

New Trends in the Museumification of the Soviet Past in Russia (2008–2018)¹

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Abstract: *This article offers a survey of the key tendencies observable in the museumification of the Soviet past in contemporary Russia, based on fieldwork and interviews with museum curators and other staff. The key focus is on aspects of the commodification of and nostalgia for the Soviet era. The article begins by examining repression and the Gulag as objects of museumification in Russia. Special attention is paid to the controversial situation when it comes to museumification of Stalin's repressions in the Russian context. The next part discusses museumification of the "Thaw" era and the growth in the number of exhibitions devoted to the late 1950s–early 1960s in Russian museums and art galleries, especially in 2016–2017. The Thaw era has begun to be re-imagined as an era defined primarily by upbeat interior design, optimism, "Soviet hipsters," and a generally positive mood. Nostalgia for the late Soviet period more broadly is becoming a noteworthy phenomenon in modern Russia. The last thirty years of the existence of the USSR are a key preoccupation unifying and driving the "folk museum" movement. This movement is non-expert in nature. Ordinary people are establishing thematic folk museums, and virtual nostalgic communities are devoted to the material world of the late Soviet period. The article goes on to examine patriotic trends in museumification. Museums and exhibitions played a significant role in military-patriotic education in the Soviet period. The Russian*

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Ministry of Defense today continues to support the major military museums and is also creating new ones, often with a strong interactive component. In the concluding part, the article analyzes how the growing influx of Chinese tourists in Russia is beginning to influence the forms of museum representation of the Soviet period. This tourism is also breathing new life into Soviet-style museums devoted to the biographies of the leaders of the Russian revolution. The phenomenon of “red tourism” that brings Chinese tourists to Russia forces us to re-think our understanding of the collective memory of communism in the context of global consumption and the mediatized mythologization of the past.

Modern museums function as repositories for the memory of the past. In that function they actively participate in the production of symbolic, ideological, and meaningful forms of collective memory, as well as offering significant resources for the construction of civil and national identities.² At the same time, museums are an important component of modernity, with all the contradictions and cultural conflicts that this entails. In this regard, a trip to a museum functions as a “civilizing ritual” for the ordinary visitor, and museum exhibitions are vital tools for influencing their visitors. Researchers have noted that museums can be conceived of as spaces that link the present day with the past. In this sense they function as storage facilities for memory and time that has hardened into concrete form.³ Museums also work as sites of social memory and help form the common meanings behind perceptions of the past.⁴ These meanings are often contested, and thus, museums can, on the one hand, become battlefields in “memory wars.” On the other hand, they can be

² Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Susan A. Crane (ed.), *Museums and Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge 1995); and Nick Prior, “Speed, Rhythm, and Time-Space: Museums and Cities,” *Space and Culture* 14 (2011): 200–01.

⁴ John Urry, “How Societies Remember the Past,” *Sociological Review* 43 (1996): 45–65; and Kirk Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).