

Preoccupied by the Past
The Case of Estonia's Museum of Occupations

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* Note that this is a pre-publication version of the paper excluding images

Stuart Burch & Ulf Zander

The nation is born out of the resistance, ideally without external aid, of its nascent citizens against oppression [...] An effective founding struggle should contain memorable massacres, atrocities, assassinations and the like, which serve to unite and strengthen resistance and render the resulting victory the more justified and the more fulfilling. They also can provide a focus for a “remember the *x* atrocity” historical narrative.¹

That a “foundation struggle mythology” can form a compelling element of national identity is eminently illustrated by the case of Estonia. Its path to independence in 1918 followed by German and Soviet occupation in the Second World War and subsequent incorporation into the Soviet Union is officially presented as a period of continuous struggle, culminating in the resumption of autonomy in 1991. A key institution for narrating Estonia's particular “foundation struggle mythology” is the Museum of Occupations – the subject of our article – which opened in Tallinn in 2003. It conforms to an observation made by Rhiannon Mason concerning the nature of national museums. These entities, she argues,

play an important role in articulating, challenging and responding to public perceptions of a nation's histories, identities, cultures and politics. At the same time, national museums are themselves shaped by the nations within which they are located.²

The privileged role of the museum plus the potency of a “foundation struggle mythology” accounts for the rise of museums of occupation in Estonia and other Eastern European states since 1989. Their existence – allied with a plethora of analogous monuments and memorial sites – testify to a pervasive preoccupation with the past – or, more accurately, *pasts*. For

these accounts, as well as being shaped by national parameters, are inherently plural. This is by no means unique to the Baltic States.³ Yet what makes them special is the amount of media attention they have accrued.

One instance of this was the dilemma facing the leaders of the Baltic States as to whether or not they should attend the celebrations scheduled to take place in Moscow in 2005 to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.⁴ They were acutely aware that, in the case of the Baltic States, the celebration of the defeat of Nazism was tainted by a far more long-lasting period of suffering – namely the occupation of their nations by the Soviet Union. This, however, was utterly at odds with the vociferously expressed view of Russia's present-day leadership, including the then Russian First Deputy Prime Minister, Sergei Ivanov.⁵ For them the “Great Patriotic War” (the Soviet term for the Second World War) is the key to their own “founding struggle” and “the resulting victory” was as justified as the so-called occupation of the states of Eastern Europe that followed the conflict. The memory of the struggle against Nazi Germany is sacred to the Russians and, in the words of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, any attempt to “blaspheme this memory, to commit outrages against it, to rewrite history, cannot fail to anger us”.⁶ They share this interpretation of the past with many of the ethnic Russians that constitute sizeable percentages of the present-day Baltic population.

Definitions of, and identifications with, victims have been high on the agenda all over Europe during the last decades. Estonia could, due to both German and Soviet occupations, rightfully claim victimhood. Yet a factor further complicating this is the pressure placed on the Baltic States to conform to a Western norm that sees the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Nazi Germany as unparalleled in their orchestrated scale and barbarity. The Baltic States, as new members of the European Union, are compelled to accede to the dissociation from the Holocaust as the European foundation mythology.⁷ Yet, for many, the necessity to come to terms with their Nazi past is seen as being of far less importance than the need to highlight the injustices of the Soviet era – injustices that did not end until the last decade of the twentieth century. This extends to the argument that complicity with the forces of Nazi Germany can be understood, if not actually excused, as an undesirable consequence of Soviet aggression. Of course, on such terms, the opposite (i.e. complicity with the Soviets to defeat the Nazis) is surely equally true. This scenario, however, is complicated by the fact that the events of the Second World War are inevitably understood in the light of what came afterwards. This has led James Mark to argue persuasively that the various museums of occupation in the Baltic States “contain” the crimes of fascism in favour of condemning the

Soviet regime.⁸ This version of the past is pursued in order to produce an “effective founding struggle” that meets the needs of these now autonomous and avowedly “European” states.

The “facts” of this history are, then, never given and are always in need of both interpretation and motivation. They are capable of supporting radically different points of view. Therefore, it is not just a case of “remembering the x atrocity”. Rather it is deciding whether it was an atrocity and whether it merits recalling above y atrocity or z atrocity. Then it is a question of how to present this historical event. In many East European countries, a major task for historians after 1989 has been to discuss not only the atrocities themselves, but also the Soviet tendency to disregard them in official historical accounts right up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Andrus Pork has noted, there are a number of both “direct lies” and “blank pages” which Baltic historians have since had to contend with.⁹ Still, the focus in the work of, for instance, the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, has been to document what actually happened rather than explicitly analysing Soviet and Estonian uses of history.¹⁰

This article is, however, concerned with just such matters: namely the purposes to which history has been put and an analysis of how the past is presented in different contexts. An important forum for doing that is the museum. One particularly noteworthy example is the *Okupatsioonide Muuseum* in Tallinn, the subject of this article. That museums shape national history and collective memory – thereby justifying the present as well as articulating the past – means that they are both valued and value-laden sites. It is for this reason that as many investigations and interpretations as possible should be made into these institutions, even if the stance adopted is limited to that of an “outside” observer. Just such a partial perspective characterises this article. We approach our case study from the standpoint of a historian and an art historian brought together by a shared interest in museology and the nature of historical consciousness. Our understanding of the *Okupatsioonide Muuseum* is reflective of a sizeable proportion of visitors to Tallinn who speak neither Estonian nor Russian. This has had two consequences: firstly a focus on the presentation of the museum in English and, secondly, a heightened awareness of the visual language of the museum as conveyed by its location and layout.

Occupations – Old and New

“First: this is a museum of occupations, not of the occupation.”¹¹ These words were spoken on July 1, 2003 by Estonia’s then Prime Minister, Juhan Parts at the inauguration of

Estonia's *Okupatsioonide Muuseum*. He was referring to the period from 1940 until 1991, a span of time divided into three occupations of Estonia – once by Germany (1941-44) and twice by the Soviet Union (1940-41 and 1944-91). Its exclusive focus is therefore the twentieth century. It does not address the much more distant Swedish “occupation” that lasted from 1561 until 1710. Whilst this has been described affectionately as the “Happy Swedish time”, this is certainly not the interpretation placed on the course of events narrated by the *Okupatsioonide Muuseum*.¹² Both to symbolise this and to explicitly connect the museum with the “fight for freedom”, its principal benefactor, Olga Kistler-Ritso, cut through barbed wire at its inauguration in the summer of 2003.

What is frequently – and inaccurately – referred to as “the Occupation Museum” is then, as Parts emphasised, a museum devoted to multiple occupations. It is also a museum of multiple titles. Its English name varies considerably. The compendium of *Estonian Museums* compiled by the Estonian Museum Association lists it as the *Estonian Occupations' Museum*.¹³ The website of the museum itself is entitled *Museum of Occupations*. A leaflet available at the museum in 2007 names it as *The Museum of Occupation and of the Fight for Freedom*. Meanwhile the blurb on the back of a DVD recounting the history of the institution and on sale in its shop refers to it as the *Museum of Recent Occupations* (with the inclusion of the word “recent” obverting the potential question mark over the 1561-1710 period).¹⁴

These multiple titles are a particularly clear reminder that “museums function as palimpsests upon which public histories and national identities are written and rewritten”.¹⁵ It also serves to indicate that what the nation “means” is processual, not fixed and that the past is constantly being reinterpreted and renegotiated in the present.¹⁶ Museums, as has already been mentioned, play a significant role in that process. Laurajane Smith, in an article first published in 1993, detected an increasing awareness of the ways in which museum displays “[provide] the basis from which we in the present construct notions of self and cultural identity”.¹⁷

The “we” referred to by Smith is important. For the “facts” of history can support diametrically opposed interpretations according to who “we” are and how “our” past is construed and displayed. The principal “we” of the Museum of Occupations is not the Estonian state. It is not, strictly speaking, a national museum. Whilst its very existence in the Estonian capital can and should be construed as an affirmation of official endorsement, the museum is in fact a private initiative that, like our analysis, took shape beyond Estonia's borders. The private – or, more accurately, *personal* – nature of the museum was stressed by its patron, Lennart Meri, president of Estonia from 1992 until 2001. At its opening he

characterised the museum building as the place where “an Estonian family [had] invested all of its savings”.¹⁸ Meri was referring to Dr Olga Kistler-Ritso, an American-Estonian eye-surgeon who had fled Estonia to “the refugee camps of Germany” in 1944. Nearly 60 years later, the 83-year-old returned to her homeland to inaugurate the museum which she had reportedly funded to the tune of EEK 35 million.¹⁹ The Museum of Occupations therefore represents the tangible culmination of the Kistler-Ritso Foundation, established in the United States in 1998 “to gather, document and display statements and reminiscences from the Estonian contemporary history”.²⁰ It now achieves this through the auspices of the Museum of Occupations.

That the intended audience for this institution is both local *and* international was stressed by Tunne Kelam at the opening of the museum. Kelam, one of four board members of the “Kistler-Ritso Estonian Foundation” expressed the hope that it would provide

younger generations [of Estonians] as well as foreign visitors [...] an understanding of the difficult path of the Estonian people, but also of their unique experience of preserving their spirit, language and culture – an experience that we can share with materially better off nations.²¹

Kelam’s allusion to “better off nations” provides a partial explanation and justification as to why Estonia’s ostensibly “official” Museum of Occupations was conceived by a private foundation on which it is still financially dependent. The funding of museums influences how they operate, even if they exude impartiality. This is the case whether support comes in the form of public or private sector funding, corporate sponsorship or personal philanthropy. This, however, only really becomes apparent during moments of controversy. An eloquent example of this was the response to the Smithsonian museum’s decision in 1994 to display the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 Superfortress bomber that dropped the atom bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The presentation of this artefact resulted in a heated “history war”. Sensitivity as to how to exhibit the nation’s past in the United States has only increased in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001.²² Less debated but yet just as problematic is the *Terror Háza* (House of Terror) museum in Budapest. Although it is dedicated to victims of both Nazi *and* Soviet persecution, only two out of twelve rooms deal with the Arrow Cross and Nazism. Hungarian antisemitism is therefore downplayed. This becomes even more apparent when the House of Terror is compared with the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest.²³ It is the former, however, which has attracted most Hungarian visitors because it “is not a traumatic, commemorative place, but an object of the

political uses of the past, whose *telos* is the maintenance of the representation of the nation of sufferings caused by communism”.²⁴

Sensitivities are also apparent in the recent narration of Estonia’s national history, not least given that there is a palpable lack of consensus over how to interpret the Soviet period that lasted from 1944 until 1991. Non-Estonian visitors to Tallinn would not easily be able to detect such a divergence of opinion from the displays of the Museum of Occupations. It took the riots that erupted on the streets of the Estonian capital in April 2007 to make this shockingly manifest. They were triggered by the relocation of the “Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn”. This Soviet era commemoration – more frequently referred to as “the Bronze Soldier” – was unveiled on September 22, 1947 to mark the third anniversary of the Red Army’s entry into Tallinn. It is, for a sizeable minority of Estonians, primarily a symbol of “liberation” from Nazi occupation. For the rest it epitomised the fact that one occupying power (Nazi Germany) had been succeeded by another (the Soviet Union). This was clearly the interpretation favoured by the government in power in Estonia in 2007 and sanctioned by the Museum of Occupations. The decision to resite the monument at the Tallinn Military Cemetery on the outskirts of the capital was an attempt to physically marginalise and symbolically reinterpret it. Its removal from the site in the city centre that it had occupied for sixty years triggered two nights of violence during which one person died. This made it abundantly clear that many of the protestors were well aware of the full import of the statue’s relocation – namely that symbolic meaning resides as much in the site of a monument as it does in the monument itself.

The Power of Place

For architects and monument makers, the power of place has been a reality for centuries. Where to put an official building or a statue has often been a question of the greatest importance since buildings and monuments have always had both practical and legitimating functions. Academics, however, have only comparatively recently begun to study the factors that make up a particular place; what constitutes that place; and why it came into being in the manner it did. In so doing a new awareness of how the past was and is presented to the public has come to the fore. So too have the often intense and intricate negotiation processes that enmesh the design of public spaces and which, once revealed, say so much about ethnicity, class and gender construction in urban landscapes.²⁵ Even more recently, the commercial

aspects of place and location, not least as a part of the tourism industry, along with people's subjective senses of places have also become fields of academic research.²⁶

The proponents of the Museum of Occupations manifest a patent awareness of the power of place when they explained: "The museum also has an additional function: it fulfils the role of a memorial. A place of remembrance for those whose graves lie in places we are unaware of. The architects have integrated the memorial into the museum and into the city as such."²⁷ This was to have special significance following the later relocation of the Bronze Soldier. This is because, at the same time as the statue's removal, the bodies of twelve unidentified Soviet soldiers were disinterred from their resting place alongside the monument and relocated to the cemetery setting. So, whilst the Museum of Occupations and those it mourned was "integrated... into the city", the opposite was done to the Bronze Soldier following its dis-integration from its city centre location.

How then is the Museum of Occupations incorporated into the city and what power is collected in the museum building and its surroundings? Designed by the architects Indrek Peil and Siiri Vallner, the museum is located at Toompea Street 8, at the corner of Toompea Street and Kaarli Boulevard. Toompea is also the name of the castle in Tallinn, which nowadays houses the Parliament (*Riigikogu*). The route between the castle and the museum is intertwined with symbols of the inter-war period and the new post-1991 era of independence. Near the castle/parliament is a rock bearing the inscription "20. VIII 1991", manifesting the moment of liberation from Soviet rule. Closer to the museum are two other recently erected monuments, one representing Johan Pitka (1872-1944) and the other Johannes Orasmaa (1890-1943). Both were high ranking members of the Estonian armed forces. Major General Orasmaa, head of the Home Guard, was arrested by Soviet occupation forces on July 19, 1940 and subsequently died in May 1943 in a Soviet prison. Rear admiral Pitka was the founder of the Defence League which, as one of the principal forces during the Estonian War of Independence (1918-20), mainly consisted of armoured trains and a naval fleet. He lived long periods in exile but returned to Estonia in 1944, upon which he died in unknown circumstances.²⁸

In its original setting, the Bronze Soldier and the associated unknown soldiers' graves disturbed the line of symbols of Estonian independence. After its removal there is nothing left to interrupt the straight line of "freedom" running from the Parliament to the Museum of Occupations and the nearby National Library. The presence of the Museum of Occupations thus explicates the absence of the Bronze Soldier. However, the latter's physical erasure does not mean that its existence has been forgotten. On the contrary, such is the power of place that

it is, arguably, far more “visible” today than when it stood at Tõnismägi, literally a stone’s throw away from the Museum of Occupations.

Within the twisting concrete and glass form of this building is the “landscape” of the museum.²⁹ The display is drawn from its holdings of some 15,000 items collected over a period of five years. The curatorial team, acting on the advice of the professor of History, Enn Tarvel, arranged these objects in chronological fashion so as to focus on the three aforementioned periods of occupation (Soviet 1940-41, German 1941-44, Soviet 1944-91). Each period is articulated using filmed interviews and artefacts, both of everyday and military origin. The idea that Communist Soviet society was free from all class differences is disavowed at the outset by the juxtaposition of two cars: one a luxury model formerly belonging to a high-ranking party member; the other, despite being a very small and simple make, was still a pipe-dream for most Soviet citizens. Another quickly discernable facet of the narrative is the way in which the Museum of Occupations tries to illustrate places that were closely connected to Estonia even if they were geographically distant. Thus a line of prison doors and a similarly long row of suitcases reminds the visitor of the many Estonians who were deported to the Gulag by the Soviet regime. The considerable quantity of suitcases can be read as one of the ways that the displays seek to draw subtle parallels between Nazi and Soviet society and between the Holocaust and the Gulag, not least because exhibitions of suitcases at Auschwitz and elsewhere are a long-standing symbol of the Nazi genocide.

The exhibition is dominated by a model of two locomotives running on parallel tracks. On the face of one is the Soviet star whilst on the other is a Nazi swastika. These dramatic features again serve to mark the similarities between the two regimes. In between the trains is a void. This vacuum can be seen as evoking the exposed position Estonia found itself in during the Second World War. The trains fit into a Baltic pattern. Instances of this interpretation are to be found in a number of museums and monuments in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In, for example, the Occupation Museum in Riga and the Genocide Victims’ Museum in Vilnius, the message is that the Baltic States found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place in the wartime years.³⁰ Similarly, the logotype for the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity is a visualisation of Estonia’s position at the cross-roads between two, equally bloody dictatorships – one Nazi, the other Soviet.³¹ Former Estonian president, Lennart Meri, who was a leading member of this commission, once described Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia as “identical twins”.³² As we have seen, the current Russian leadership – along with many Baltic citizens of Russian descent – vehemently reject this characterisation of the twentieth century. This angry denial

explains their fury at what they perceived as the sacrilegious decision to “destroy” the Bronze Soldier in April 2007. One of the places they targeted during the ensuing riots was the Museum of Occupations, the windows of which were shattered by missiles thrown by some of the protestors.

Shifting Statues

The recent fate of the Bronze Soldier serves as a pertinent reminder that Estonia, like all other post-communist states, is faced with the difficult question of what to do with its Soviet heritage. Of all the tangible legacies of this era the most poignant is the anachronistic pantheon of commemorative statues and memorials. One solution is to simply destroy them and erase all trace of their presence. Another is to remove the symbol itself and either leave the site blank or replace it with another, more acceptable sign. But the latter strategy results in a further question: what to do with the superfluous monument? One widely adopted solution has been to reframe it through an alternative form of display. The most celebrated example of this is Statue Park, also known as Memento Park, which opened in Budapest in 1993.

Another mode of reframing occurs when a monument is reinterpreted by an additional societal agent – such as an artist or curator. Their actions are frequently informed by the notion of institutional critique – especially the critique of the museum.³³ One of the most straightforward yet effective actions in this vein was carried out by the American artist, Michael Asher. His decision to move a statue of George Washington from outside the Art Institute of Chicago to an interior gallery holding eighteenth century artworks, whilst seemingly unremarkable, in fact laid bare the powerful influence exerted by museal displays. He showed that meaning can be varied according to shifting historical and aesthetical criteria.³⁴

A particularly sustained example of the processes of such reframing within the museum was presented at the first hang of Kumu, Estonia’s new national museum of art which opened in Tallinn in 2006. It featured an installation by Villu Jaanisoo (born 1963). Entitled *Seagull*, it consisted of 52 portrait busts dating from the late nineteenth century until the 1980s. They filled an entire corner of the museum. Indistinct voices could be heard emanating from loudspeakers concealed in the pedestals. The numbered sequence of portraits commenced high up on the wall in the form of a bronze bust of Lenin by Georgi Markelov dating from 1970.

This provides an example of an acceptable way in which to display Soviet heritage in contemporary Estonia: instead of a troublesome historical document it becomes an element of contemporary art. This points to the wider remit of Kumu as a whole. Kumu's role is to tell the (or rather "a") story of Estonian art history. The title of the main exhibition – *Difficult Choices* – related as much to the problematic position artists found themselves in during the Soviet period as to the difficulties faced by the curators in trying to tell a narrative of Estonian art history from the vantage point of a post-Soviet, EU-affiliated Estonia. Indeed, "difficult choices" characterises practically every aspect of not just Estonian art history but Estonian history in general – be it the dilemmas its people faced in 1940, 1941 or 1991 as well as in more recent times, such as with the removal of the Bronze Soldier in 2007.

A Sepulchre of (In)Famous Men

Dario Gamboni, in his important study of iconoclasm and vandalism, notes that those Soviet-era monuments that were not destroyed were, "as a last resort", stored in museums. Their triumphant or ironical display in this context serves as a deliberate form of defacement:

the informal, desultory or absurd presentation – no pedestals, traces of paint, prone position – gave the visitors unmistakable interpretative and behavioural hints that this was banishment and not promotion, and that the works were there neither to be venerated nor to be admire but rather to be laughed at.³⁵

This would seem to be what has happened at Estonia's Museum of Occupations. Its basement is filled with Soviet-era sculpture, stripped of their elevating pedestals. But the impression it creates is very far from amusing. James Mark in his account of Estonia's Museum of Occupations observed that the architecture is characterised by large windows which allow in natural light.³⁶ This makes the contrast between the main gallery and the basement particularly stark. This subterranean space is very dark. Low light levels in museums are usually implemented in order to conserve sensitive objects from light pollution. This is not the case here. Rather, the murky conditions are for interpretative purposes, contributing as they do to the oppressive atmosphere. There is no amusement here.

The place is more akin to a storeroom than a gallery. This is exacerbated by the exposed metal pipes and numbered, yellow-framed metal cages that line this industrial-looking space. The visitor is not informed what these things are for. Equally mysterious and unsettling are a

series of locked doors. In this context the signs pointing towards the emergency exit take on a strangely urgent feel, not least because the display includes two prison doors leaning up against the right-hand wall. One of these is reproduced on the homepage of the museum: the visitor clicks the prison door to virtually enter this prison of the past.³⁷

In the midst of this sepulchre are the sculptures.³⁸ These are either positioned directly on the floor or on a low “plinth” formed by the architecture of the building. This – as Gamboni noted – underscores the anti-heroic nature of the works. They have literally been taken down from their pedestals. The nature of some of these missing plinths is discernible from two laminated newspaper cuttings pinned to the wall. They serve as interpretative panels for the two principal objects: two over-life-size statues. Even to non-Estonian speaking visitors it is clear that, rather than reporting the removal of the monuments, the newspaper articles date instead from the time of their inauguration. They show the statues in their original settings. This emphasises how far they have travelled: from being foci of attention in central locations they are now marginalised in a dark basement. The symbolic and interpretative consequences of this shift help explain why the decision to move the Bronze Soldier was so controversial. The latter now resides, as we have noted, in a military cemetery on the periphery of the city. It has not been destroyed. It has instead been reclassified, just like the statue of George Washington following Michael Asher’s intervention or, even more forcefully, the sculptures in the basement of the Museum of Occupations. What were once “living” monuments have now become “dead” memorials.

The decision to pair the two statues that are currently in the basement of the museum was fitting, not least because they were inaugurated within a year of one another. On the right is Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin (1875-1946), the nominal Head of State of the USSR. His statue was erected at Tallinn’s Field of Towers in 1950. The sculpture which now stands to his right was erected at Harjumägi in 1951. It commemorates Viktor Kingissepp (1888-1922), “one of the leading figures among Estonia’s communists. He operated secretly in Tallinn... [and] was arrested and executed by a firing squad after being tried by a military court for espionage”.³⁹ Kingissepp thus died a traitor in independent interwar Estonia, was heralded as a hero in Soviet Estonia and is now disparaged once more.⁴⁰

The statue of Kingissepp has therefore had the exact opposite trajectory to the aforementioned commemorations of Pitka and Orasmaa. It testifies to the mutability of history and of commemorative monuments. Indeed, the ravages of time are written on the bronze bodies of both Kingissepp and Kalinin. The former is depicted as an orator. He gesticulates evocatively with one hand, whilst the other clutches a sheaf of rolled papers. This is meant to

amplify his imaginary words. But his oratory is mute. If he “speaks” at all it is to a subterranean wall. His gesticulating fingers are all missing. Kalinin meanwhile has lost an entire hand. These disabled figures stand next to the door leading to the disabled toilet.

Above the statues is a metal grill where one can hear and see people walk by in the galleries above. This accentuates the subterranean aspect and sense that these figures are entombed here. One character that could not be so inhumed is Stalin: his head was apparently too big to fit in (unlike Lenin’s).

Prime Minister Juhan Parts told those that gathered to inaugurate the Museum of Occupations that it should be understood as being about “the past not the present, consequently the idea of a museum is appropriate”. Yet he went on to aver that it “is a place where future generations can see what once took place. Where they can see that which will never be repeated.” This is why the statues are deemed worthy of preservation. They need to be literally contained so that they can safely recall something deeply (un)desirable whilst simultaneously reassuring the visitor that the terror is now over. Yet in so doing there is an anxiety that unwelcome interpretations might somehow leak out. The sculptures might be entombed in this space, but their current position seems somehow provisional. Perhaps one day they will be reinstated in their previous locations? With this in mind it is clear that the museum is serving a moral and political function – a warning from history.

All commemorative monuments deal with time. But in this setting time is literally meant to stand still. Between the figures of Kingissepp and Kalinin is a clock. The hands point perpetually to just after 8 o’clock. Why? Is it in the morning or the evening? In this temporal void the active component is provided by the visitor. Aside from looking at the sculptures, the visitors’ activity includes an act of the very basest kind: for between the statues of Kingissepp and Kalinin is the entrance to the toilets. This further denigrates the “heroes”. Yet in this place where the sacred and profane collide nothing is as straightforward as it first appears. The liminal zone betwixt the gallery space and the toilets is taken up by a massive, circular water feature that resembles something one might expect to find in a temple or some other sacred place. Behind this is a large, mirrored wall. Its reflection makes the visitor very much aware of their presence amidst the statues, drawing attention to their own diminutive size in contrast to the grotesquely proportioned bronze bodies.

Kingissepp, Kalinin and the other individuals commemorated by these sculptures are all male. Yet this overtly masculine pantheon exists in a very feminine space. Whilst the concrete basement of the Museum of Occupations is reminiscent of a bomb shelter or a prison, the walls of the stairway which leads down to it are lined in red velvet-like textile. This weird

parody of honour is comparable to a uterus, whilst the opening at the bottom is akin to a womb – complete with embryonic creatures inside.

The latter are reminiscent of some of the other sculpture produced in Estonia during the Soviet-era and which are now on display at the above-mentioned Kumu art museum. One such is *Son of Regiment* (1948) by Sarra Bogatkina (1904-90). A young child marches resolutely forward clearly aping the proud, heroic soldiers he has no doubt been encouraged to admire. A metal helmet – perhaps his father’s – balances precariously on his tiny head. Another example is *Father and Son* (1977) by Ülo Õun (1940-1988). Here a monstrously large child holds hands with a bearded man. In the version at Kumu the latter’s left arm is broken at the elbow. The fragmentary nature of Õun’s figure finds a weird echo in the two standing statues in the basement of the Museum of Occupations. This raises another shared characteristic: namely a monument’s ability (or not) to communicate – something that is similarly picked up on by the murmuring portrait busts of Villu Jaanisoo’s installation *Seagull*.

The formulaic nature of the portraits in both Jaanisoo’s work and the sculptures crammed into the Museum of Occupations is all too evident. Despite this they surely have an aesthetic value. The statues of Kingissepp and Kalinin are “type specimens” showing the style of monuments produced in the Soviet Union during the early 1950s. Nevertheless, the names of the sculptors are not mentioned in the explanatory sheet that hangs from the ceiling. If it *had* it would have revealed that the Kingissepp statue was by Enn Roos (1908-1990), the sculptor responsible for the Bronze Soldier.⁴¹ The available information concentrates instead on the personalities of those depicted. These facts are arranged as a numbered list, with each digit referring to a large white figure painted directly onto the sculptures. This again flags up their non-art status. They are no longer the same class of object that one finds in a gallery such as Kumu.

Visitors to the cellar space of the Museum of Occupations invariably touch the sculptures. This is something that would be strictly forbidden in a fine art gallery. But it is clear that they are not “art” and so the visitors enjoy the freedom to run their hands over the tactile surfaces. This is despite the fact that they are being surveilled by a CCTV camera. This is not the only such recording device in the basement: many people take photographs here. They line up beside the statues to have their pictures taken. What is the motivation for this? One answer is that these images will last as mementos of their visit. The memorial function of the sculptures therefore persists – but it operates on an alternative register than that intended by those that commissioned the statues in the first place. This opens up the troubling

possibility that, in turn, the aims of the curators might be inverted by the readings of the visitors – not least if the latter look upon these pathetic, petrified figures and pity rather than despise them. But this is where the constrained, oppressive environment of the basement comes again to the fore by restricting the range of permissible interpretations.

Past Errors, Present Interpretations

The German historian Ulrich Schlie has noted that, when chronology is put out of order, place itself becomes the bearer of memory. In these circumstances monuments become timeless entities. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, they doggedly manage to carry the imprint of their inauguration.⁴² This theory is played out in practice in the basement of Estonia's Museum of Occupations. The motionless clock visualises the timelessness of this place. The imprint of the multiple inaugurations that have befallen the statues of Kingissepp and Kalinin takes the form of the newspaper cuttings from the 1950s. These in turn amplify the impact of their very different "inauguration" in 2003 as debased artefacts at the Museum of Occupations.

Another insight that can be gleaned from this museum – especially the basement – is the uncanny effect produced when an object falls outside a conventional system of classification. The statues of Kingissepp and Kalinin are caught between taxonomies. These "type specimens" are no longer what they once were. On the one hand they are shown as being meaningful and valuable by virtue of being preserved in a museum. Yet, on the other, they also take on the guise of remnants and rubbish. These once elevated heroes are now, literally, beneath our feet and therefore beneath our contempt. The statues still commemorate, but that commemoration is skewed and morphed. Whereas public commemorations normally exude consensus and universality, these qualities are emphatically disavowed here. Everything is wrong in the basement of the museum. So, presumably, everything must now be right in the society beyond its walls. This is a crucial implication of the Museum of Occupations.

Yet the riots of April 2007 qualify this easy assumption. It provided unmistakable proof that not all Estonians agree with the message of the museum. But, oddly enough, this in fact confirms that which is so eloquently conveyed by the museum: that perspectives on the world vary; that one should be wary of extremism of all kinds; that there is more than one way of understanding either the present or the past. Indeed, this dynamic scenario is essential for the museum to fulfil its principal mandate. In the words of its benefactor Olga Kistler-Ritso: "The museum has to connect the past to the present. It has to be a connecting link between the generations."⁴³

Neither the shape of the present nor the meaning of the past are preordained or fixed. Both are contingent and plural. Yet this is effectively disguised when all traces of the mistaken, the abortive and the discredited are erased or suppressed. The Museum of Occupations exists precisely to preserve “the point of view of error”.⁴⁴ Or, to recall, Prime Minister Juhan Parts: it is where people “can see that which will never be repeated.” The Museum of Occupations is testimony to the fact “that a history of errors is far more enlightening than the narrative of an untroubled rationality [...] Error is democratic: it opens towards heterogeneity; it allows newness to come into the world.”⁴⁵ That quality of newness is the promise of an independent, tolerant and democratic Estonia – the Estonia of today in other words. The vitality of these qualities can and should be gauged by the way in which it measures up to the error-ridden Estonia recounted in the Museum of Occupations. That is why this institution is and will remain so significant. Because the changes that the future will no doubt bring to the institution and its displays will say much more about the Estonia of the present than the Estonia of the past. This is doubly significant in the light of the decision to remove the Bronze Soldier from its environs. Its absence means that – as has been argued above – nothing now “disturbs” the straight line to Estonian “freedom” in the memorial landscape of central Tallinn. This line needs to retain its “errors” and blind alleys, for without them Estonia runs the risk of actually forgetting what it is that ought never to be repeated.

Notes

¹ G. J. Ashworth, Brian Graham & J. E. Tunbridge, *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*, London 2007, p. 97.

² Rhiannon Mason, *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums*, Cardiff 2007.

³ That much is clear from Ashworth et al’s aforementioned *Pluralising Pasts*.

⁴ Eva-Clarita Onken, “The Baltic States and Moscow’s 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2007:1, pp. 23-46.

⁵ “Russians advised to shun Estonia”, *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6522377.stm>, April 3, 2007.

⁶ Sergei Lavrov quoted in the article “Kremlin Revisionism”, *The Baltic Times*, May 9, 2007, available at: <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/17834>.

⁷ Cf. Sabine Offe, “Opfererzählungen. Europäische Gedächtnisorte”, in *Europa – geeint durch Werte? Die europäische Wertdebatte auf dem Prüfstand der Geschichte*, (Hrsg.), Moritz Csáky & Johannes Feichtinger, Bielefeld 2007, pp. 133-143.

⁸ James Mark, “Containing Fascism: History in Post-Communist Baltic Occupation and Genocide Museums”, in *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, (eds) Oksana Sarkisova & Péter Apor, Budapest 2007, p. 351.

⁹ Andrus Pork, “History, Lying, and Moral Responsibility”, *History and Theory*, October 1990:3, pp. 321-330.

¹⁰ Cf. <http://www.historycommission.ee>, and Lauri Mälksoo, “Soviet Genocide? Communist Mass Deportations in the Baltic States and International Law”, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 2001:4, pp. 757-787.

¹¹ This quotation is cited at: <http://www.okupatsioon.ee/english/speech.html>.

¹² Stuart Burch & David Smith, “Empty Spaces and the Value of Symbols: Estonia’s ‘War of Monuments’ from Another Angle”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2007:6, pp. 913-936.

¹³ Mariann Raisma, *Estonian Museums*, Tallinn 2003, p. 35.

¹⁴ *Okupatsiooni ja Vabadusvõitluse muuseumi rajamine (Design and Construction of the Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom)*, duration 23 minutes, 50 seconds, produced by AYA Plc, c. 2003.

¹⁵ Rhiannon Mason, “Nation Building at the Museum of Welsh Life”, *Museum and Society*, April 2006:1, p. 29.

¹⁶ Stuart Burch, “The Texture of Heritage: A Reading of the 750th Anniversary of Stockholm”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2005:3, p. 224.

¹⁷ Laurajane Smith, “Towards a Theoretical Framework for Archaeological Heritage Management”, in *The Heritage Reader*, (eds) Graham Fairclough, John H. Jameson, John Schofield & Rodney Harrison, London 2008, p. 65.

¹⁸ Lennart Meri cited at: <http://www.okupatsioon.ee/english/speech.html>.

¹⁹ Estonian Government Information Office press release (2003/06), <http://www.valitsus.ee/brf/index.php?id=22106&tpl=1007&external=0&search=&aasta=2003-06>.

²⁰ Aigi Rahi, “On the Current State of Research into Soviet and Nazi Repressions in Estonia”, http://www.history.ee/register/doc/artikkel_1.html; Toomas Hõbemägi, “A rare museum dedicated to both Soviet and Nazi atrocities opens in Tallinn”, *Baltic Business News*, <http://www.balticbusinessnews.com/Default2.aspx?ArticleID=6bd21e9e-9713-4cdf-af7e-0cf1d65b6041>, July 1, 2003.

²¹ Tunne Kelam cited at: <http://www.okupatsioon.ee/english/speech.html>.

²² See, for instance, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, (eds) Edward T. Linenthal & Tom Engelhardt, New York 1996; Vera L. Zolberg, “Museums as contested sites of remembrance: the Enola Gay affair”, in *Theorizing Museums. Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, (eds)

Sharon Macdonald & Gordon Fyfe, Oxford 1998, pp. 69-82; Michael Bernard-Donals, "Conflations of Memory or, What They Saw at the Holocaust Museum after 9/11", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2005:2, pp. 73-106; Scott Boehm, "Privatizing Public Memory. The Price of Patriotic Philanthropy and the Post-9/11 Politics of Display", *American Quarterly*, 2006:4, pp. 1147-1166.

²³ Kristian Gerner, "Hungary, Romania, the Holocaust and Historical Culture", in *The Holocaust – Post-War Battlefields. Genocide as Historical Culture*, (eds) Klas-Göran Karlsson & Ulf Zander, Malmö 2006, pp. 246-251.

²⁴ Zsolt K. Horváth, "On 'Lieu de Mémoire', 'Trauma' and Their Relevances in Hungary. Memory Research in a *begriffsgeschichtliche* Approach", *Kakanien Revisited*, September 29, 2004, p. 6, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/theorie/ZKHorvath1.pdf>. See also Tony Judt, "From the House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory", *The New York Review of Books*, October 6, 2005, p. 15.

²⁵ See, for example, Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1995.

²⁶ Richard Ek & Johan Hultman, "Produktgörandet av platser – en introduktion", in *Plats som produkt. Kommersialisering och paketering*, (eds) Richard Ek & Johan Hultman, Lund 2007.

²⁷ This quotation is taken from the aforementioned DVD entitled *Design and Construction of the Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom*.

²⁸ See, for instance, Andreas Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, New York & London 2000. The lives of Orasmaa, Pitka and some other leading Estonian officers during the interwar era play an important role in another Estonian museum, namely Tabivere Vallamuseum.

²⁹ Stuart Burch, "Museum landscapes: zoning in on a complex cultural field", in *NaMu, Making National Museums Program: Setting the Frames*, (eds) Peter Aronsson & Magdalena Hillström, Linköping 2007, pp. 49-52.

³⁰ Ulf Zander, "Minnen av krig vid Fredens hav. Konflikter och historiska symboler i Östersjöområdet", in *Östersjö eller Västerhav? Föreställningar om tid och rum i Östersjöområdet*, (red) Klas-Göran Karlsson & Ulf Zander, Karlskrona 1999, pp. 123-124.

³¹ See: www.historycommission.ee/temp/mainmenu.htm.

³² Lennart Meri, "Kommunismens mörka sidor", *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 26/4, 1999.

³³ Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, New York 1999.

³⁴ James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: the Museum as Medium*, London 2001, p. 30. As we shall see, this taxonomic shift is of a similar order to that which has afflicted the statues in the basement of the Museum of Occupations.

³⁵ Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, London 1997, p. 77.

³⁶ James Mark, p. 351.

³⁷ See: <http://www.okupatsioon.ee>.

³⁸ “I would have you day by day fix your eyes upon the greatness of Athens, until you become filled with the love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonour always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to their country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feast. The sacrifice which they collectively made was individually repaid to them; for they received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all sepulchres – I speak not of that in which their remains are laid, but of that in which their glory survives, and is proclaimed always and on every fitting occasion both in word and deed. *For the whole earth is the sepulchre of famous men*; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men. Make them your examples, and, esteeming courage to be freedom and freedom to be happiness, do not weigh too nicely the perils of war.” *Thucydides* (translated 1881, Benjamin Jowett). See <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/thucydides/jthucbk2rv2.htm>.

³⁹ This is according to the information sheet provided in the gallery space.

⁴⁰ This is underlined by the fact that Kingissepp’s birthplace was renamed “Kingissepa” from 1952 until 1988, upon which it reverted to its former name of Kuressaare. See <http://www.kuressaare.ee/uus/?page=text&kat=17>.

⁴¹ Peeter Kaasik, “Common grave for and a memorial to Red Army soldiers on Tõnismägi, Tallinn”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tallinn 2006, p. 17. Available at: <http://www.valitsus.ee/brf/doc.php?282742>.

⁴² Ulrich Schlie, *Die Nation erinnert sich. Die Denkmäler der Deutschen*, München 2002, pp. 7-8. See also Kristian Gerner, “Historien på plats”, in *Historien är nu. En introduktion till historiedidaktiken*, (red.) Klas-Göran Karlsson & Ulf Zander, Lund 2004, pp. 165-184.

⁴³ This quotation is taken from the aforementioned DVD entitled *Design and Construction of the Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom*.

⁴⁴ Couze Venn, “Rubbish, the Remnant, Etcetera”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2006: 2-3, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Couze Venn, pp. 45-46.