

This project investigates how World War II is represented in state-funded post-communist memorial museums (re-)established after 1989 in the context of the “Europeanization of Memory” and the efforts to re-narrate history after the fall of the communist regimes. This cultural, historical and political study makes a qualitative approach in comparing exhibitions in memorial museums in the EU member states of Central and Southeastern Europe, namely: the Museums of Occupation(s) in Tallinn and Riga, the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, the Warsaw Rising Museum, the Terezin Memorial, the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising, the House of Terror and the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, the Museum of Contemporary History in Ljubljana, and the Jasenovac Memorial Museum. This project will also consider the meaning of absence in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania, countries that do not have significant World War II museums.

The research focuses on how World War II is represented in countries in which post- or anti-communism is the dominant discourse. Beyond presenting an overview of the museums, how they were established, and what they represent, the project considers how “double” or “triple occupation” and the Holocaust (i.e., victimization and collaboration) have been (and are being) negotiated in each country, as well as how these negotiations were affected by the process of EU-integration. Since some exhibitions have changed more than once since 1989, the dynamics of the victim-narratives, externalization, and negative memory will also be analyzed, particularly in terms of how the museums reference “European standards” and the extent to which they incorporate the archetypal trend among Holocaust museums of highlighting individual victims. Accordingly, this project will provide the first ever typology of World War II memorial museums in post-communist EU member states.

Comparative research drawing from memory and museum studies will concentrate on three levels of analysis. First, the location and role of the museums in each society will be examined through exhibition catalogs, museum officials’ publications, and museum websites, all of which are understood as sources of (critically questioned) information that have not yet been subjected to a systematic discourse analysis and interviews with museum officials. Second, the exhibition’s core narrative will be explored using such sources as publications in which museum representatives explain their goals, interviews with museum personnel, catalog and website introductions, the entrance and concluding displays of the exhibitions, understood as the neuralgic points of museum analysis. Third, the museum aesthetics, the role of 3D-, audiovisual and (para)text objects will be analyzed, distinguishing between exhibitions with a) ontological-authentic objects; b) constructed-authentic objects; and c) installations staging the past as something one can touch, smell and walk through. Additionally, the exhibition (para)texts and catalogs will be subject to a systematic discourse analysis.