

Russia as a Significant Other in Latvian Regional Museums: New Mental Borders and Cultural Exclusion

Lidia S. Zhirnova

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia. Email: [l.zhirnova\[at\]inno.mgimo.ru](mailto:l.zhirnova[at]inno.mgimo.ru)

Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a massive redefining of borders, formal as well as mental. Latvia was among those countries that needed to reshape their identity, and its elite opted for distancing the country from Russia and the Soviet past. The article studies how this approach is reflected in 32 local history museums around Latvia. Many of their collections were formed in the Soviet times, and now museums have to redescribe them in accordance with the new ideological framework of “two occupations”. The study presents an initial classification of museums according to their scope. The article highlights the underrepresentation of the Russian language in the texts of exhibitions despite a considerable share of the Russian-speaking population. The main connotations with Russia are singled out, the most emotional of them being the narrative of the “Soviet occupation” and deportations, that was excluded from the public discourse in the Soviet times, and now is re-actualized. Three strategies of dealing with the Soviet past within the framework of museums are described: leaving Soviet items without a consistent narrative, pushing this topic to the margins of the exhibition and rewriting the Soviet discourse in complete accordance with the new ideological framework.

Keywords

National Identity; Spatial Identity; Mental Border; Constructivism; Discourse Analysis; Museums; Latvia; Russia; USSR; Significant Other



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Россия как значимый Другой в латвийских региональных музеях: новые ментальные границы и культурное отчуждение

Жирнова Лидия Сергеевна

МГИМО МИД России. Москва, Россия. Email: l.zhirnova@jinno.mgimo.ru

Аннотация

Распад Советского Союза вызвал серьезное изменение границ, как формальных, так и ментальных. Латвия была одной из тех стран, которым пришлось переформулировать свою идентичность, и латвийская элита сделала ставку на дистанцирование от России и советского прошлого. В данной статье рассматривается воплощение этой стратегии в 32 краеведческих музеях по всей Латвии. Многие из их коллекций были сформированы в советское время, и теперь музеи должны переописать их в соответствии с новой идеологической рамкой «двух оккупаций». Исследование предлагает базовую классификацию музеев в соответствии с охватом их экспозиций. Подчеркивается недостаточная представленность русского языка в сопроводительных текстах с учётом значительной доли русскоязычного населения. Выделяются основные коннотации, связанные с Россией. Наиболее нагружены в эмоциональном плане описания «советской оккупации» и депортаций, которые в советский период исключались из общественного обсуждения, а теперь актуализированы. В статье описываются три стратегии рассказа о советском прошлом в региональных музеях: оставление предметов советской эпохи без последовательного нарратива, вытеснение этой тематики на периферию экспозиции и полное переописание дискурса об СССР в соответствии с новой идеологической рамкой.

Ключевые слова

национальная идентичность; пространственная идентичность; ментальная граница; конструктивизм; дискурс-анализ; музеи; Латвия; Россия; СССР; значимый Другой



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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought into existence new borders in Europe, formal as well as mental. It has taken decades to demarcate formal borders, and this task is far from completion. As for the mental borders between states and nations, their reshaping continues due to their increased flexibility.

All the above-mentioned is true for Latvia. After obtaining independence its elite chose a resolute Euro-Atlantic course and started shaping a new identity for the country based on alienating the Soviet past as well as contemporary Russia and striving to be an integral part of the Western community. Russia has become one of the main significant Others for Latvia, indispensable for forging a new understanding of what Latvia is. The demarcation of formal borders between the two countries was finished in 2017 (Latvia and Russia sign final documents..., 2017), but mental borders are still in motion, and the distancing from Russia is going on.

Historical narratives are central to this process, and history museums play a key role in preserving and promoting them. The discourse of “two occupations” – the Soviet and the Nazi German – has become prevalent in the Latvian public sphere, with the “Soviet occupation” considered worse as it lasted much longer (first from 1940 to 1941, then from 1945 to 1991) and had a lasting transformation impact on the society. This approach is most vividly reflected in the display of a special museum – Museum of the Occupation of Latvia – that was created in 1993 in order to consolidate and enrich the corresponding discourse (the emphasis on the “Soviet Occupation” can be witnessed both in the collection of the museum and on its website). The institution is private, but it is a key actor and a reference point in all the public discussion on this matter. For instance, it has become traditional for high-ranking officials and diplomats from other countries to visit the museum.

However, the focus of this study is not the Museum of the Occupation, but local history museums in various parts of the country. Most of their collections were gathered in the Soviet times and were initially arranged in accordance with the Soviet ideological settings. After the restoration of independence these museums faced the necessity to overcome the inertia of the collections, reshape their displays and reformulate the message of their exhibitions. The aim of the study is to describe the way Russia and the Soviet Union are represented in local history museums in Latvia, to define strategies employed by the museums in order to bring the display in line with the prevalent ideology and to assess how successful this transformation has been. For these purposes, 32 museums all around Latvia were visited in the years 2016-2017, their collections were studied, photographed, and later analyzed and compared.

The present study is a part of a more ambitious effort to assess the spatial positioning of Latvia. Studying local museums helps to define regional cleavages in understanding the place of Latvia in the world and the country's attitude



to the eastern neighbour, and further analysis of geopolitical caricatures in national newspapers is meant to highlight social cleavages in this regard (Zhirnova, 2021).

The topicality of this research lies in deepening the knowledge of the shaping of national identity as well as in clarifying how Russia is viewed in a neighbouring country with a large Russian-speaking population, which is important taking into account the Russian policy of supporting compatriots abroad.

Literature review

For many decades museums have attracted attention of researchers from various fields, primarily history and theories of culture. A specific discipline of museology started to form as early as in the end of the 19th century. The first *Journal of Museology and Antiquarianism as well as related sciences* [*Zeitschrift für Museologie und Antiquitätenkunde sowie verwandte Wissenschaften*] was established in 1878 by J. G. T. Grässe, a famous German cultural historian and the director of the Green Vault in Dresden. In 1883, Johann Grässe published an article *Museology as a Science* [*Die Museologie als Fachwissenschaft*], where he stated that by that time museums in Europe had evolved from “cabinets of curiosities” to full-fledged institutions, so there was a need to study them in the framework of a separate discipline.

It was not easy for museology to overcome skepticism and to get rid of the label of a “Continental eccentricity” (Vinoš, 1995, p. 8). However, by the present moment it has evolved to cover a vast number of topics, starting from rather traditional research of the history of museums, their organization and social role, to interdisciplinary research of the way people interact with the surrounding reality through documenting and objectifying it (Popadić, 2020, p. 7). One can find extensive overviews of museological theory (Soares, 2019) as well as analysis of its development (Biedermann, 2016).

In Russia, museology has also been developing in many directions. The first comprehensive handbook on museology in Russia came into being in 2003 (Jureneva). It covers theoretical foundations of the discipline as well as the methods of the museum work. Elaborating on the philosophy of museology, M. Piotrovsky (2006, p. 7) claims that research and education in this sphere cannot be purely theoretical and should be closely linked to practice, that is, to functioning of modern museums. Some researchers focus on the history of museums; for instance, Gritskevich (2007) systemizes early history of museums in various parts of the world and overviews the historiography of museology. There is a number of applied research publications on various aspects of museology, for example, preservation and scientific description of archaeological collections (Vorobyova, 2019).

Within the framework of social sciences, museums represent invaluable material for identity studies. The notion of heterotopy (Greek, “different spaces”) is relevant in this regard. The term was introduced by French philosopher Paul-Michel Foucault in 1966-1967 to describe a vast variety of *topoi* that represent, challenge,

and renounce at the same time. As Foucault states in his essay “Of Other Spaces” (1967, p. 335), heterotopias are symbolically separated from other places and simultaneously can include objects from other spaces and times rewriting their meaning based on the rules of heterotopia itself. This notion can describe many various leeways including cemeteries, libraries, ships, bars, fairs – and museums. In case of museums the concept of heterotopia is of special interest, because here we deal with including evidence of various epochs and regions into one place and rewriting not just words, but the meaning of objects. As N. Rudenko proves (Rudenko, 2015), not only does heterotopia help to explain the functioning of a museum as a socio-cultural space, but also vice versa – the empirical study of museums allows to grasp an ambivalent nature of heterotopias through analyzing the process of redescribing attributes of things when they get into the museum space. Besides, heterotopia helps to underline the temporal aspect of museums that accumulate not just various spaces, but also time in the form of stories, memories, images and objects (Kulkina, 2018, p. 27).

The present article is devoted to the image of Russia as a significant Other in Latvian local history museum exhibitions. Political scientists took the concept of Other from sociology, particularly, symbolic interactionism that analyses the role of significant Others in the shaping of the self. In order to grasp the main idea behind the concept, one needs to get a basic understanding of how it developed in sociology. Mead (1965 [1934], p. 204) stated that “me” was created by social relationships and reflected the attitudes of others. Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 170) view the development of the self as “a dialectic between identification by others and self-identification”. In this regard, significant Others play a key role in self-definition and reality maintenance, they are vital “for ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity”. Significant Others are named “principal agents”, whereas “less significant others” serve “as a sort of chorus” (Ibid.). Symbolic interactionists prioritize not objective structures, but subjective meaning created in the process of interaction with Others. Lately these ideas found application not only in self- and identity studies, but also in a number of adjacent fields including theories of culture, gender and status studies, research of collective behaviour and social movements as well as social context and the environment (Carter, Fuller, 2016).

Cultural and political geographers try to find out why there is a need for the Other and how it influences national identity. According to Eriksen, group identity is based not only on inner concord and shared culture, but also on opposing others. The researcher describes two regimes of identification – one based on we-hood and the other on us-hood. The latter is based on opposing an external agent – either a real or an imaginary adversary (Eriksen, 1995, p. 427). As a rule, a prevailing identity comes to the fore among a variety of identities. In case of Latvia the most important cleavage lies between Latvians and the Russian-speaking population, so ethnic variety is basically reduced to this binary scheme.



Another issue drawing the attention of the researchers is whether there is a way to shape a collective identity without the Other. Some believe that the relations with the Other need to be confrontational (Schmitt, 1996), others claim that there is no need for an antagonistic Other while forging a collective identity (Abizadeh, 2005, p.45). Abizadeh points out that the definition of the Other is always unclear and fluid, but when the Other is defined on a map as a region or a country, the vagueness partially goes away.

Johnson and Coleman (2012, p. 110) state that an internal Other can be as important as an external in forging national identity. In case of Latvia the antagonism with an external Other – Russia – is enhanced by the internal cleavage between the Latvian and the Russian-speaking population. These two Others are often connected in the Latvian public discourse: Russian-speaking population is depicted as a dangerous fifth column of Russia that does not want to integrate into Latvian society. In spatial terms, the region of “otherness” in Latvia is Latgale – a region with a large non-Latvian population that borders on Russia and Belarus. Riga is also often viewed as representing internal Other as most of its population speak Russian at home.

A number of studies view Latvian identity as the one based on countering Russia; consider, for example, the recent article by D. Kazarinova and N. Dunamalyan (2022) who classify post-Soviet national identities. Based on the analysis of memory and symbolic policy of post-Soviet states, they assign Latvia as well as other Baltic states, also Ukraine and Georgia to the group of those creating an anti-imperial, anti-Russian identity based on “returning into Europe”.

The present study is different from the previous works in this field because it focuses on the case of Latvia and bases research on the empirical data gathered from the local history museums around the country, which helps to define regional differences in representing the significant Other – Russia – and Latvia itself.

An interesting example of a similar approach – studying the image of Russia in the museums of a neighbouring country – is an article by E. Popravko (2019) based on the materials from Chinese museums. As it is in the present study, the representation of Russia is not separated from that of the USSR: in the Latvian public and historical discourse these two identities are also closely linked.

As far as analyzing museum displays is concerned, it is important to mention the theory of the Cultural Exclusion and Frontier Zones that focuses not on that which is said and shown, but on that which is silenced and left out of discourse (Ulrich, Troitsky, 2019, p. 245). In case of Latvia, the issue of silencing is of importance in two ways. On the one hand, in Soviet times when most of the collections of local history museums were formed, the topic of Soviet repressions and deportation was excluded from them despite the scale of these tragic events in the history of many Latvian families. Since independence was gained, these painful topics are re-actualized and brought to the fore in many museum displays. On the other hand, the Soviet era that was hailed in Soviet museums is now rewritten as

the “Soviet occupation”, and all the positive memories about that period are left out of the scope of museum exhibitions forming a new exclusion zone.

Methodology

The conceptual framework of this study is set by constructivism in nation-building and international relations. According to the constructivist paradigm, nations and nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century appeared as a result of conscious construction (and sometimes fabrication) by governing classes, especially if we take Europe (Cahan, 2019, p. 479). The methodology is based on discourse analysis, where narratives are not only texts, but the whole display of the museum, including items and even setting of the exhibition. The idea behind discourse analysis is that the narrative is structured in accordance with certain patterns that need to be analyzed to understand the researched subject, in this case, the national identity (Jorgensen, Phillips, 2002, p. 1-2).

Museum exhibitions as an object of study have several peculiarities. They represent a very heterogeneous material for discourse analysis: not only texts, but also objects, pictures, maps. The overall set-up of the exhibition is important as well. Such a variety of materials makes it hard to codify and interpret them. Besides, museums differ by the size and the scope of their collections, which makes it difficult to bring them to one denominator. Another specific trait of the museums is their inertia: despite cardinal changes in the Latvian politics and nation-building in the early 1990s, many museums retained most of their collections gathered in the Soviet times and had to rewrite the meaning of many objects in accordance with the new political and social reality.

The material was gathered in local history museums in 32 cities and towns around Latvia: Aizkraukle, Aizpute, Aluksne, Balvi, Bauska, Valka, Valmiera, Ventspils, Viesīte, Vilaka, Gulbene, Daugavpils, Dobele, Jekabpils, Jelgava, Kraslava, Kuldīga, Liepāja, Limbazi, Madona, Mālpils, Ogrē, Rēzekne, Rundāle, Saldus, Talsi, Tervete, Tukums, Turaida, Cēsis, Jaunpils, Jūrmala. These museums were chosen because they focus on local history, not on art or some personality, and are situated in various regions all around Latvia, which helps to define regional differences in the representation of Russia.

Riga was left out of the scope of the study for a number of reasons. First, as a capital, it tends to represent the whole country, not just one city, which contradicts with the task of defining the regional differences. Secondly, it hosts a number of museums dealing with history including National History Museum, the National Museum of Natural History, the Ethnographic Museum, the Museum of Occupation, and the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation (the latter puts an emphasis on the history of shipping and the development of Riga and Latvia in this regard). Such a concentration of history museums and the scale of their collections makes it difficult to define the discourse specific for Riga).

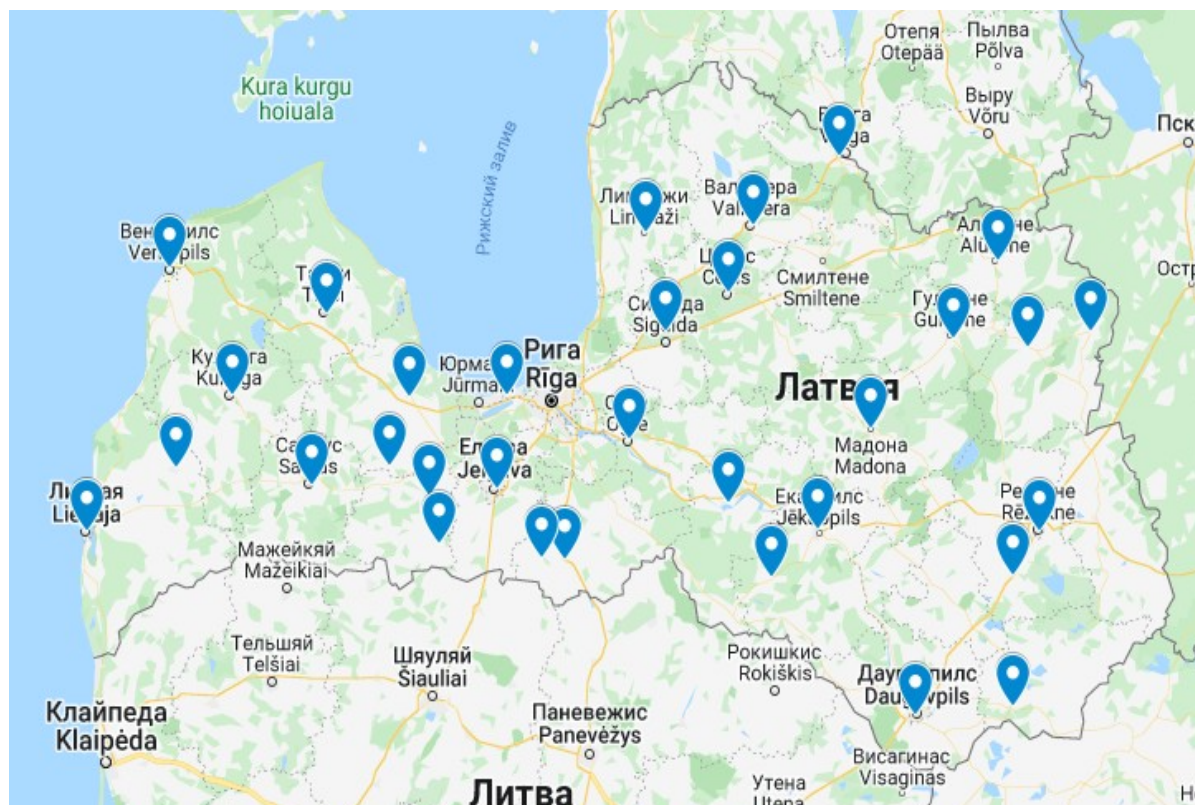


Fig. 1. Regional history museums analysed in the present article. Google Maps Screenshot.

Latvian museums were visited and photographed in 2016-2017, so the study captures the content of exhibitions for that point in time. Museum displays were analyzed to define the main contexts of mentioning Russia (the USSR, the Russian Empire) and describe its overall representation. The present article focuses on the initial analysis of the classification of the museums based on their content and scale, the analysis of the languages of the exhibitions and the main topics associated with Russia. Three cases representing three various strategies of dealing with the Soviet past are discussed more closely: that is the Balvi Regional Museum, the Aizkraukle History and Art Museum and the Liepaja Museum.

Local history museums: topics, languages and the representation of Russia

Most of the studied museums (21 out of 32) present a multifaceted exhibition covering many epochs and spheres of social, political and economic life. Such kind of approach based on a chronological tale of the local history was typical of Soviet museums, and it still prevails. However, it is possible to single out other key topics that are either combined with or substitute with a multifaceted chronological report. Many museums (namely, 9) explain local history through personal history, for example, that of the family who owned the corresponding estate (as in Gulbene), or focusing on key events of a person's life (christening, confirmation, wedding, burial) and the traditions around those in various epochs (as in Kuldiga).

Some museums (5) offer an exhibition concerning the ethnic history of the region; the main display in Kraslava, for instance, is built around five main ethnic groups living there, and in Turaída visitors can find a separate and rather extensive exhibition on livs. Four of the studied museums are based on romanticizing the traditional life of Latvians, among them a museum in Tervete. In four cases the exhibition is built around a certain aspect of the life of the city, for instance, in Jurmala it is the development of the resort and in Madona – the stories of the main buildings. Finally, three museums focus on the industrial history of the town, for instance, the vivid tail of the narrow-gauge railroad is the heart of the exhibition on Viesīte.

The attitude to Russia and the desire to distance from the Soviet past is reflected in the usage of languages for the texts accompanying exhibitions. The most widespread language of such texts after Latvian is English, despite the fact that Russian is the mother tongue of one third of the permanent inhabitants of Latvia. That shows that some exhibitions are more suited to the needs of English-speaking tourists than of Russian-speaking locals (or Russian-speaking tourists that had been numerous prior to the pandemic). At the same time, exhibit items in Russian, such as documents, money, maps, can be found in almost every museum, and they represent not only the Soviet period, but also the times of the Russian Empire. That creates a curious paradox, when a visitor sees many items with Russian words, but can read about them only in Latvian or in English. As for exhibit items in English, they are quite rare.

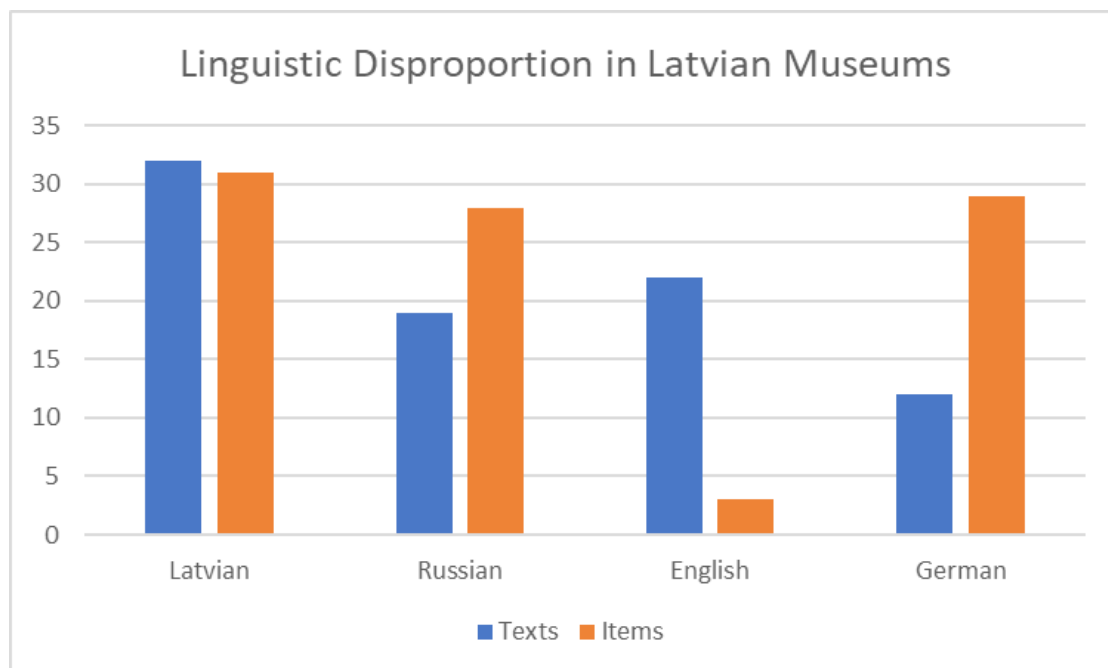


Fig. 2. Linguistic disproportion between texts and exhibit items in Latvian local history museums



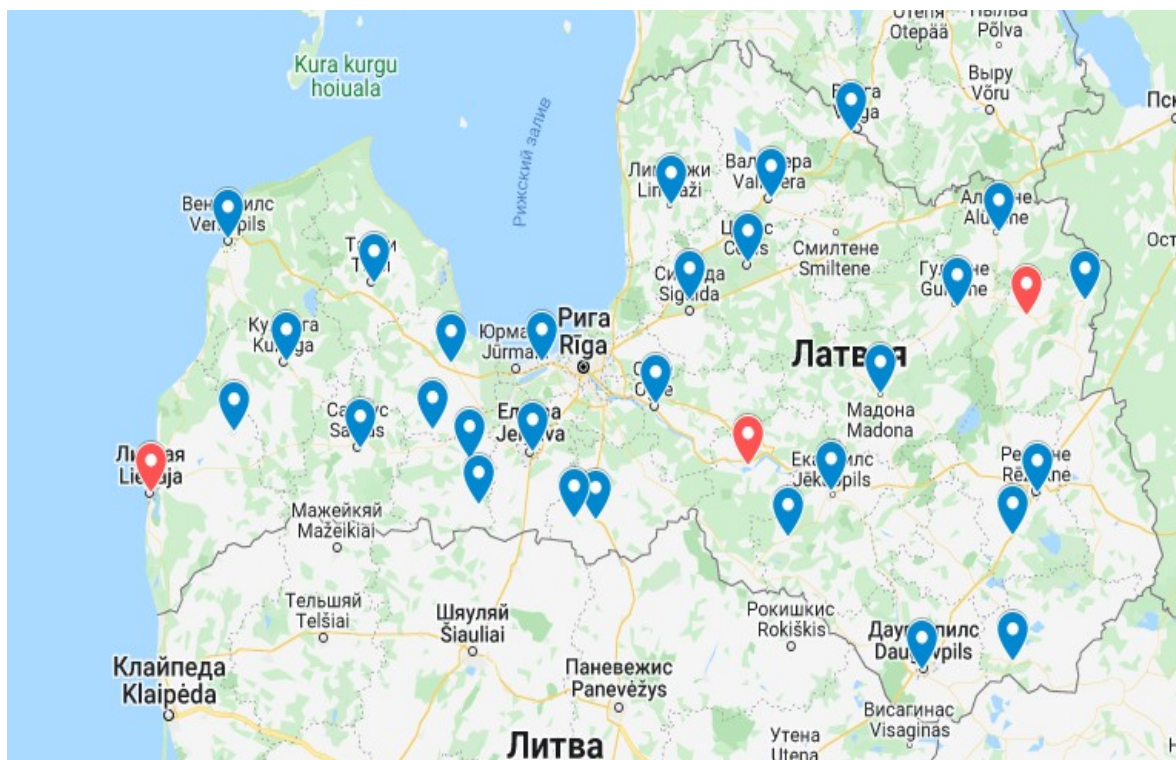
Russia is mentioned in almost every museum, which is not surprising given close ties since the early ages and the fact that Latvia was a part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. As for the main connotations in which Russia is mentioned, the most widespread context concerns the questions of administration, for instance, of how the town was governed in the Russian empire. The second most common connotation is war, including medieval wars such as the Livonian war and more recent World War I and II. The display of money and symbols of the Russian Empire and the USSR is quite common. A number of museums emphasize the role of the Eastern neighbour as the trade partner. In case of the Russian Empire, several exhibitions show how Latvians went to Saint Petersburg and other Russian cities in pursuit of a career. In case of the Soviet Union, many displays tell about industrialization.

However, the most emotional (although not omnipresent) representations of Russia are connected with the “Soviet occupation” and the deportations in 1941 and 1949. It has to do with the fact that, for decades, these tragic events remained in the cultural exclusion zone, were silenced and stigmatized. After the independence obtained, the situation inverted: positive memories about the Soviet past were stigmatized, whereas memories of deportations and repressions were not just allowed, but brought to the fore and became the mainstream in the discourse about the Soviet past. That is reflected in local history museums as well.

Case Studies: Aizkraukle, Balvi, Liepaja

In order to illustrate the abovementioned theses, let us examine three cases more closely: the Aizkraukle History and Art Museum, the Balvi Regional Museum and the Liepaja Museum. These museums are chosen because they are situated in different parts of Latvia and represent different strategies in dealing with the Soviet legacy. Besides, all three cities remained regional centers after the 2021 administrative territorial reform that considerably reduced the number of the municipalities of the first order.

Aizkraukle is a regional center in Vidzeme, in the middle of Latvia. Although people have lived in this area since ancient times, the modern city came into being only in the Soviet times, in 1967, when Plavinas Hydroelectric Power Plant was built. The city was initially named after Soviet and Latvian politician Peteris Stucka, who was the head of the first Soviet Latvian government back in 1918-1920. That means that, after the independence gained, museum had to distance itself not just from the Soviet past, but from the era that brought the city into being.



**Fig. 3. Museums for the case study (from left to right):
Liepāja, Aizkraukle, Balvi. Google Maps Screenshot**

The contradiction between the initial collection of the museum and a new political reality was reflected in the display a visitor could view in 2017. One part of the exposition was devoted to the pre-industrial past which was considerably romanticized. The display gave a detailed depiction of architectural values and magnificent landscapes ruined by the building of the Plavinas Hydroelectric Power Plant, the largest in the Baltic states. The exhibition is introduced by the text emphasizing the key role of Daugava for Latvians and their destiny and the dramatic changes of the 20th century when many elements of the cultural and natural heritage were eliminated.

The second part of the exhibition was devoted to the Soviet period and was much less consistent. It included many items of the epoch with short explanations: personal belongings, documents, photos, products, instruments of the builders of the power plant – things showing the course of industrialization and daily routine of the Soviet people. However, it lacked conclusive narrative. There was no mentioning of the “Soviet occupation” or deportation. All in all, the contradiction between the two parts of the exhibition created tension, as the process of re-description of the Soviet items was far from over. This is a typical situation for many museums, when Soviet exhibit items are left in the narrative limbo. Nowadays, the museum in Aizkraukle has expanded and the Soviet exposition has been moved to a separate building.



The Balvi Regional Museum represents another strategy of redescribing the Soviet past. Balvi is a city in Latgale not far from the Russian border. Latgale is an internal Other for Latvia, a region that is culturally, ethnically, religiously distinct and is often deemed disloyal and economically backward.

The museum in Balvi has been recently rebuilt and upgraded with the use of modern technologies. The logic of the exposition is built not around chronological tale of the past, but around various traditional arts such as singing, dancing, embroidery. The narrative is based on the romantization of traditional culture and the creative potential of Latvian people. History of the Soviet period is told in accordance with the “occupation” narrative with special emphasis on national guerilla fighters that were active in the region till 1950s. The exposition includes regrets about the loss of Abrene (modern Pytalovo), the city transferred to Soviet Russia in 1944. However, the representation of the Soviet period is not exclusively hostile. For instance, part of the exposition is devoted to the personal history of honorary citizens, including those who acquired this title in the Soviet times for the fight against Nazis in World War II. To sum up, Balvi is an example of pushing the historical narrative to the margins of the exposition and focusing on some other issues, such as traditional culture.

The third strategy is represented by Liepaja Museum, the largest museum in Kurzeme. Here the tale of the Soviet Latvia is represented in a separate building under the title “Liepaja under Occupation Regimes”. This department functions under the auspice of the Latvian SS Legion veterans’ organization Daugavas vanagi, the Soviet Army veterans’ organization Latvian Riflemen Union and the Liepaja Club of Political Repression Victims. The exhibition is set up in accordance with the doctrine of “two occupations”, and more attention is paid to the “Soviet occupation” that is viewed as a period of violence and devaluation of basic human values. Much is told about deportations and the tough life in GULAG, about the fight of national guerilla, coercive collectivization and eventual movement for the restoration of independence (Atmoda). The Liepaja Museum shows the strategy of redescribing the past to the maximum.

Conclusion

The study presents an initial classification of local history museums and highlights three strategies of redefining the Soviet past in local history museums: leaving Soviet items without a consistent narrative (Aizkraukle), setting out a new ideological framework while pushing the Soviet period out of the scope of attention (Balvi) and thoroughly inverting the discourse in accordance with the official narrative (Liepaja). The second strategy seems highly likely to prevail, because with each reconstruction exhibitions will distance themselves from the Soviet standards and narratives. Numerous museums telling of occupation, as in Liepaja, are unlikely to appear due to the lack of funding in many cultural institutions at the local level.

The research also points out the linguistic imbalance of expositions, as Russian language in accompanying texts is underrepresented both in comparison with the proportion of the Russian-speaking population (and formerly tourists) and the representation of the Russian language in exhibit items. However, under contemporary geopolitical circumstances the increase in the amount of information in Russian seems highly improbable.

The future of the research lies in providing a more thorough classification of museums and a detailed description of the representation of Russia in them. Afterwards it is planned to compare the results with those acquired from other sets of data such as geopolitical cartoons in national newspapers.

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