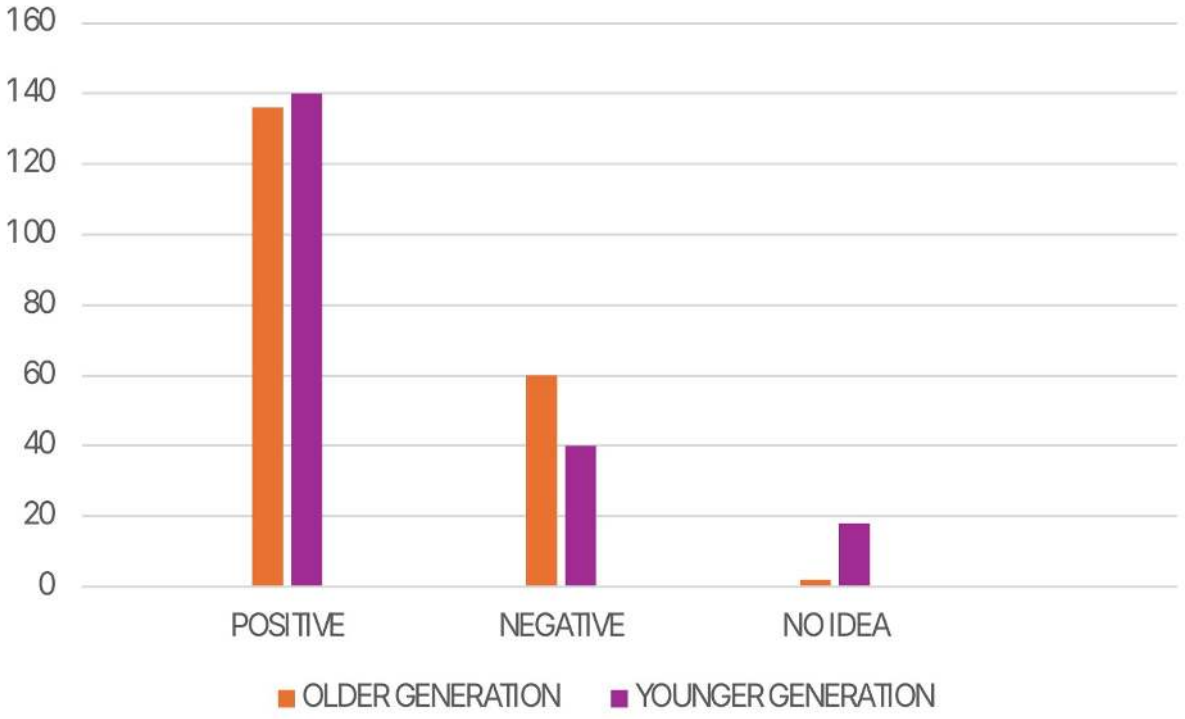
Remembering the past, imagining social justice

The paper concluded with a set of observations on the relationship between individual and collective memory:

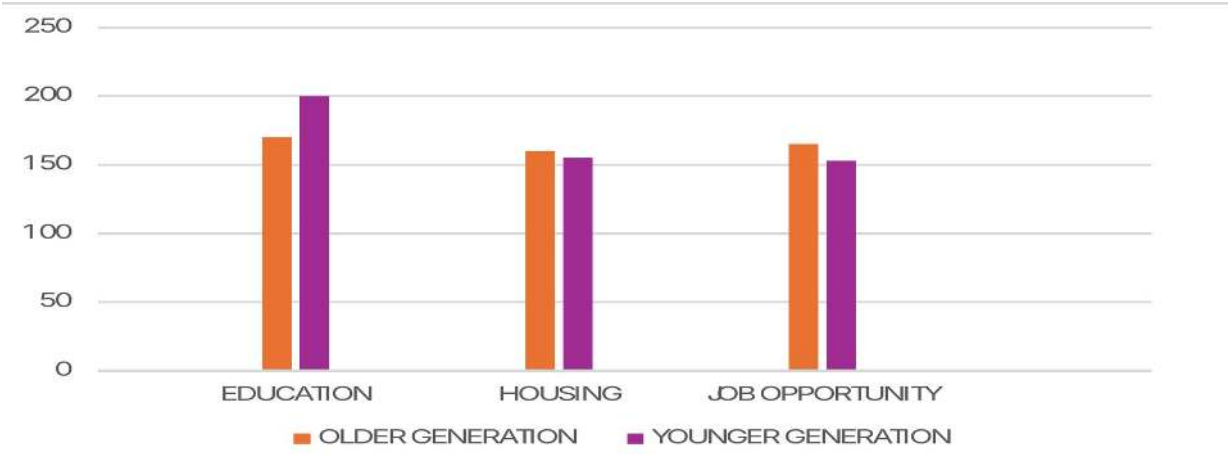
- individual memory opposes collective memory;
- collective memory matches historical memory;
- individual memory files personal experiences;
- memory policy tends to build a bridge between power and society;
- discontent with the present produces an uncritical nostalgia for the past.



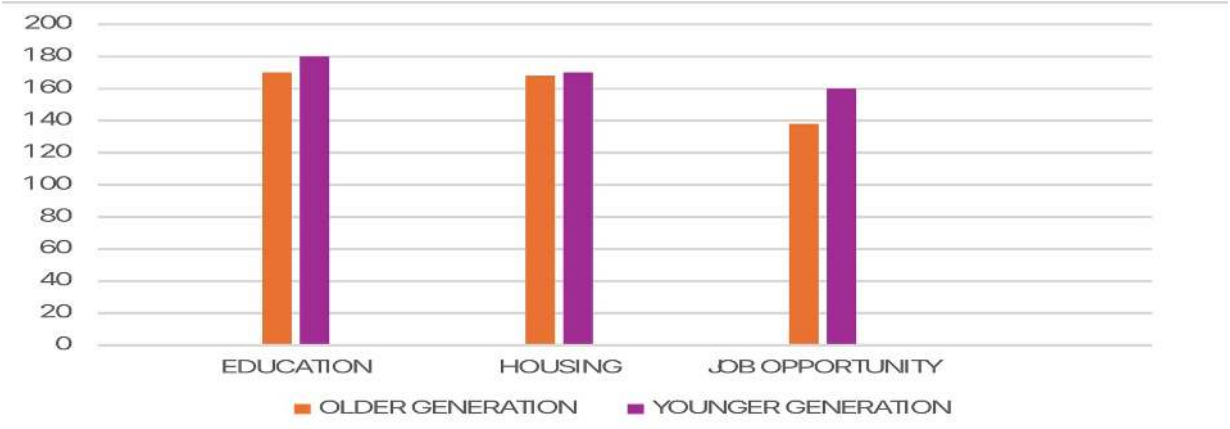
Like or dislike the Soviet regime. 2014 survey



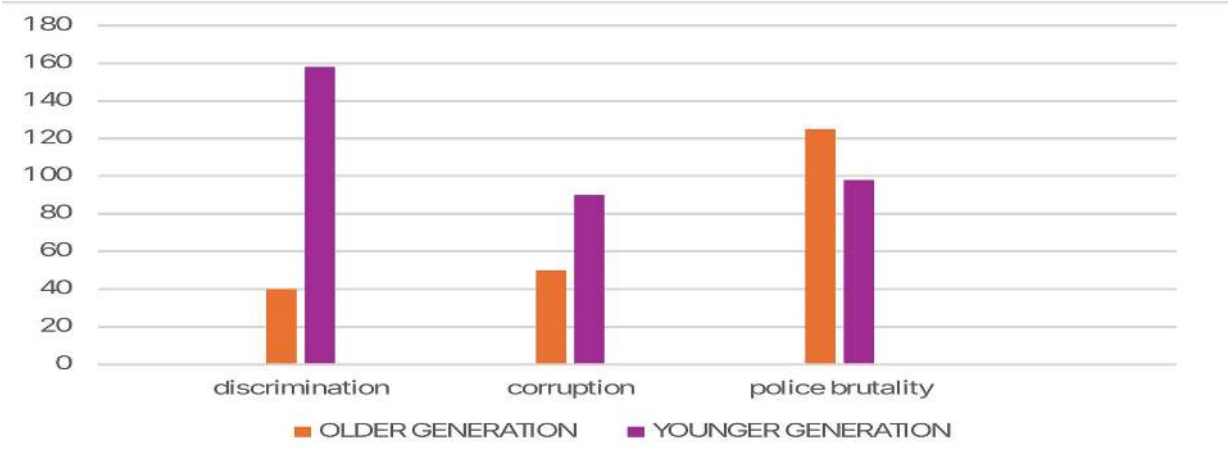
Like or dislike the Soviet regime. 2019 survey



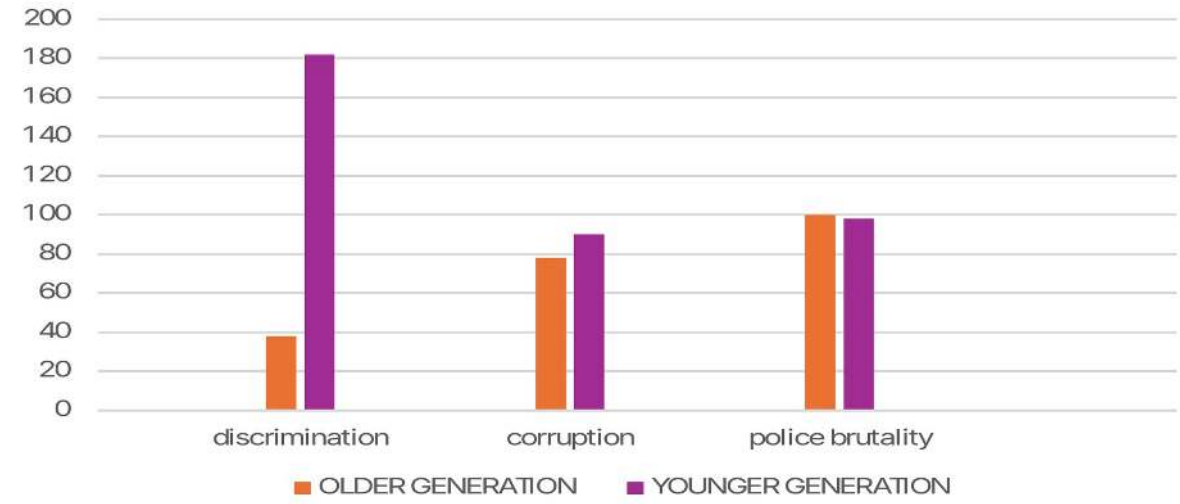
Advantages of the Soviet regime: education, housing, job opportunity. 2014 survey



Advantages of the Soviet regime. 2019 survey



Disadvantages of the Soviet regime: discrimination, corruption, police brutality. 2014 survey



Disadvantages of the Soviet regime. 2019 survey

Survey results compared across the older and the younger generation (orange: older generation; purple: younger generation). From the author's presentation

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the author's presentation.



UKRAINE

Digitization of Criminal Cases on Cannibalism in the Early 1930s as a Tool for Overcoming Totalitarian Silencing

Mykhailo Kostiv

National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, Head of the Department for Research on Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes

Fond 32

The presentation was devoted to a collection of criminal cases on cannibalism from the early 1930s – the period of the Holodomor – known as Fond 32, and to the digitisation of these documents.

The cases reached the archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs after the reorganisation of 1954. In 1956, 994 cases were destroyed. The destruction of a further 1,022 cases in 1965 was stopped by the minister I. Holovchenko, and these files were saved. The fate of part of the cases is unknown because of the occupation of the Luhansk region.

Why digitisation matters

The author identified three dimensions of the significance of digitisation.

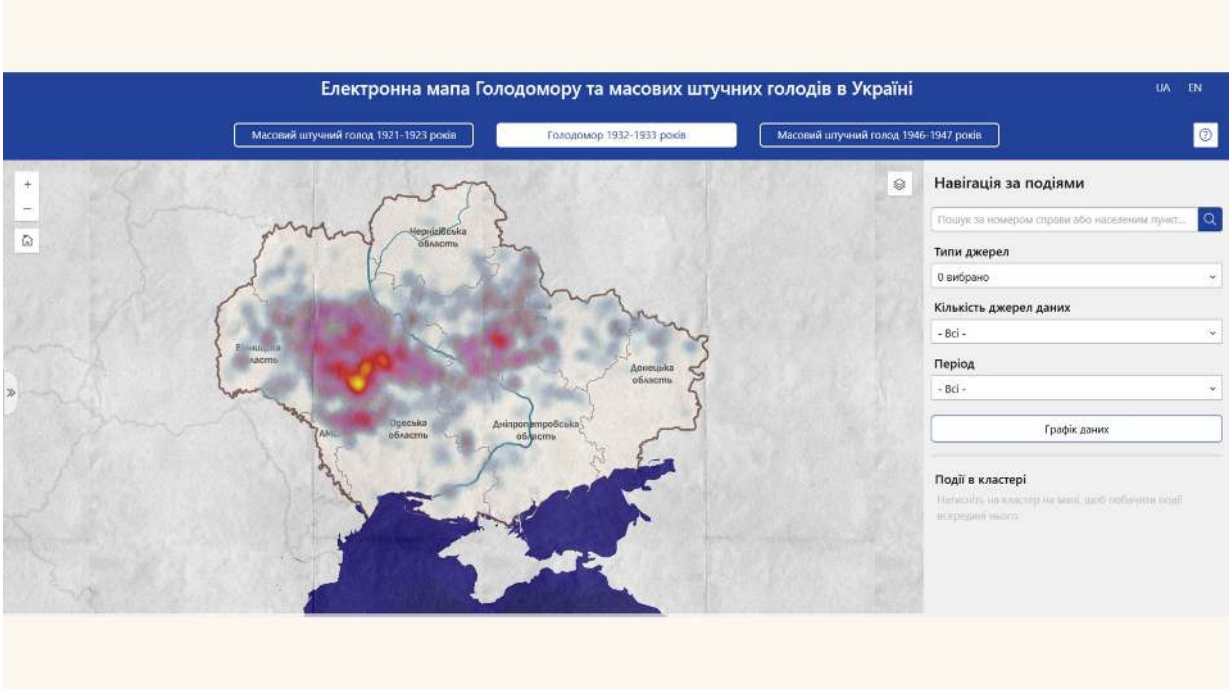
Legal. The cases are part of the body of evidence in criminal case No. 475 of the Security Service of Ukraine. The court decision of 13 January 2010 can now be verified against its sources.

Scholarly. The collection becomes open to medicine, psychology, sociology and economic geography, as well as to statistical and regional studies.

Social. Open documents counter denial and manipulation at a time when the aggressor once again uses hunger as a weapon.

Mapping the famine

The presentation also showed the electronic map of the Holodomor and the mass artificial famines in Ukraine.



Electronic map of the Holodomor and the mass artificial famines in Ukraine



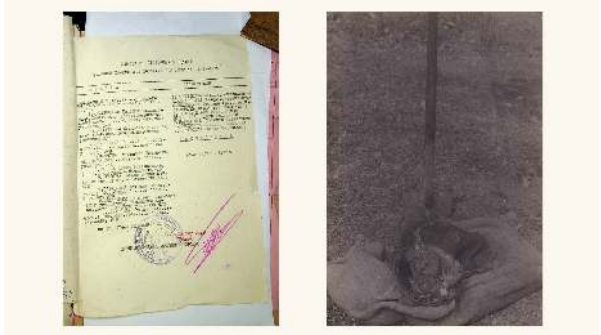
Electronic map: distribution of cases by locality



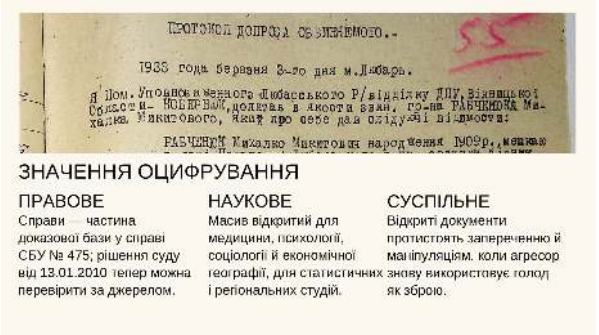
The fate of Fond 32



Case files from Fond 32



Case files from Fond 32



Interrogation protocol, 1933, and the significance of digitisation

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the author's presentation, translated from Ukrainian.

ITALY

The Discursive Construction of Memory: War, Museums and Identity in Belarus

Anna Gataleta

Academy of Fine Arts of Macerata, postgraduate student

Abstract

Belarus is currently a prime setting for observing how diaspora, emigration and nationalism converge. The paper focuses on the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, examining how dominant national narratives shape the sense of belonging and marginalise alternative memories and identities.

Museums and transitional justice

In confronting the recent past, as well as the atrocities and human rights violations that continue to take place, social and political transformations have largely been framed and narrated as a transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic forms of society. Within this framework, negotiated international agreements have placed particular emphasis on the rule of law and on the pursuit of transitional justice.

Today, transitional justice has become an established field, taking the form of an international network of individuals and institutions brought together by shared concepts, practical objectives and specific claims to legitimacy. Its emergence is closely connected to the need to address new practical dilemmas and to systematically organise the knowledge deemed necessary for confronting them. Transitional justice is best understood as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice, and achieve reconciliation."

Museums form part of this transitional justice network insofar as they assume the responsibility of safeguarding memory when it is threatened by military aggression.

When dealing with subjects such as war and violence, museum professionals are confronted with a series of questions. What aims and strategies are involved in representing war in museums? How can the banalisation or aestheticisation of war be avoided? How can museums prevent violence, wounds, death and trauma from becoming the principal attractions for visitors? And, ultimately, how should museums engage with memory?

The museum as a site of memory

For Jay Winter, author of *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, war museums can constitute important landmarks on the map of memory if they avoid fetishising or glorifying war. This objective can be pursued by offering alternative ways of approaching the terror of the battlefield and by reconsidering the gender balance underpinning representations of populations affected by war.

From this perspective, it is useful to return to the concept of the "site of memory", understood as a repository of meanings associated with the cultural identity of a community. The term refers to something that can be identified within both space and time. As a space that resonates with and contributes to the production of memory culture, the museum fulfils this definition: it both reflects and generates memory, thereby functioning as a contemporary site of memory. The museum consequently provides a basis for concrete methodological reflections on the concept of memory culture as a framework for museum analysis.

Katrin Pieper argues that the parallels and interdependencies between memory as a guiding concept in cultural studies and the museum as a space for memory, representation and meaning-making call for a "joint analytical approach". She concludes, however, that the methodological foundations required for such an approach are still lacking.

Pieper's proposal for developing these foundations involves analysing the discourses surrounding conflicts and forms of public dissonance generated by museums, as well as undertaking synchronic and diachronic comparisons between museums. She regards these methods as a means of "expressing views on memory culture or trends within memory culture", as well as on the "significance of certain historical events [...] and on the current state of a society, its ideas, truths, its remembering and forgetting".

Although this approach may contribute to achieving these goals, it does not fully account for the museum as both a medium and an institution through which history is appropriated and interpreted.

Alongside the growing popularity of war museums, a range of academic disciplines have developed methodological and theoretical approaches to their study. From the perspectives of history and cultural studies, two principal areas of interest can be identified. The first concerns the cultural and political functions of museums within broader debates about memory and remembrance, history and identity. The second focuses on the representation of history itself and on the various forms through which it is presented to museum audiences.

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk

War-related museums, particularly in countries where the conflict remains recent and unresolved, can serve as tools for constructing and legitimising national identities; indeed, much like armies, they can assume a political function and become vehicles for specific ideological narratives.

Kristiane Janeke has presented the case of the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, an interesting study of a museum actively engaged both in propaganda practices and in new museum studies.

It may seem strange to seek inspiration for a discussion on cultural identity and museums precisely from Belarus, a politically and culturally isolated country. Today the country is an authoritarian presidential republic with strong nationalist characteristics, governed with an iron fist by President Alexander Lukashenko, who is determined to keep Belarus firmly within Russia's orbit and places particular emphasis on celebrating the Soviet past. This celebrated past is fundamentally nourished by a myth: the hard-fought victory against Germany in the Second World War, still referred to today as the Great Patriotic War.

Myth and discursive cleansing

The construction of myths is an essentially creative activity that involves the production and standardisation of one or more dominant narratives; this process also requires competing versions to be eliminated. The myth of the Great Patriotic War, however, is not entirely false. Belarus was indeed the most important theatre of the partisan war. Rather, in this case, the myth is the result of the monologisation of language: "an absolute fusion of the word with a concrete ideological meaning is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental constitutive characteristics of myth".

Alongside the creation of the myth, another strategy is "discursive cleansing": a destructive process more powerful than simple censorship, defined as "the discipline of discourse through coordinated epistemic and physical violence that is both retrospective and prospective in its application". Public discourse about the war was purged of unwanted stories, and those who attempted to oppose it were removed from society, silenced and, like other war veterans, sent to camps as punishment for their transgressions.

Discursive cleansing therefore contributed to the "partisanisation" of the war by transferring the decision-making role entirely to the collective: it was the political body that suffered, reacted and ultimately claimed victory. This resulted in the elimination of any trace of the traumatic effects of the war experienced by individuals. This collective memory does not exclude the memory of the war. The fact that almost every family in Belarus lost loved ones during the war weighs heavily. This loss is still deeply rooted in communicative and individual memory and exists alongside official commemorative models.

Vasil Bykaŭ's "Rosy Mist"

The short story by the Belarusian writer Vasil Bykaŭ entitled *Ruzhovy tuman* ("Rosy Mist") recounts precisely this complex attitude of Belarusians towards post-war events. The protagonist of the story, Barsuk, embodies the ritual commemoration of Soviet power, which is inextricably linked to a false memory of the partisan war.

Barsuk arrives from western Belarus at the beginning of the war. He has lost his entire family and is condemned to a life of poverty because he is unable to fight due to his disability. He survives the war thanks to the help of a partisan couple who provide him with ration cards that allow him to obtain supplies from the German occupying forces, supplies which he then shares with the partisans. After the war, Barsuk continues to think fondly of the partisans, cultivating an idealised vision of the partisan movement and particularly of the couple who had ensured his livelihood and therefore his survival. He never discovers the lie concealed behind that act of assistance: the ration cards were documents produced by the partisans themselves, who were using him, putting his life at risk and being fully prepared to let him die if the plan failed.

In post-war socialism, Barsuk never learned of any version of the story that might contradict his optimistic view of the partisan movement, and therefore he could never learn the truth. Meanwhile, the other inhabitants of the village had always known that Barsuk's belief was false. "After the war, Barsuk's story became known to many. Only Barsuk did not know it."

Although the story implies that Belarusians knew that the partisan myth was a fiction, it also suggests that people openly revealed their indifference to the official memory of the war only after 1991. The attitude of the veterans who meet Barsuk at the beginning of the story is puzzled and condescending; they treat him as a "nostalgia channel", an object of curiosity and a relic of the past.

Belarusians, together with Barsuk, continued to gather at the Victory Monument, thus revealing their adherence to myths that had already become outdated. The story concludes with a comment from the narrator: "Perhaps we should simply let him live in his rosy mist, spending his days laying flowers at the foot of the monument."

Anti-memory

During the same period Bykaŭ also wrote essays, memoirs and autobiographical works in which he explicitly reflected on the relationship between lived experience, collective memory and the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War. Scholars use the term *antypamiać* (anti-memory) to describe the author's position. Bykaŭ argued that "people's memories of the war are not only becoming shorter, but are being replaced by anti-memory, actively capitulating to propagandistic stereotypes." Lived experience is almost completely supplanted by the official myth, which establishes itself as the dominant form of knowledge. In Bykaŭ's use of this term, the words of the scholar Geoffrey Hartman resonate: he defines anti-memory as "something that shows the colours of memory but tends toward the closure of the ritualization of forgetting."

For Bykaŭ, anti-memory is a discourse of lies, propagated by an authoritarian state as a means of exercising control over a subjugated population. Hartman, on the other hand, provides a further explanation of how trauma is deferred: when a catastrophic event is commemorated symbolically, through empty gestures rather than an honest exploration of the terrible past, the wound is merely patched up, never healed.

A post-colonial reading

The story of the partisans in Belarus displaced the trauma, attempting to define the boundaries of memory while merely postponing the painful process of confronting the past. This led to the creation of a monolithic image of Soviet Belarusian identity based on the memory of the war – the construction of the Partisan Republic – as a form of colonial discourse, a means of imposing hegemonic identity norms on a dominated population. Consequently, both resistance to this myth by authors such as Bykaŭ during the Soviet era and museological theories concerning the Museum of the Great Patriotic War can be analysed in terms of post-colonial theory.

From this perspective, the concepts developed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* make it possible to interpret the memory of the war not as a simple shared historical heritage, but as a field of symbolic negotiation shaped by power relations. The myth of the Partisan Republic can be read as a form of hegemonic representation that produces a collective subject defined by the experience of anti-Nazi resistance and loyalty to the Soviet project. Through this discourse, the plurality of individual memories is subordinated to a unifying narrative that establishes what can be remembered

and what must be marginalised.

The construction of Belarusian national identity during the Soviet period displays characteristics that can be traced to processes of colonial discourse: the production of a normative image of the community, the establishment of identity categories and the naturalisation of a specific interpretation of the past. The memory of the war thus becomes an instrument of political legitimation, capable of transforming a traumatic historical event into an unquestionable foundation of collective identity.

The work of Vasil Bykaŭ can be interpreted as a form of resistance to this process. Through his representation of moral ambiguity, individual suffering and the contradictions of the wartime experience, the writer challenges the official narrative and opens a space for what post-colonial theory defines as "counter-narratives": alternative narratives that challenge the discursive monopoly of the centre. His works do not deny the historical significance of the war, but problematise its memory, giving voice to subjects and experiences excluded from the dominant heroic narrative.

The museum and national identity

Returning to the museum, we can confirm that it is a builder of contemporary Belarusian cultural identity; but adherence to this historical vision raises questions precisely concerning national identity and the reference points of history in an independent Belarus.

The Great Patriotic War has been used as a founding myth for the Republic of Belarus in order to create and strengthen a collective national identity. This is an anachronistic and unique phenomenon among the post-Soviet countries. After the collapse of the USSR, the other countries revived national memories with the aim of uniting society and creating a contrast with the Soviet interpretation of history. Although the Belarusian President also aims at national unity, his policy is not truly suited to this purpose. The "reunification of Belarus", as it is officially defined, is also used in the museum concept. However, due to the prohibition of public debate and of free research, few people in Belarus today are aware of the complexity of their own national history; many are still unable to identify with the image of a reunified and independent country. If cultural institutions continue to uphold the officially sanctioned historical narrative, unofficial interpretations of history will ultimately become aligned with the views of the political opposition, thereby contributing to its marginalisation.

Hybridity and the future of Belarusian museums

Meanwhile, communities of a new generation of artists and activists have sought to redefine Belarusian identity. While some have continued to celebrate the image of the partisan, reclaiming it in the contemporary era, others have preferred a strategy that can be defined as hybridity, namely the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization."

Supporters of a hybrid and intermediate Belarusian identity do not seek to restore lost forms of narrative and knowledge, but rather to dismantle the disjunctive moments of discourses authorised by colonialism and authenticated by the nation-state, and to rearticulate them into another, third form of historical writing.

In a critical situation in which the war prevents curators and artists from acting freely within the country, initiatives have emerged that support and promote the preservation of Belarusian historical memory elsewhere.

The question, therefore, becomes: what is the future of Belarusian museums? What perspectives do they offer regarding the country's historical politics and collective memory – or rather, how can museum institutions contribute to the development of a differentiated culture of memory? As this overview has shown, curators, journalists and other professionals are severely constrained, and the public is still unprepared.

Anna Gataleta holds a Master's degree in Museology from the Academy of Fine Arts in Macerata, Italy, where she defended her thesis "Memory and Identity of Cultural Heritage: Case Studies in Eastern Europe". She is based in Warsaw and collaborates with the Free Belarus Museum.

DAY 2 | 9 OCTOBER 2026 | 10:00–11:30

Thematic session

Politics of Memory, War and Transnational Narratives

Moderator: **Joanna Wawrzyniak**
University of Warsaw, Centre for Research on Social Memory

Stefan Donth GERMANY
Commemorative Sites to the Victims of Communist Dictatorships

Kristiane Janeke GERMANY
Military History and War Memory in Eastern Europe

Bozhena Kozakevych POLAND
German-Ukrainian-Polish Memory Triangle: Entanglements and Challenges

Paweł Kalisz POLAND
Sybir, Prison of Nations: Polish Deportees in Southern and Eastern Africa during the Second World War

GERMANY

Commemorative Sites to the Victims of Communist Dictatorships

Stefan Donth

Head of the Department of Memorial Sites and Remembrance Culture, Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Germany

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.

GERMANY

Military History and War Memory in Eastern Europe

Kristiane Janeke
Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences (ZMSBw)

I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce myself and my work in this setting, and I would like to thank the organisers for it. For me this is, above all, a chance to connect, including, potentially, towards cooperation with the Free Belarus Museum. In this short contribution I would like to address three aspects: a brief introduction of myself and my main areas of work; an introduction to the institute where I currently work; and the challenges and opportunities involved in bringing military history and Eastern European studies into closer dialogue by examining war memory.

Personal background

I am a historian, Slavicist and museum professional, and my career has moved back and forth between academic research and museum practice, always with a focus on Eastern Europe and the history of the 19th and 20th centuries.

My professional path took me from academic research at the university deep into museum work. I co-curated a major exhibition on the First World War at the German Historical Museum and became director of the Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, the historical site of Germany's unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945.

From 2010 to 2013 I lived and worked in Minsk, Belarus, a period that shaped me profoundly, both personally and professionally. I worked closely with the Goethe-Institut and with ICOM, and built lasting professional ties with Belarusian museum colleagues, among them Ala Stashkevich, who is with us at this conference. Together we ran museum seminars aimed at the continuing education of Belarusian museum professionals: training in exhibition-making, collections work and public history.

After my time in Belarus, I continued to work with the History Workshop (Geschichtswerkstatt) in Minsk. Among our joint projects was a travelling exhibition on the history and memory of the extermination site Maly Trostenets, which has been shown in Belarus and in several Western countries.

I then worked as an independent exhibition curator, lecturer and consultant for institutions such as several German memorial foundations, the German Historical Museum, the Swiss National Museum and others, before taking on a second museum leadership position, this time as Director of Research, Exhibitions and Collections at the Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden.

For the past three years I have been back in research. My focus lies on memory cultures and the politics of history; on war remembrance in museums and memorial landscapes; and on military history and military cultures in Eastern Europe.

Today I bring these perspectives together at the Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences, the ZMSBw, working at the intersection of military history and Eastern European studies, with a particular focus on war memory and the politics of history in the context of the war in Ukraine.

The ZMSBw

The Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences, located in Potsdam near Berlin, is a federal research institution within the German Ministry of Defence. The Centre conducts fundamental research in military history, as well as military-sociological and security-policy research, applying the methods and standards of general historical scholarship. It operates on the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of science and research, even as it is institutionally part of the armed forces. In practice, this dual character means that the choice of methods and the research findings themselves remain independent. The Centre serves both the Ministry of Defence and the wider scholarly community and public.

Within the ZMSBw I am based in the Research Department (there is also a separate department for education), in the section covering military history up to 1945. Because the institutional focus here is specifically on military history, I have adapted and sharpened my own thematic emphasis accordingly: I now work at the intersection of military history, security strategy, museum studies and the politics of memory.

Two forthcoming publications illustrate this: an article on Soviet war museums in Kaunas, Moscow and Minsk in the early post-war period, and a study of the memorial landscapes created by the Belarusian architect Leonid Levin.

My current project is a larger monograph, which I am preparing together with a co-author, on how the culture of war remembrance in Eastern Europe is being transformed in the context of the war against Ukraine. Alongside that, I am co-authoring an interdisciplinary essay on the Battle of Velikiye Luki in Russia, 1941–1943, which deliberately bridges operational military history, occupation history and memory studies, three perspectives that are usually treated separately in the literature.

A research perspective on Eastern Europe

Beyond this individual work, I also lead the research group on Eastern Europe. The underlying idea is to connect military history more systematically with Eastern European area studies: two fields that, at least in Germany, too often run in parallel rather than in dialogue, each with its own methods, source traditions and analytical vocabulary, despite dealing with deeply overlapping subject matter.

We tested this idea in a workshop held in November 2025 in cooperation with the German Association for East European Studies. It brought together scholars of modern military history and scholars of Eastern Europe around three thematic strands. The first was occupation and operational history in the Second World War, where we looked at how military decision-making, logistics and local administrative practice were entangled with violence on the ground. The second was memory and the politics of history, where we discussed how the memory landscape of the Second World War is shifting in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, and how historical narratives function as instruments of contemporary security and identity politics. The third was contemporary military cultures, where researchers presented their work on perception, violence and institution-building across different nations, regimes and periods.

What became clear is that this is not simply an academic exercise in bridging two disciplines. Bringing military history and Eastern European studies into closer dialogue, and increasingly also connecting both with gender studies, the study of violence and museum studies, opens up a more complete understanding of how military organisations, patterns of violence and the room for local agency interact with historical interpretation and collective memory.

That, I think, is exactly where my own work connects to the subject of this conference: a military-historical Eastern European research with a special focus on the entanglement of war, memory and identity. The field is directly compatible with, and I would argue necessary for, research on memory culture and on museums as sites where these histories are narrated, contested and revised.

POLAND

German-Ukrainian-Polish Memory Triangle: Entanglements and Challenges

Bozhena Kozakevych
German-Polish House, Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Poznań

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.



POLAND

Sybir, Prison of Nations: Polish Deportees in Southern and Eastern Africa during the Second World War

Paweł Kalisz
Sybir Memorial Museum, Białystok

The Sybir Memorial Museum, Białystok

For thousands of Poles deported by the Soviet authorities in 1940–1941, Africa was a place they had never even been able to imagine, known only from school reading. Not long before, they had been living in their own homes in the eastern borderlands (Kresy) of the Second Polish Republic. Then they were taken deep into the Soviet Union: to special settlements and places of forced settlement, to collective farms, and some to the camps. They worked in forests, mines and state farms, struggling with hunger, cold, disease and separation from their families. Two years later some of them found themselves in a completely different world: in Africa.

It was one of the most extraordinary journeys of Polish civilians during the Second World War: from the Kresy through Siberia and Central Asia, then Iran, and from there to Africa. Between 1942 and 1952 Polish settlements and camps operated in Africa, housing some 20,000 Polish citizens. They were established in Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa.

From Siberia to Africa

There would have been no deportees without the German-Soviet aggression of September 1939. A week before the start of hostilities, the invaders signed a secret protocol to the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact, under which part of Central Europe was to fall into the Soviet sphere of influence in the coming conflict. Poland was divided almost in half between the Third Reich and the USSR. The aggressors quickly overcame the resistance of Polish soldiers fighting on two fronts. The Germans incorporated a large part of the occupied territory into the Reich and turned the rest into the General Government, a puppet entity entirely dependent on Germany. The Soviets legitimised their annexation of part of the Polish state by staging sham elections. In response to the strong resistance of the population of the eastern lands of the Second Republic, they applied collective responsibility and carried out four great deportation operations. Particularly tragic was 10 February 1940, when the first great deportation began. Further deportations followed in April and June 1940 and in May and June 1941. They were carried out on a mass scale: more than 330,000 Polish citizens of various faiths and nationalities were deported into the interior of the USSR.

The tragic fate of hundreds of thousands changed with the German attack on the Soviet Union. Pressed by the situation at the front and by the British, Stalin had to normalise relations with the legitimate Polish government in exile.

After the Sikorski–Mayski agreement of 30 July 1941, the situation of Poles in the Soviet Union changed. An amnesty was declared, and in the south of the USSR the formation of a Polish Army under General Władysław Anders began. Thousands of people released from prisons, camps and places of forced settlement began to arrive at the places where the army was being formed.

The difficult supply and sanitary situation, together with Soviet pressure to send untrained and sick deportees to the front, provoked an obvious reaction from the Polish authorities, who were determined not to let Polish recruits be bled dry. General Anders, commanding the Polish forces in the East, in agreement with the government in exile and with the British, set about rescuing thousands of compatriots covered by the amnesty. Stalin finally agreed to the

evacuation of Polish citizens from the USSR to Iran.

In the spring and summer of 1942 the Polish Army was evacuated together with tens of thousands of civilians. Some 40,000 Polish civilians reached Iran: above all women, children, the elderly and men unfit for military service.

Iran, however, could not become a place of permanent residence for so many refugees. The search began for places where they could be settled safely. The British authorities agreed to accommodate Polish refugees in, among other places, East Africa. In July 1942 the decision was taken to send Poles to Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika.

The first transport reached the port of Tanga in Tanganyika on 27 August 1942, with some 1,400 people on board. The next arrived in Mombasa on 19 September. By the beginning of November 1942 more than 11,000 Polish refugees were already in Africa, including some 5,000 children.

For many of them Africa was not the end of their wandering. It was another stage in the lives of people who, within just a few years, had been torn from their homes, stripped of their property and deported thousands of kilometres from their homeland.

Polish towns in Africa

Six large, permanent Polish refugee settlements were established in East Africa: four in Tanganyika – Tengeru, Kondoa, Ifunda and Kidugala – and two in Uganda – Masindi and Koja. There were also smaller establishments and transit camps, among others in Morogoro, Kigoma, Dar es Salaam, Iringa, Tosamaganga and Makindu.

In December 1944, 13,364 Polish citizens were living in the three countries of East Africa: 6,631 in Tanganyika, 6,443 in Uganda and 290 in Kenya. Poles were then the largest community of European refugees in this part of the continent.

The settlements were not ordinary refugee camps. Over time they came to resemble small Polish towns, with schools, hospitals, churches, workshops, shops, bakeries, laundries, common rooms, libraries, post offices, farms and meeting places. There was an administration, a health service, schools, social welfare and pastoral care.

Each settlement had a commandant, usually a British official, and a Polish manager appointed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Polish government in exile. There were also residents' councils and departments responsible for education, health, culture, work and religious life.

In this way, people who had been deprived of their own world in Siberia began to recreate it.

Tengeru, the largest Polish settlement in Africa

The largest and best-known Polish settlement was Tengeru in Tanganyika, near Arusha, at the foot of Mount Meru, with the massif of Kilimanjaro visible in the distance.

At its peak more than 4,000 people lived here, in 947 houses. Most were built of clay and roofed with banana or palm leaves or grass, resembling the local African huts. For the Poles, however, they were above all the first substitute for a home of their own after

the experience of Soviet exile.

Tengeru quickly turned into a real Polish town. It had schools, a hospital, a farm, a slaughterhouse, a bakery, a smokehouse, a tannery, a weaving mill, a sewing room, a brickworks, and shoemaking and saddlery workshops. There were small shops, a cooperative, a post office, a cinema, a theatre and common rooms, an orphanage and an old people's home. Religious life centred on the church, but the settlement also had a synagogue and an Orthodox church. Christian and Jewish cemeteries were laid out nearby.

Agriculture was particularly important. A large farm was established next to the settlement, growing vegetables and raising poultry and cattle. Some 300 Poles, mainly women, and about 160 local workers were employed there. Farm production was an important element of the settlement's self-sufficiency.

Tengeru was also a place where children could, for the first time in years, begin a relatively normal life. Schools, scout troops, choirs and artistic groups were founded. In the shade of African trees, elements of a world destroyed by war and deportation were recreated. The settlement in Tengeru operated the longest, until 1952.

Koja, a "Polish town" on Lake Victoria

The second great concentration of Poles was Koja in Uganda, near Lake Victoria. At its peak some 2,800–3,000 Poles lived here. Koja became one of the best examples of how refugees organised their own community almost from scratch.

From November 1942 a primary school operated here, at first with six and later with seven grades. In March 1943 it was attended by 431 children, with a further 30 in pre-school care. The school was run by 15 teachers, who had come from various parts of pre-war Poland, among others from Warsaw, Vilnius, Grodno and the famous Krzemieniec Lyceum.

The beginnings were difficult. There were no suitable buildings, textbooks, exercise books or materials. Lessons were at first held in adapted houses. Despite these problems the teachers tried not only to follow the curriculum but also to rebuild the children's sense of normality and security.

The school was more than a place of learning. It had a choir, published a newsletter and organised celebrations and cultural events. The school community helped children recover their lost childhood.

Work was equally important. As new transports arrived, residents helped build new houses, and young people were involved too. The structures were made of wood, with walls filled with a mixture of clay and straw. The common effort allowed the settlement to grow gradually.

Koja also developed farming and gardening: chickens and pigs were raised, land was cultivated, and workshops and institutions served the residents. In Masindi, meanwhile, a large church was built between 1943 and 1945. Koja was an example of the remarkable ability of Poles to organise a community in conditions of forced emigration.

Masindi, Ifunda, Kidugala and Kondoa

Not all settlements were as large as Tengeru or Koja. Masindi in Uganda housed more than 3,500 Poles, one of the largest Polish concentrations in Africa. It was here that children began school as early as September 1942, at first even in the open air. School buildings and the settlement's infrastructure came later.

Ifunda in Tanganyika had about 780 residents. Living conditions were relatively good: some one hundred brick houses were arranged in five districts, each with its own kitchens, dining rooms, laundries and storerooms.

Kidugala had nearly 800 residents and was organised near an abandoned former German Protestant mission. Kondoa, with about 430 residents, was smaller; the Poles lived there in about twenty clay barracks.

Conditions thus varied considerably. Some lived in brick houses, others in clay structures. All, however, had to face the hot climate, unfamiliar nature and disease, above all malaria. In Tengeru parasites were also a problem, which the residents gradually learned to combat.

At the same time Africa offered something the deportees had not had in the Soviet Union: safety, relative stability, access to food, the possibility of educating their children and, above all, the prospect of a life without forced labour under Soviet terror.

Everyday life, between memory and normality

Life in the settlements was an attempt to regain normality. Refugees received food rations, clothing and small sums of money. There were communal canteens, although in some places residents could also cook in their own homes. Farms and livestock played a large role.

Work was an obligation, but also a way of rebuilding self-esteem. Women worked in kitchens, sewing rooms, laundries and on farms. Men worked in construction, crafts, agriculture and transport. Young people helped with various jobs.

After work, social life began. There were performances, commemorative assemblies, concerts, meetings, sports competitions and patriotic celebrations. Scouting flourished. Religious and national holidays were an important part of everyday life. The settlements thus became not only places of refuge, but spaces for preserving Polish culture and memory.

School and children, the most important investment in the future

Children made up a large part of the residents of the African settlements. In November 1942 some 11,000 Poles were in East Africa, about 5,000 of them children. Organising schools for them was one of the most important tasks. It was not only about education: after years of deportation, hunger and uncertainty, children needed above all a sense of security.

Teachers therefore tried to recreate the Polish school, with Polish language, history, geography, literature, religion, scouting, choirs and patriotic celebrations.

It was an extremely difficult task. There was a lack of textbooks and suitable premises, and many pupils had been through the trauma of deportation. One contemporary text on education stressed that learning conditions were hard and that the experiences of previous

years weighed on children and teachers alike.

Nevertheless, the Polish schools worked. Thanks to them, the next generation was not deprived of the language, culture and memory of their parents' country.

African neighbours

The Polish settlements did not exist in complete isolation from the local population. The inhabitants of Tanganyika helped the Poles in the first months of their stay, supplying building materials and food and working on the construction of the settlements. This was often the first contact with African communities. The Poles had to learn to live in a completely different cultural, climatic and natural environment.

At the same time they themselves became part of the local landscape. Polish schools, farms, workshops and houses formed distinctive enclaves of European life in colonial Africa.

Poles in Southern Africa

The Polish presence was not limited to East Africa. From February 1943 refugees were also sent to Southern Africa: to Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa. In December 1944 almost 2,900 Poles were living in Northern Rhodesia and more than 1,400 in Southern Rhodesia. Settlements were established, among others, in Abercorn, Bwana Mkubwa and Rusape. Oudtshoorn in the Union of South Africa occupied a special place.

In April 1943 a group of 500 Polish children and 59 carers, victims of the Soviet deportations, arrived there. Their reception by the authorities and the local population was a response to international efforts to provide shelter for Polish children. The invitation was issued by the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, Jan Smuts.

The children lived on the site of a former military camp. A Polish school, care and a social life were organised for them. Here too a kind of "little Poland" came into being: a place where children who had experienced Soviet terror could regain something of their childhood.

The settlement in Oudtshoorn operated until 1947. Some of its pupils decided to remain in South Africa and, over time, became one of the foundations of the post-war Polish community in that country.

Not only Poles

It is worth stressing that the residents of the African settlements were not a homogeneous group. Although many came from the eastern borderlands of the Second Republic and had experienced deportation, there were also people from other regions of pre-war Poland among the refugees, including the so-called *bieżeńcy*: Polish citizens of Jewish origin who had fled east after the outbreak of war.

What they shared was the loss of home, forced migration and life in a foreign land.

Religion, culture and memory

The Church and religion played an important role in the life of the settlements. Pastoral care helped rebuild the community and allowed people to celebrate holidays according to the traditions of their family homes.

Culture and memory were no less important. Patriotic assemblies, performances, concerts and anniversary celebrations were organised. Scouting raised young people in a spirit of responsibility for the community and remembrance of Poland.

In Tengeru, a particular symbol was the inscription “POLAND 1942”, laid out in the central part of the settlement. It was like a declaration: although the residents were thousands of kilometres from home, Poland still existed in their memory, language, religion, culture and everyday customs.

The end of the war did not end the wandering

The greatest paradox in the history of the Polish settlements in Africa is that the end of the war did not mean an immediate return home for their residents. In 1945 Poland found itself in the Soviet sphere of influence. For many deportees, returning would have meant going back to the reality they had escaped, or living in a state subordinated to the Soviet Union. Some residents of the African settlements therefore decided to remain in exile.

The closing of the settlements took several years. Some were closed relatively quickly, others operated much longer. The largest, Tengeru, functioned until 1952, and Koja until 1951. Former residents scattered across the world, to Great Britain, Canada, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, South Africa and other countries. A small number returned to Poland.

The legacy of the African settlements

The history of the Polish settlements in Africa is the history of people who were deprived of their homeland but did not allow their identity to be taken away. In Siberia and Kazakhstan they fought above all to survive. In Africa they began to fight for something more: to rebuild a normal life. They built houses, schools, churches, workshops and farms. They organised performances and celebrations, founded scout troops and taught their children Polish and history. Within a few years, small Polish worlds had arisen on African soil.

Tengeru, Koja, Masindi, Ifunda, Kidugala, Kondoa, Abercorn, Bwana Mkubwa, Rusape and Oudtshoorn were more than places to house refugees. They were an attempt to recreate a home lost through war and deportation. For many residents, “home” no longer meant a particular building. It was language, family, school, church, a Polish book, the white-and-red flag and the memory of the places from which they had been taken.

This is why the history of Poles in Africa is an important part of the history of the Soviet deportations. It shows that exile did not end when people left Siberia. For many, another long road began then: through Iran, Africa, refugee camps and emigration.

And yet communities that endured were born of this wandering. Their members and their children left a mark on the history of East and Southern Africa, and the memory of the Polish settlements survived long after they closed.

The road of thousands of people led from Siberia to Africa. From Africa their paths led on, all over the world. What connected them was the memory of Poland, which neither deportation, nor war, nor many years of emigration could destroy.

Belarusians and Ukrainians among the “Polish refugees”

The most important caveat: “Polish refugees” did not mean only ethnic Poles. They were above all citizens of the Second Polish Republic deported by the Soviet authorities, among them Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews. Studies by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) assume that about 95% of the residents of the Polish settlements in Africa were Poles, while the others included Ukrainians and Belarusians.

The historian Jerzy Grzybowski published a separate article in *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* devoted to Polish citizens of Belarusian nationality: “Belarusians among the Polish refugees in the Middle East and East Africa during the Second World War”. According to his findings, in 1942–1943 some 2,000 Belarusian civilians, Polish citizens, many of them Orthodox, were evacuated to Iran together with the Anders Army.

Their situation was particularly difficult. The Soviet authorities tried to keep in the USSR those who were not ethnic Poles. Belarusians sometimes had to declare Polish nationality or Catholicism, and some changed their surnames, in order to be allowed to leave. This matters for our subject: some of the people who later reached the African settlements first had to prove to the Soviet authorities that they belonged to the group entitled to evacuation.

Tengeru, a place of particular importance for Belarusians and Ukrainians

One study devoted to Belarusians states that there were more than 400 Orthodox Belarusians in Tengeru. Moreover, an Orthodox church operated in Tengeru, and its priest was Fr. Michał Bożerianow, a clergyman connected with the Belarusian community.

This is a remarkable detail, because in 1943 Fr. Bożerianow was appointed religious inspector of the Polish Orthodox Church for Central and East Africa. He first set up a chapel in one of the settlement’s buildings and then, with the help of local Greeks, brought about the construction of a church.

A surviving testimony states that Fr. Bożerianow’s parishioners were Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians and other Orthodox residents of the settlement. Tengeru thus had an Orthodox community that was not exclusively Belarusian, but united people of different nationalities who shared Polish citizenship, the experience of Soviet deportation and the Orthodox faith.

There is currently no study that would allow an exact figure to be given for the Ukrainians evacuated through Iran to Africa. Sources on the national structure of the African refugees, however, clearly indicate that Ukrainians were among the residents of the Polish settlements.

A surviving summary of Polish refugees in Africa states that about 95% were Poles and about 4% Jews, with the remainder including Orthodox Belarusians and Ukrainians. Its author notes that relatively more Orthodox Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians probably went to Africa than to some other places of settlement. This allows a very cautious conclusion: Ukrainians were present in the African settlements, but their numbers and individual fates are less well known than those of Poles or Belarusians. The administrative records were above all records of Polish citizens, not of individual nationalities. After the war some of these people found themselves outside Poland and often became part of the broadly understood Polish emigration.

For Orthodox Belarusians and Ukrainians, the religious community was particularly important. In Tengeru the Orthodox parish brought together people of different nationalities. In the documents we may therefore find information about "the Orthodox", but not necessarily about their nationality; some people may appear simply as Polish citizens. There is one more important point: we should be careful about projecting today's understanding of nationality onto the situation of 1942–1945.

A person could be at the same time a Polish citizen, a Ukrainian or a Belarusian, an Orthodox inhabitant of the Kresy, a deportee of the NKVD, a refugee evacuated with the Anders Army and a resident of the Polish settlement in Tengeru. These identities did not have to exclude one another. This is why the history of these people is also a very good example of the multinational character of the Second Polish Republic and of the complex heritage of the borderlands.

From the exhibition "Sybir, Prison of Nations"

The paper accompanied the exhibition "Sybir, Prison of Nations" of the Sybir Memorial Museum, presented in cooperation with the Holocaust and Genocide Centres in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg: fifteen panels in five parts, following one road from the eastern provinces of Poland, through the interior of the Soviet Union and Iran, to the camps of East and Southern Africa. The following figures and episodes come from the exhibition and from the author's presentation.

Four deportations in sixteen months. At least 330,000 people were deported, each wave affecting a different group: in February 1940 more than 140,000 military and civilian settlers and forestry workers with their families; in April 1940 at least 60,000, mainly the families of Polish prisoners of war and prisoners; in June 1940 at least 90,000 refugees from central and western Poland, mostly Jews; in May–June 1941 at least 40,000 "socially alien elements".

Not only a Polish story. Panel 6 places the Polish deportations in the wider system: in 1941 deportations from the Moldavian SSR, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia; in 1944–1947 some 115,000 Ukrainians labelled "nationalists"; in 1948–1949 Operation "Priboi" in the Baltic states; in 1951–1952 some 4,500 relatives of Anders Army soldiers from the Belarusian SSR. The peoples of the Baltic states, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Moldovans could return home after Stalin's death in 1953. Poles from the eastern provinces could not: their home regions were no longer in Poland.

The road to Africa. By October 1942 some 80,000 people had been evacuated to Pahlevi in Iran with the Anders Army; around the army gathered some 44,000 civilians, among them more than 18,000 children, including whole orphanages. 639 people died in the port of Pahlevi alone. In July 1944, according to *The East African Standard*, there were some 6,250 Polish refugees in Tanganyika, over 6,250 in Uganda, around 3,000 in Northern and Southern Rhodesia, 780 in transit in Kenya and over 500 in South Africa, in twenty-two camps altogether.

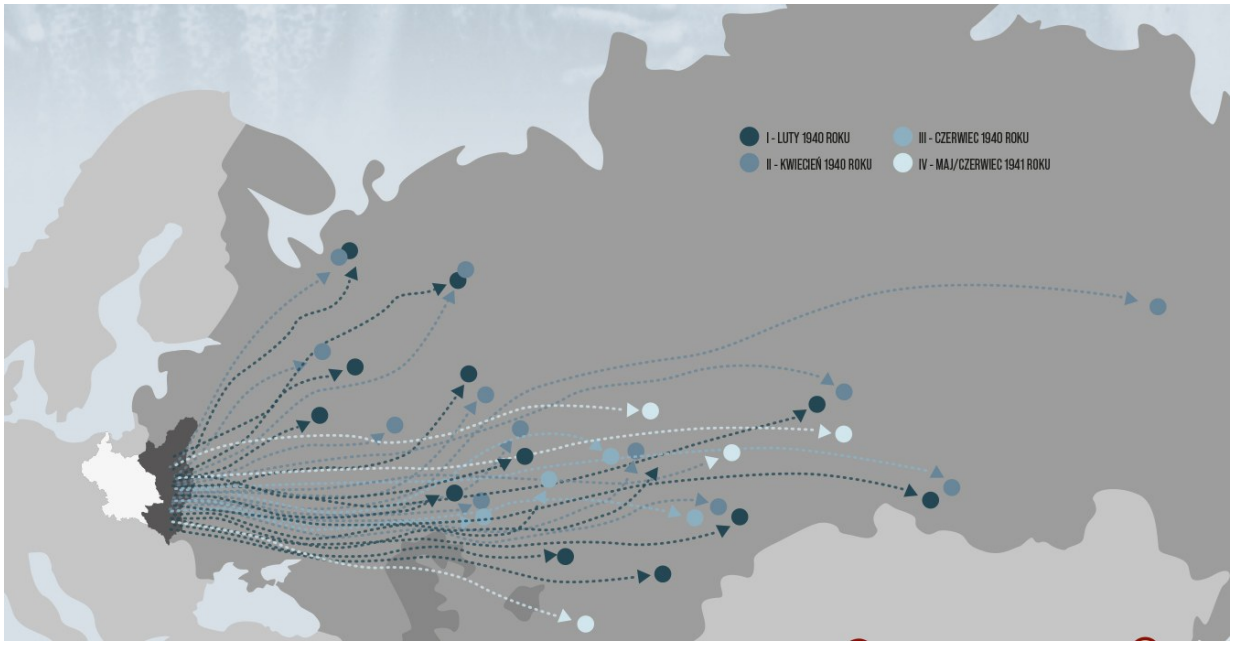
Built by African hands. Some 2,000 African workers cleared reeds and bush on the shore of Lake Victoria at Koja, laid out roads and built huts; some 1,000 worked with the Public Works Department on Tengeru. In the published Polish literature Africa appears as landscape,

and Africans are almost entirely absent, although they guarded the gates, carried the post, cooked, drained mosquito breeding grounds, worked on the camp farms and raised every building.

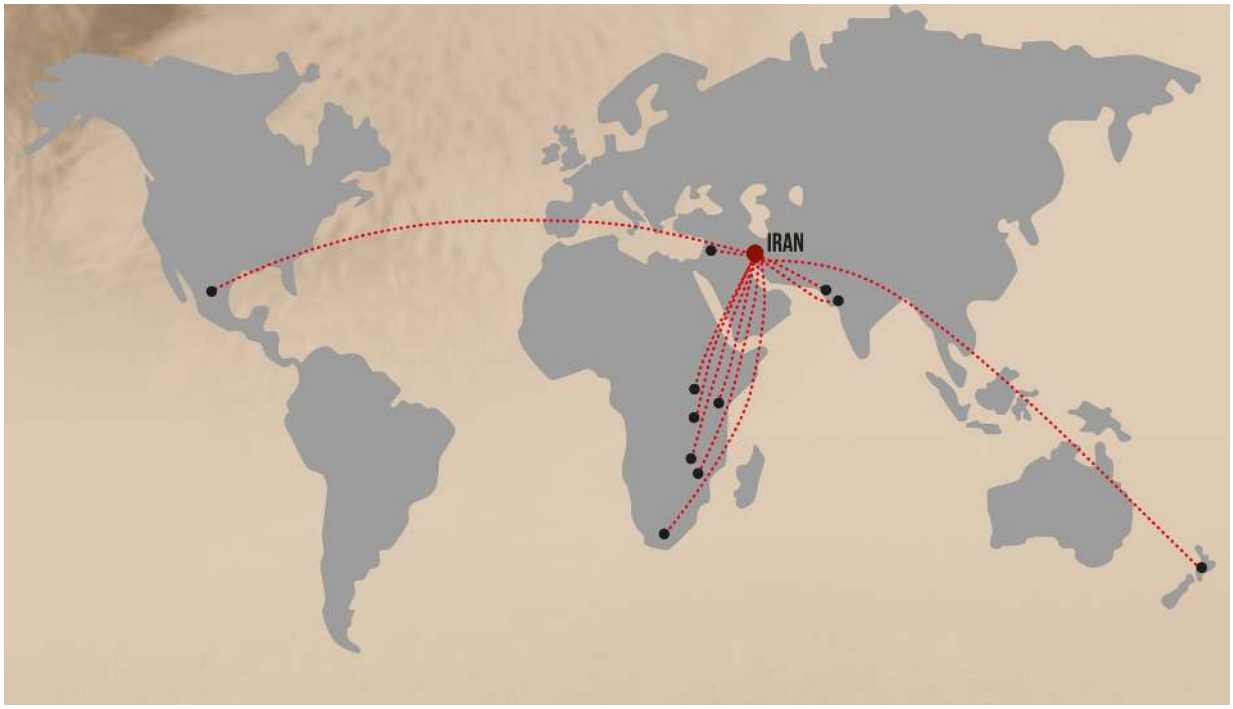
Life and health. Malaria accounted for a third of deaths in the refugees' first six months in Africa. The hospital in Koja opened in January 1943 with two wards of 20 beds and no electricity; by mid-1945 it had 128 beds, an operating theatre and a maternity ward. In Koja, a camp of 2,658 people in 1945, 123 children were born and 40 people died in four years.

Children. In January 1943, 3,531 children attended primary schools in six camps, and a year later 5,021. Some 1,500 joined the scouts. On 10 April 1943 five hundred Polish children, mostly orphans and half-orphans aged four to twenty, arrived in Oudtshoorn at the invitation of Jan Smuts. The town took them into private homes, gave them presents and let them into the cinema for free. The home closed in 1947.

The end. By October 1950 the International Refugee Organization had taken 17,493 people out of Africa; 9,491 went to Great Britain, 1,795 chose repatriation to Poland. When the IRO office in Nairobi closed on 31 October 1950, 266 people were still there: the sick, the elderly and people with disabilities whom no country would accept.



Directions of the Soviet deportations. From the exhibition



From Siberia through Iran to Africa: the route of the evacuees



Panel 2: "Poland – between the hammer and sickle and the swastika"



Panel 5: "The White Crematorium"



Panel 8: "A chance to survive"



Witnesses of the deportations, from the video testimonies of the Sybir Memorial Museum



Witnesses of the deportations, from the video testimonies of the Sybir Memorial Museum

Translated from Polish. The final section summarises the exhibition panels and the author's presentation. Main sources cited in the presentation include The National Archives, Kew (FO 371/32650; FO 371/36685), the Archive of New Files, Warsaw (MPiOS 131/106), and Wanda Warlik, "Twenty-one camps were scattered: Displacement and the Second World War: Polish refugees in Africa", University of Western Australia, 2019. Exhibition website: prisonofnations.com

IV

DAY 2 | 9 OCTOBER 2026 | 11:40–13:00

Thematic session

Belarusian Memory: Repression, Identity and Heritage Preservation Practices

Moderator: **Stsiapan Stureika**
Historian, researcher and cultural heritage expert, Associate Professor at the European Humanities University, Vilnius

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Volha Arkhipava BELARUS – POLAND (DIASPORA)
Deconstructing Belarusianness in Contemporary Belarusian Art

Stsiapan Zakharkevich LITHUANIA
Discussing Violence: Repression against Belarusian Ethnographers in the Early 1930s as a Means of Scholarly Development in the Soviet Totalitarian System

Valieryja Charnamortsava BELARUS – LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
Contemporary Practices and Approaches to the Use of Oral-History Testimonies in European Museum Exhibitions and Online Projects on Soviet Repressions as a Basis for the Renewed Concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Ilia Magin LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)
Between the Archive and the Audience: Popularising Heritage



BELARUS – POLAND (DIASPORA)

Deconstructing Belarusianness in Contemporary Belarusian Art

Volha Arkhipava

Cultural studies scholar, former research fellow at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus

Olek Jager, "Fear the Belarusian who is silent". Exhibition "Gold of Belarus", Poznań, 2025

The traditional canons of Belarusianness

The presentation started from the traditional canons through which Belarusianness has been represented in art: the ethnographic canon (ornament, costume, material culture); the historical canon (events and heroes); the image of Belarusian nature (the Belarusian landscape, the Belarusian palette, the Belarusian still life); the peasant culture and its calendar (Kalady, Kupalle, Dziady); and a type of national character, described through moderation, inclusiveness, empathy and assimilation.

From image to process

The presentation then followed how contemporary Belarusian artists move from illustrating these canons to taking them apart. The central thesis was formulated as follows:

When art stops illustrating Belarusianness and begins to deconstruct it, Belarusianness moves from the category of "image" to the category of "process". Belarusianness is no longer shown; it is lived.

A chronicle of exhibitions, 2021–2026

The argument was developed through a sequence of exhibitions and projects, many of them in Poland and Germany:

- 2021: a new view of the work of Mikhail Savitsky (1922–2010) on the centenary of his birth;
- 2022: work on an article about Zakhar Kudin (1986–2019);
- 2022, Poznań: the project Gray Mandorla Manifest (18 December 2021 – 18 December 2023) of Siarhei Shabohin's Gray Mandorla Studio, with Yana Shostak's "A Minute of Scream", and Rufina Bazlova's cycle "The History of the Belarusian Vyzhyvanka" on the civic protests of 2020–2021;
- 2022, Białystok and Leipzig: "When the Sun Is Low, the Shadows Are Long", Arsenał Gallery (1 April – 12 May 2022 in Białystok, 10 June – 29 September 2022 in Leipzig);
- 2022, Poznań: "COALITION / Kaalicyja / Koalicja", Domie Gallery;
- 2023–2024, Poznań: a culturological club;
- 8 December 2023 – 7 January 2024, Poznań: "Białowieża Forest", Galeria Duża Scena UAP, within the PerspAKTIV project;
- 31 August 2024: "Art Afterlife", a discussion of the exhibition of the artist Ales Pushkin (1965–2023) at the Free Belarus Museum;
- 3 February – 29 May 2024, Berlin: "Sometimes I Hold On to the Air", co-curated by Uladzimir Hramovich, with the analytical group of the Belarusian Council for Culture;
- 2024, Poznań: the project "Dziady" of the KUT Foundation, with works by Artsiom Burak, Aliaksei Luniou and Siarhei Shabohin, Volha Arkhipava and Olek Jager, Yauhen Rahozin and Volha Stryzhniova;
- 2025, Berlin: a group exhibition with Siarhei Bialoki, Aliaksandr Belski, Razalina Busel, Aliaksandra Vialichka, Aliaksandr Kot-Zaitsau, Volha Savich and Varvara Sudnik, curated by Volha Arkhipava and Evelina Muraszkiewicz;

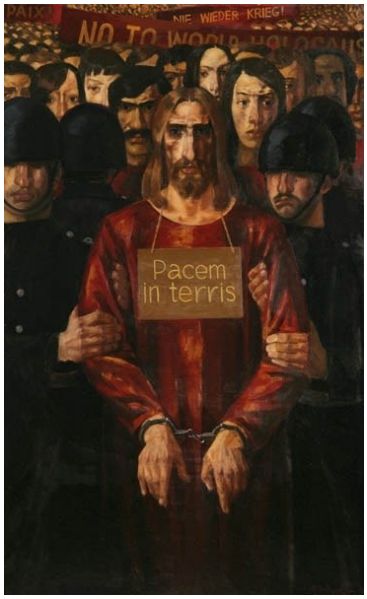
– 2025, Poznań: “Gold of Belarus”, with Aliaksandr Adamau, Sasha Vialichka, Aliaksei Luniou, Heorhi Minets, Raman Tratsiuk, Tsemra, Siarhei Shabohin and Olek Jager, conceived as a move “from the representation of ‘Belarus’ to the production of many different Belarusiannesses”;
– 2026: the Belarusian pavilion in Venice, curated by Daniela and Natallia Kaliada.

Documents of denial

One of the works discussed, Sasha Vialichka’s “State of Denial” (2023–2025), pairs photographs with short documentary texts about detentions in Belarus: for a round dance in Brest on 13 September 2020, in what became known as the “round-dance case”, the largest criminal case against demonstrators in Belarus; for prayer, when a well-known vascular surgeon in Hrodna went out into the street with an icon and a cross on 1 September 2020; and for speaking Belarusian, when a 65-year-old pensioner in Minsk was detained on 21 April 2021 after neighbours complained that he “irritated everyone with the Belarusian language”, and was sentenced to 15 days of arrest.



Mikhail Savitsky (1922–2010). Works shown in the new view on the artist’s centenary, 2021



Mikhail Savitsky (1922–2010). Works shown in the new view on the artist’s centenary, 2021



From work on an article about Zakhar Kudin (1986–2019): Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 190×300, National Art Museum of Belarus, and the film “Pure Art” by Maksim Shved, 2019



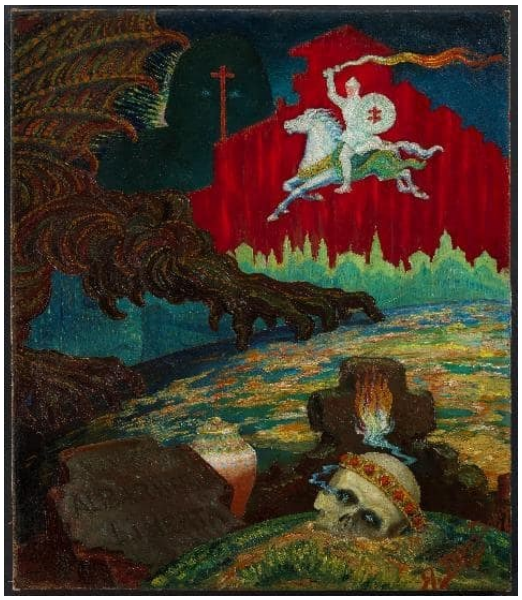
Yana Shostak, “A Minute of Scream”. Gray Mandorla Manifest, Poznań, 2022



Rufina Bazlova, from the cycle “The History of the Belarusian Vyzhyvanka”, on the civic protests of 2020–2021. Poznań, 2022



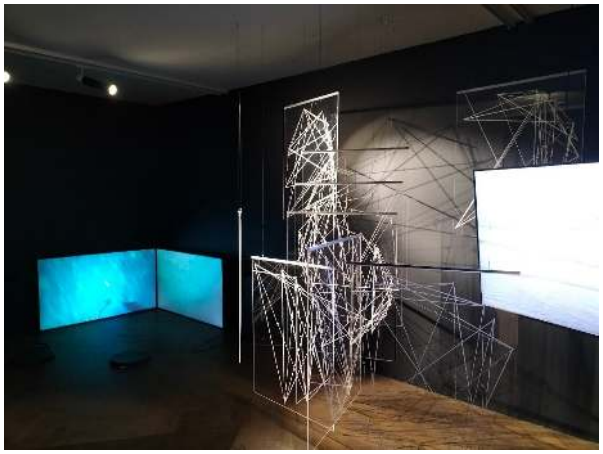
“When the Sun Is Low, the Shadows Are Long”, Arsenał Gallery, Białystok, 2022



“When the Sun Is Low, the Shadows Are Long”, Arsenał Gallery, Białystok, 2022



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“When the Sun Is Low, the Shadows Are Long”, Arsenał Gallery, Białystok, 2022



“COALITION / Kaalicyja / Koalicja”, Domie Gallery, Poznań, 2022



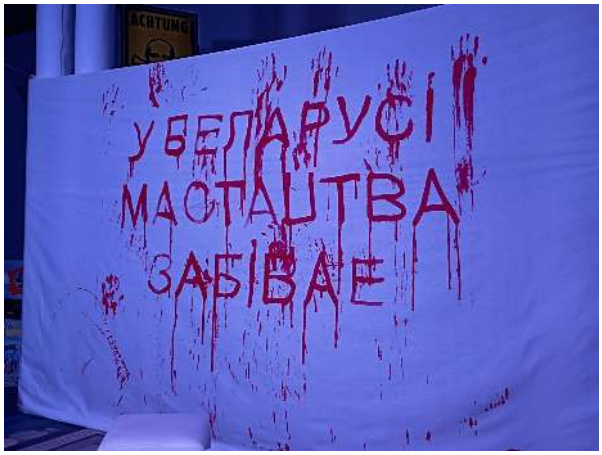
“COALITION / Kaalicyja / Koalicja”, Domie Gallery, Poznań, 2022



“Białowieża Forest”, PerspAKTIV project, Galeria Duża Scena UAP, Poznań, 2023–2024



“Białowieża Forest”, PerspAKTIV project, Galeria Duża Scena UAP, Poznań, 2023–2024



“Art Afterlife”: discussion of the exhibition of Ales Pushkin (1965–2023), Free Belarus Museum, 31 August 2024



“Sometimes I Hold On to the Air”, Berlin, 2024. Co-curator Uladzimir Hramovich



“Dziady” project, KUT Foundation, Poznań, 2024



Aliaksei Luniou, Siarhei Shabohin, from the series “Title Pages”, 2024. “Dziady”



Volha Arkhipava, Olek Jager, “Disunity”, 2024, mixed media. “Dziady”



Aliaksandr Belski, “Nemesis”, 2022, charcoal on canvas, 100×200. Berlin, 2025



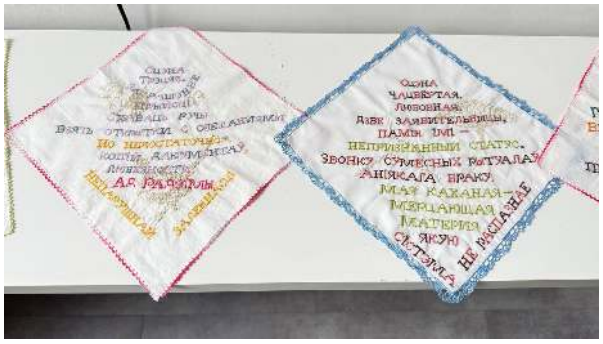
Volha Savich, “Alphabet of War”, 2015. Berlin, 2025



Siarhei Bialoki, “Twinkle Little Star”, 2023–2024. Berlin, 2025



Razalina Busel, “Solemn Reception”, 2024, installation from the project “Life in Suspension”. Berlin, 2025



Varvara Sudnik, “Servisas”, 2023, animation, embroidery. Berlin, 2025



Aliaksandr Adamau, “Europe, Welcome the Migrant!”, 2022. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Sasha Vialichka, “State of Denial”, 2023–2025, photo, print. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Heorhi Minets, object, 2025. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Daria Siamchuk / Tsemra, “Anthology of Constraint”, 2025. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Siarhei Shabohin, “Practices of Subordination: Flagpole (Bomb)”, 2012, photo banner. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Olek Jager. “Gold of Belarus”, 2025



Belarusian pavilion in Venice, 2026. Curators Daniela and Natallia Kaliada

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the author’s presentation, translated from Belarusian. Artists’ names are transliterated from Belarusian.

LITHUANIA

Discussing Violence: Repression against Belarusian Ethnographers in the Early 1930s as a Means of Scholarly Development in the Soviet Totalitarian System

Stsiapan Zakharkevich

Associate Professor, Academic Department of Humanities and Arts, European Humanities University, Vilnius

Presentation delivered at the conference. The text was not submitted for this publication.



BELARUS – LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)

Contemporary Practices and Approaches to the Use of Oral-History Testimonies in European Museum Exhibitions and Online Projects on Soviet Repressions as a Basis for the Renewed Concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Valieryja Charnamortsava
Independent researcher, graduate of the EHU Master's programme, creator of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Interactive exhibition "Tichá hrdinství" ("Quiet Heroism"), Paměť národa

The choice of topic

As it was impossible to create a real museum in Belarus, the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus (represii.net) was created in 2013. Its main exhibits are oral-history testimonies, but it needs to be renewed. The need to develop a renewed concept for the museum, based on contemporary European approaches and practices, determined the choice of topic for this Master's research, carried out within the programme "Development of Cultural Heritage" at the European Humanities University.

Relevance

Museums of communism and repression in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as the related online museum projects, very often use oral-history testimonies. With the rapid development of multimedia technologies, new possibilities have appeared, and new approaches and practices of using oral history in museum exhibitions are being applied. Most theoretical research on oral history in European museums, however, concerns the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Traumatic heritage and oral history in exhibitions

The review of literature, including Steffi de Jong's *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums* (2018), identified two main approaches to using oral history in a museum exhibition:

1. collecting oral-history testimonies in order to tell the stories of material artefacts, which remain the main exhibits;
2. using oral-history testimonies as the main exhibits, around which the exhibition is built.

The theoretical part of the research also examined the role of emotions in museums and the concept of the "virtual museum".

Case studies

The research was based on seven semi-structured interviews, conducted with a specially developed questionnaire, with the following museums and online projects:

- the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in Riga;
- the Katyn Museum in Warsaw;
- the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial (the former Stasi prison);
- the Museum of Communism in Prague;
- the Czech online project GULAG.cz;
- the Czech non-profit educational organisation Post Bellum, with its project Paměť národa ("Memory of Nations") and two interactive museum branches in Brno and Pardubice, based entirely on oral-history testimonies, which became the most interesting cases of the research.

In addition, the Sybir Memorial Museum in Białystok and the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn were studied. Online resources examined included the YouTube

channel of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, the Czech website Paměť národa and its exhibition "Tichá hrdinstvi" ("Quiet Heroism"), the virtual Gulag museum of GULAG.cz, the immersive virtual-reality tour of the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen prison and the website of the Sybir Memorial Museum.

Summary of contemporary approaches

So far, the main practice of using oral-history testimonies in museum exhibitions and online projects remains the display of so-called "talking heads" on screens or tablets with headphones. As the cases studied show, however, other ways of representing oral testimony with new technologies are spreading: 3D modelling, augmented and virtual reality, holograms, audio-light installations, and gamification in the form of quests and other immersive and participatory practices that draw visitors into action and allow them to experience personally the dramatic moments in the lives of witnesses of Soviet repression and other traumatic events of the past.

The round table

The practical part of the research was a round table that formulated important questions about the use of oral-history testimonies in museum exhibitions:

- the re-traumatisation of visitors in exhibitions devoted to Soviet repression;
- the ethics of using oral-history testimonies in museum exhibitions and online projects dealing with difficult heritage;
- the technical problems of using testimonies in exhibitions, and of processing them so that they are accessible to visitors of different ages and nationalities.

Conclusions

1. Contemporary museums and online projects in Eastern Europe dealing with Soviet repression seek to communicate with visitors through storytelling: personal stories transmitted through oral-history testimonies.

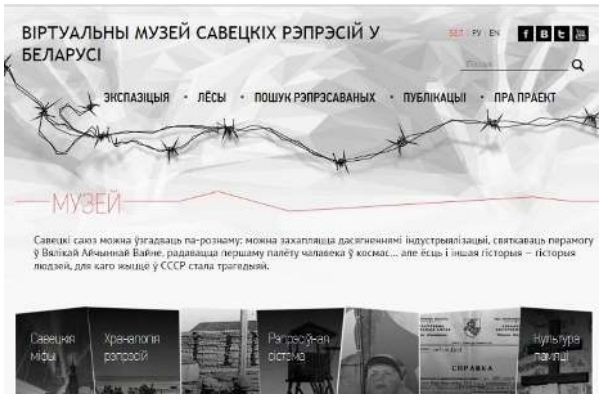
2. The most interesting contemporary approaches and practices in using oral testimony in museum exhibitions are connected with new technologies and with maximum interactivity, multimedia, immersion and participation, the involvement of visitors. These should be used in the renewed concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions.

The principle of the renewed concept

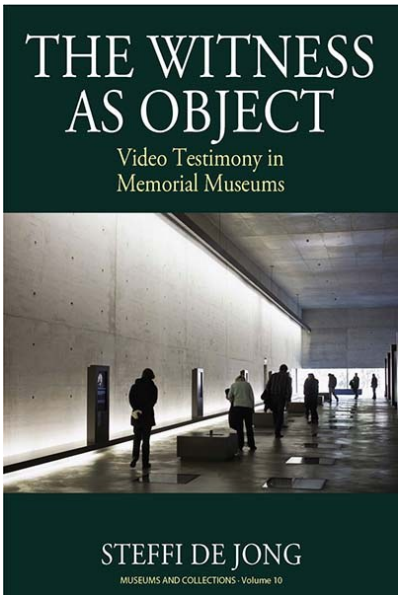
On the basis of this research, the principle of the renewed concept of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions has been formulated: it should be based on an interactive, immersive approach to potential online visitors, using virtual reality and artificial intelligence, with active use of gamification, quests of various kinds and surveys.

A quest-tour similar to the Czech case could be developed for a dedicated quest room, possibly in cooperation with Polish or Lithuanian thematic museums. There is also an idea for a temporary exhibition using oral history to compare Soviet-era repression in Belarus with the

repression of today, under the working title “GULAG = LuLAG”.



The Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus, represii.net



Steffi de Jong, “The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums”, 2018


Oral-history testimonies in the museums studied


Oral-history testimonies in the museums studied


Oral-history testimonies in the museums studied


Oral-history testimonies in the museums studied



The virtual Gulag museum of GULAG.cz



Immersive virtual-reality tour of the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen prison



“Tichá hrdinství” (“Quiet Heroism”), a new interactive exhibition, Brno



“Tichá hrdinství”, Brno and Pardubice



"Tichá hrdinství", Brno and Pardubice



Online round table "The Use of Oral History on Soviet Repressions in the Museums of Eastern Europe", 9 December 2024

Translated from Belarusian on the basis of the author's presentation.



LITHUANIA (DIASPORA)

Between the Archive and the Audience: Popularising Heritage

Ilia Magin

University of Tartu, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, PhD student; Vilnius Belarusian Museum

Zoska Veras and Zoja Koŭš. Photograph from the collection of Aliaksiej Aniščyk, 1981. Vilnius Belarusian Museum

Six persons

The presentation looked at the collections of the Vilnius Belarusian Museum (VBM) through the biographies of six people whose papers and photographs are kept there: Nadzieja Šnarkievič, Jazep Šnarkievič, Stanisłaŭ Stankievič, Janka Bahdanovič, Aliaksiej Aniščyk and Zoja Koŭš. Four of them taught in schools, four were held in Soviet camps, five published before the war and five were subjected to repression.

What has been written

The texts about these people fall into several groups: the archive itself, which offers a "thick description" of their lives; their own publications from the 1930s and the 1990s; obituaries; biographical articles in the media; local history articles; encyclopaedic entries; reference notes; interviews; podcasts; and research.

Some genres, however, are entirely missing: there is no monographic biography and no proper scholarly study of any of them. A chart of publications from 1990 to 2026 was compared with the coverage of well-known Belarusians: Drazdovič, Aliachnovič, Kit, Advažny, Astroŭski and Veras (according to the bibliographies of the National Library of Belarus, slounik.org and Wikipedia).

Sources and their paths

The author traced how biographical data travel from the archive to the public. Among the basic sources of biographical data is the article "Fräulein… from the Belarusian committee" in *Naša Niva* (1991, No. 4). Informal memoirs, for example a blog post preserved only through the Wayback Machine, can become a source in their own right. The 2006 dictionary contains entries on Nadzieja Šnarkievič and Alaiza Paškievič; the entry on Šnarkievič in *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms* (CEU Press, 2006) was written by Aleh Hardzijenka. Among the sources of the biographies are the "Biographies" by Zoska Veras, circulated in samizdat in the 1970s. The presentation also discussed the choice of languages for the Wikipedia article on Nadzieja Šnarkievič.

Recommendations

The presentation ended with three recommendations for museums working with such collections:

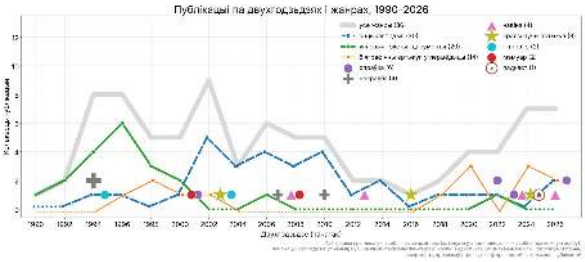
1. write the reference works themselves;
2. write reference works in English and other languages;
3. write the scholarly studies themselves.



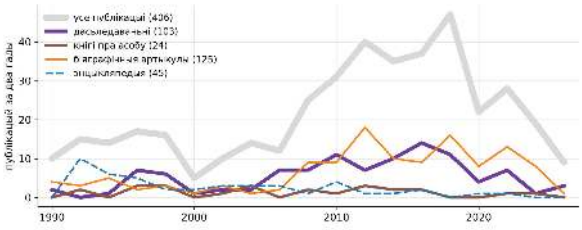





Six persons from the collections of the Vilnius Belarusian Museum: Nadzieja Šnarkievič, Jazep Šnarkievič, Stanisłaŭ Stankievič, Janka Bahdanovič, Aliaksiej Aniščyk, Zoja Koŭš



Publications about the six persons by genre, 1990–2026



Comparison with well-known Belarusians

SZNARKIEWICZ, Nadzieja (born Kaladzianka) (1897–1974)

Belarussian social and cultural activist, teacher and ethnographer. Co-founder (1931) of the *Ab'jadnanne belaruskih zhanchyn imya Alaizy Pashkievich* (Alaiza Pashkevich Belarussian Women's Organization); co-founder and editor-in-chief of the short-lived magazine *Zhanotskaya sprava* (Women's cause).

Nadzeja Kaladzianka was born on 30 September (12 October) 1897 in Brest. Her father died when she was seven years old, after which her mother moved with her to the village of Wostrawa near Kobryn, and then to Pruhzany. In 1914, Nadzeja graduated from Pruzhany women's gymnasium and, in 1919, after completing courses in pedagogy (the only post-secondary education course available to women in the Russian Empire), she qualified as a teacher. She had already been working as a teacher of boys and girls in Pruzhany County, in the years 1914 to 1915. By the summer of 1915, the ravages of World War I had left Nadzeja a refugee on the Russian Volga. In 1921, after she had returned home (in 1919), western Belarus was incorporated into Poland (in accordance with the Treaty of Riga) and the Belarussians, whose language had earlier been outlawed in the Russian Empire, became an ethnic minority in Poland. They were urged to switch to the Polish language under political (and often police)

Entry on Nadzieja Šnarkievič in "A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms", CEU Press, 2006



Nadzeja Sznarkiewicz in the English Wikipedia

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the author's presentation, translated from Belarusian.

V

DAY 2 | 9 OCTOBER 2026 | 14:00–15:30

Discussion panel

Free Belarus Museum: Memory of Unfreedom, Space for Freedom

Moderator: **Stsiapan Stureika**
Historian, researcher and cultural heritage expert, Associate Professor at the European Humanities University, Vilnius

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Hanna Zianovich

Museum in Exile as a Laboratory of Alternative Memory Culture: The Belarusian Experience in a European Perspective



Museum in Exile as a Laboratory of Alternative Memory Culture: The Belarusian Experience in a European Perspective

Hanna Zianovich

Topography of Terror, Berlin

Three questions

The presentation was built around three questions. In what way can a museum in exile influence the formation of an alternative culture of memory? What forms of working with memory developed by European museums can be productive for the Belarusian experience? And can a museum in exile become a space where the principles of a more responsible, dialogic Belarusian culture of memory are established, one capable in the future of incorporating diverse, including conflicting, experiences of the past?

The paradox of the museum in exile

A museum in exile is defined by a rupture: with territory, archives, state infrastructure, institutions and people. At the same time it works with an ongoing reality. Unlike many European post-totalitarian cases, the process is unfinished, and the work begins ahead of political change.

What does “alternative culture of memory” mean?

Official memory is a monologue, a single canon, a vertical memory. An alternative culture of memory means multiplicity of memory, dialogue and a conflict of interpretations, diverse voices and experiences, collective and civic memory. It is not an “alternative truth” in place of the official one, but a different principle of engaging with the past.

What does exile change?

Memory, archives and testimonies come to exist between different spaces. Severed from the country of origin, the museum acquires a different kind of legitimacy: trust is built through professionalism, community and international connections. Belarusian memory enters a European context and becomes transnational. The museum works without historical distance, between documenting and taking part, with an unfinished event. In a new environment memory changes, adapts and acquires new connections.

The Belarusian case: the museum as a laboratory

What do we keep? Materials of protest and repression, personal belongings, works of art, photographs, digital archives. What from today’s experience will become tomorrow’s cultural memory?

Whose voice? Activists, families, journalists, artists, migrants, former political prisoners, “non-heroic” experiences. Whom does the museum make visible, and whom does it leave out of the frame?

How do we connect? 2020, repression, the Soviet period, the national and democratic movement, independence, emigration. Is the museum able to see a long historical continuity?

The laboratory is not only a place of selection but also a place of self-reflection.

European perspectives as a counterpoint

Germany. A culture of memory takes a long time to form, and not solely through the state; civic initiatives and public discussion play a major role. The Topography of Terror in Berlin speaks not only about the victims but about the institutions, mechanisms and perpetrators of state violence. The lesson: memory cannot be integrated into society through a simple administrative decision.

Poland. Political transformation does not eliminate conflicts over memory, and the past can become a resource for political struggle. The POLIN Museum shows that trauma must not be allowed to swallow the whole history of a community. The lesson: pluralism does not emerge automatically after a change of regime.

The Baltic states. National renewal and the Europeanisation of memory can go hand in hand with new exclusions and controversies. At Vabamu in Tallinn the question is: who decides which object becomes a testimony of the era, and which story will be attached to it? The lesson: the national narrative also requires critical self-reflection.

Shared heritage. Does a shared European past exist? At the House of European History in Brussels, memory is interpreted not only within a national but within a transnational frame. The lesson for us is not the European narrative itself but the method: history organised not as the sum of national histories, but through shared processes, conflicts and mutual influences.

Three risks: how to avoid creating a new monologue?

Canonisation of 2020: the risk of reducing contemporary Belarusian memory to a single event and a single experience.

Heroisation: powerful stories easily displace fear, silence, compromise and moral ambiguity.

A new monopoly on memory: an alternative narrative may itself begin to claim the status of the only correct one.

Not a waiting room, but a space for experiment

The institutionalisation of Belarusian memory is already taking place in exile. A museum in exile is not a “waiting room” until the return, but a space for experimentation. Being “alternative” is not merely opposition to the official narrative, but a principle of pluralism and critical inquiry.

European experience shows that a political turning point does not, in itself, create a dialogic culture of memory. Will a museum in exile be able to create a culture in which society is ready to listen not to one, but to many stories about its own past?



POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw



Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom, Tallinn



House of European History, Brussels

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the bilingual presentation.

VI

DAY 2 | 9 OCTOBER 2026 | 16:00–17:00

Presentation panel

Museums, Refugees and Community Participation

Judith Depaule FRANCE

Supporting Artists in Exile in France: A Look Back at 10 Years of Experience

Rob Sharp UNITED KINGDOM

REFUGE Project: Refugee Participation, Shared Authority and Participatory Museum Practice

FRANCE

Supporting Artists in Exile in France: A Look Back at 10 Years of Experience

Judith Depaule

Founder and Director of l'atelier des artistes en exil

Why artists in exile

By the very nature of their profession, artists are particularly exposed during times of global crisis, including censorship, conflict and persecution. The atelier des artistes en exil (aa-e) aims to identify and support artists in exile of all origins and disciplines, responding to their individual situations and needs. Since its founding in 2017, the aa-e has supported 956 exiled artists from 50 different countries.

What the aa-e is

- Reception and work spaces in Marseille (482 m^2) and Paris (1,150 m^2).
- Legal, social, linguistic and professional support over three years.
- A permanent team focused on access to rights, autonomy, and understanding the French administrative and cultural system.

Becoming a member

To become an artist member of the aa-e, applicants must have been living in France for less than five years, demonstrate an active artistic practice, be in danger in their country of origin or country of residence, and plan to settle in France long-term.

Key figures for 2025

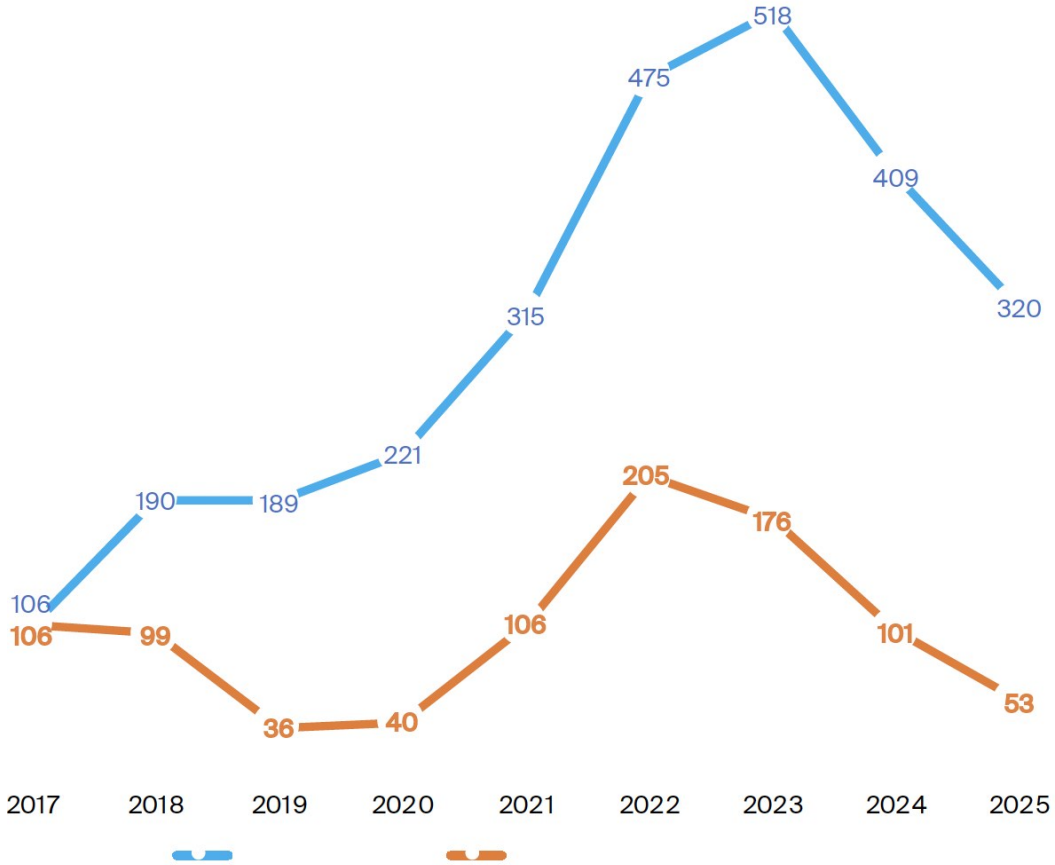
In 2025 the aa-e had 310 artist members, with an average age of 37; 45% were women and 55% men. 44% work in the visual arts, 17% in film, 17% in music, 17% in the performing arts and 5% in literature. The artists come from 34 countries, including Iran, Palestine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Russia and Ukraine.

Learning French through art

French as a foreign language (FLE) classes aligned with the CEFR, exhibition visits, original teaching resources and artistic practices.

Career guidance

Group training sessions to help artists understand how the system works; one-to-one meetings; workspaces for all disciplines; a programme of cultural events; and art workshops led by artists in exile, for all audiences.



Total members and new members of the aa-e, 2017–2025

Text prepared by the editors on the basis of the author's presentation. More information: aa-e.org

UNITED KINGDOM

REFUGE Project: Refugee Participation, Shared Authority and Participatory Museum Practice

Rob Sharp
University of Sussex, REFUGE project

This presentation draws on REFUGE: Codifying Refugee Participation, an AHRC-funded project examining how museums, galleries and other cultural institutions can work more meaningfully with refugees and forcibly displaced people. Developed through workshops involving cultural practitioners, researchers and people with lived experience of displacement, REFUGE explored both the possibilities of participatory practice and the institutional conditions that frequently constrain it.

Voice is not recognition

Museums often promise to "give voice" to communities affected by violence, repression and displacement. Yet voice alone does not guarantee recognition. Testimony may be collected without participants gaining meaningful influence over how their experiences are interpreted, contextualised or publicly represented. Participation can consequently reproduce unequal relationships even when it is intended to challenge them.

Sharing curatorial authority

Drawing on examples from UK institutions, including the Imperial War Museum, the Migration Museum, the Whitworth and North East Museums, the presentation considers the practical and ethical questions involved in sharing curatorial authority. Who defines the purpose of participation? At what stage are displaced people involved? Who controls the resulting narratives and materials? How should institutions respond when individual testimony complicates an established national or institutional story?

From consultation to shared decision-making

The presentation distinguishes between consultation, contribution, collaboration and shared decision-making, while recognising the constraints under which museums operate. It argues that meaningful participation requires more than the inclusion of personal stories: it depends on sustained relationships, appropriate resources, transparency about institutional power and a willingness to accommodate disagreement.

An open conversation

Rather than presenting the British experience as a model to be transferred, the paper uses REFUGE to open a conversation about the future representation of repression, resistance and displacement in museums. It asks how institutions emerging from authoritarianism might preserve difficult memories without fixing those affected by violence into a single identity of victimhood, and how museums might become spaces not only of commemoration, but of recognition, civic participation and continuing debate.

Index of speakers and moderators

Volha Arkhipava BELARUS – POLAND (DIASPORA) 89
Cultural studies scholar, former research fellow at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus

Andrei Arkhipenka BELARUS – TAIWAN – POLAND (DIASPORA) 37
Belarus–Taiwan and East Asia Platform, founder of the initiative and researcher

Virgiliu Birladeanu MOLDOVA 22
National Museum of History of Moldova; Institute of History, Moldova State University

Valieryja Charnamortsava BELARUS – LITHUANIA (DIASPORA) 98
Independent researcher, graduate of the EHU Master's programme, creator of the Virtual Museum of Soviet Repressions in Belarus

Ludmila Cojocaru MOLDOVA 22
National Museum of History of Moldova; Institute of History, Moldova State University

Judith Depaule FRANCE 113
Founder and Director of l'atelier des artistes en exil

Stefan Donth GERMANY 70
Head of the Department of Memorial Sites and Remembrance Culture, Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Germany

Evita Feldentāle LATVIA 34
Head of the Audiovisual Archive, Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

Anna Gataleta ITALY 62
Academy of Fine Arts of Macerata, postgraduate student

Anna Gavina POLAND 50
President of the Management Board, Memorial Poland

Kristiane Janeke GERMANY 71
Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences (ZMSBw)

Paweł Kalisz POLAND 76
Sybir Memorial Museum, Białystok

Mykhailo Kostiv UKRAINE 59
National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, Head of the Department for Research on Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes

Bozhena Kozakevych POLAND 75
German-Polish House, Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Poznań

Ilia Magin LITHUANIA (DIASPORA) 104
University of Tartu, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, PhD student; Vilnius Belarusian Museum

Shalala Mammadova AZERBAIJAN – UNITED KINGDOM (DIASPORA) 54
Independent researcher

András Mink POLAND 15
Blinken OSA Archivum at Central European University

Enriketa Papa Pandelejmoni ALBANIA 16
University of Tirana

Klára Pinerová CZECH REPUBLIC 10
Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Liisi Ploom ESTONIA 28
Head of Collections, Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom

Rob Sharp UNITED KINGDOM 116
University of Sussex, REFUGE project

Bartłomiej Sokołowski POLAND 53
Museum of Independence in Warsaw

Ala Stashkevich 27
Moderator. Independent expert in museology and cultural heritage

Stsiapan Stureika 88, 107
Moderator. Historian, researcher and cultural heritage expert, Associate Professor at the European Humanities University, Vilnius

Pavel Tserashkovich 9
Moderator. Historian, cultural anthropologist and adviser to the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on education and science

Paulina Vitushchanka LITHUANIA (DIASPORA) 46
Curator, Vilnius Belarusian Museum named after I. Luckievič

Joanna Wawrzyniak 69
Moderator. University of Warsaw, Centre for Research on Social Memory

Zofia Wóycicka POLAND 52
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