



# The Collective or the Individual?

## Considering Ukrainian Memorial Museums

by Linda Norris and Olesia Ostrovka

*Linda Norris* was a Fulbright Scholar to Ukraine (2009-2010) and is managing partner, Riverhill Partners, Treadwell, NY, U.S. She may be contacted at [Linda@riverhillpartners.com](mailto:Linda@riverhillpartners.com).

*Olesia Ostrovka* is a contemporary art curator and Project Manager for Cultural Heritage at Rinat Akhmetov Foundation for Development of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. She may be contacted at [oostrovka@fdu.org.ua](mailto:oostrovka@fdu.org.ua).

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As a conversation between colleagues with different backgrounds and experiences, we explore three different Ukrainian museums: the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, the Holodomor Museum and Memorial, and the Kharkiv Literature Museum, each memorializing a different 20<sup>th</sup> century event.

*Linda:* To me, a memorial is a contemplative place. It doesn't necessarily help me understand an event, but is a place for remembrance. I recently visited the Oklahoma City bombing memorial and as well as the museum, and I thought of them as two very different entities. But increasingly it seems, in the US and elsewhere, memorials and museums are combined into one.

*Olesya:* I would say that memorials are rather places to feel, remember and re-think, while museums are places to explore and create your own understandings/versions. And you are right; they do seem to merge into one.

### **Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Kyiv**

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War is an enormous complex in Kyiv, opened by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in 1981. It is one of the most-visited museums in Ukraine's capital. The approach is through an outdoor tunnel with heroic bas-reliefs of soldiers and citizens. In the entrance of the museum, there is a statue of a Soviet soldier, standing proud over a pile of Nazi rubble. The exhibitions are in dark halls, theatrically presented, and display a chronological version of what Americans think of as the Eastern Front in World War II.

*Linda:* I think of this as a museum about patriotism—but what seems confusing is that it's patriotism for a nation that no longer exists. So is it a memorial for the Soviet Union itself? For the USSR's idea of itself as a nation? Inside the permanent exhibitions the message of seriousness and sacrifice of the Soviet people is repeated over and over.

Two spaces exemplify the idea of a memorial within a museum. At the end of the permanent exhibition, an enormous table is set with glasses and canteens, and the table covered with letters home. The first time I visited the museum, even though I couldn't read the labels, this space made real the scale of enormous losses suffered by the Soviet Union during the war. And at the very end of the exhibition, the visitor ascends into what I think of as a sort of Soviet heaven; up a flight of stairs to a sunlit dome inscribed with the names of Soviet heroes. The story is entirely collective in its presentation.

*Olesya:* Individual stories have no place here; the story *is* entirely collective in its presentation. That is a result of an artistic and intellectual tradition that has its roots in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition of Soviet avant-garde saw the very act of interaction with art as a collective act, in opposition to bourgeois private consumption. An ideal new citizen had to live in a collective and experience life in a collective, an extreme transformation of human nature. And despite the later devastation of the avant-garde movement of the 1920s, the ideal of collective experience of images (including museum exhibitions) penetrated into later practices including museum design. What you describe in the Museum of the Great

Patriotic War in Kyiv is not merely a result of some old fashioned paradigm or the museum's lack of capability for critical self-assessment. It is a part of a deeper artistic/intellectual tradition, and that is why change did not happen automatically with the collapse of Soviet Union.

*Linda:* This deeper tradition represents one of the real challenges about memorial museums for outsiders, particularly in societies that have undergone change such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. A museum's capability for self-assessment can only reflect a society's capacity for self-assessment. Only as some citizens of the United States became more reflective about our role, as a nation, in issues such as slavery, did museums begin to reflect that thoughtfulness. As an outsider, it's often hard to fully understand the thinking processes that created the exhibitions we see.

*Olesya:* My intuition is also that Ukrainian memorial museums of Soviet times were influenced by the Lenin Museum (they existed virtually in every city) as another ideal model for a museum, a kind of a central temple where there was no room for personal interpretation or alternative approaches. The truth was already there and one had to feel it with all one's senses.

World War II, or as it is often still called in Ukraine, The Great Patriotic War, is an important founding myth of the Soviet Union. And an alternative interpretation of it means alternative interpretation of the Soviet experience itself. For veterans—an alternative interpretation of their entire lives.



*Bas-relief detail at the entrance to the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Kyiv. Courtesy Linda Norris.*

#### **Holodomor Memorial and Museum, Kyiv**

This memorial museum is one of Ukraine's newest, opened in November 2008 by President Yuschenko. It is dedicated to the memory of the millions of Ukrainians killed during the Holodomor (enforced famine) of 1932-33. In those years Ukrainian peasants were dispossessed by the Soviet government of any food supplies and prohibited from leaving their villages. Millions died of hunger. At the same time the Soviet Union was exporting large quantities of grain. According to some recent scholarship, Holodomor was a tool to subdue rebellious Ukrainian peasants who would not accept the idea of collectivisation and the Soviet Union as a state. The Holodomor Memorial is an entire installation in a city park. Exterior statues lead to a large candle-shaped monument with a museum installation in the basement level. At the basement entrance there is a small group of panels, in Ukrainian only, that discuss the intentional nature of the famine. The exhibition is a dark round space, with a random collection of farm tools. On the walls, a video installation of a woman walking along a road, starving and crying, plays repeatedly. Poorly lit books contain

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Ascending into the “secular heaven” of the war museum. Courtesy Linda Norris.

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names of the dead. In the center of the room, visitors are encouraged to light candles on an altar.

*Linda:* When I taught a museum studies course in Ukraine I asked students to write papers about memorials, as they seemed so much a part of the urban landscape in Kyiv. One of my students wrote about this museum, and proposed an alternative, one where visitors could understand the lives of both peasants who starved and those who served the Soviets. And to me, this is the difference between a memorial and a museum. Here, with candles to light and a bell to ring when departing, it seems solely a memorial and not a museum.

A museum could help visitors understand the why of an event—but perhaps in Ukraine the why—and the who—is still too painful to address. Holodomor is an event that few non-Ukrainians have ever even heard of, much less understand. This place still seems to operate on the Soviet

model, Olesya, as you describe it, “The truth was already there and one had to feel it with all one’s senses.”

There are not even heroes, as in the War Museum, there are only victims. How should we feel when exiting? A sense of sorrow? A sense of vengeance? A sense of never again?

*Olesya:* It inclines to the idea of a temple where you have to feel and not to think. Originally, it was not based on a collection of memorable objects, and I would say that this is a monument rather than a museum if we understand museum as a certain cultural archive with the function to transmit knowledge. And what is interesting—the fact that there are no English texts or that the story is not told properly shows that the museum actually fails to transmit the knowledge and is not a publicly trusted archive. Or let’s take a slightly different perspective: philosopher Boris Groys argues that present day museums are deeply rooted in the capitalist notion of looking for new markets (new audiences), and they fail to serve as archives that contain certain cultural values that are not exposed to market estimation. And if we take this perspective, we can see that the Holodomor museum does not reach either of the goals—neither does it find new markets, nor serve as an archive.

*Linda:* Olesia, when I visit here and listen to you, I think about current American museum thinking. For example, John Falk and Lynn Dierking’s work both on meaning-making—that museums really are places where visitors construct their own meaning—and their recent work on identity in museums. Falk proposes

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five categories of visitors: explorers, facilitators, professional hobbyists, experience seekers, and spiritual pilgrims. It seems that, within the Soviet tradition, both the Holodomor Museum and the War Museum were designed only for spiritual pilgrims: places not to learn, not even really to experience, but to feel and reflect. But unfortunately, they are designed in such a way that accessing such reflection is limited only to those who come with sufficient knowledge or are willing to accept a rigid formula for reflection.

### **Kharkiv Literature Museum**

The Kharkiv Literature Museum is a post-Soviet museum, although it opened in 1988, at the very end of the Soviet Union. Located in Kharkiv, once the capital of Ukraine and known as an intellectual center, it's a small museum with a modest entrance on a city street. Its core permanent exhibition exploring Ukrainian writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents an alternative way of thinking about memorializing those affected by life in the Soviet Union. This exhibition begins with the early, pre-Revolutionary 20<sup>th</sup> century and takes the viewer in chronological fashion to the present. In one gallery, a towering pile of books is overseen by a giant ceiling graphic of Stalin, Lenin, and Brezhnev. Around the room, books are housed on three shelves. On the top shelf are writers who became a willing part of the Soviet system; on the second shelf, writers who accommodated in some way; and on the third, lowest shelf, the writers who resisted.

The final gallery is a recreation of a coffee shop table with pencils and paper. Visitors are invited to sit down and write their



Center exhibition area at the Holodomor Museum. Courtesy Linda Norris.

This is a small treasury of prohibited books, and a visitor feels that reading here might be a very interesting thing to do.

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own work, subtly implying that a creative life is one way to resist the machine, be it capitalism or socialism.

*Linda:* This museum was a total surprise to me when I visited in 2010. I had become used to Ukrainian museums presenting a sentimental or single narrative.

In the room with the shelves of books, I asked the curator why the authors who resisted were on the lowest shelves, assuming those books would have places of honor on the higher shelf. To demonstrate that they were pressed down, she said, and also, by taking a small bow

to look at them, to demonstrate our respect.

This exhibition really made me wonder about people—about the writers and how they survived. It made real the oppression without the kind of pathos that exists in so many Ukrainian memorials and seemed to allow visitors to see the many shades of gray that exist in history, rather than the black and white of good and evil, oppressor and victim. And then, of course, I wondered why more Ukrainian museums had not experimented with this approach.

*Olesya:* This museum gives a sense of a treasury or forgotten archive to many Ukrainian visitors, since the books that you have described are very rare. Since the books' authors were banned from university courses, schools and—generally speaking—the collective memory—these books never stood on the bookstores' shelves or could be read in libraries. Their very presence breaks the monolithic structure of the past that is still believed in by the museums such as the Museum of the Great Patriotic War. So this exhibition simply cannot be fit into the narrow frames of the same tradition of museum display. The artifacts of this exhibition are alternative history themselves. And the small reading room in the back of the display is the element that partly satisfies the desire to sit and read right away. As I said, this is a small treasury of prohibited books, and a visitor feels that reading here might be a very interesting thing to do. Also, the reading room gives access to recently published books by Ukrainian authors, which gives a sense of continuity of tradition. And yes, this tradition is not monolithic. But a visitor gets a space for rethinking the history of literature and history in more general sense, and also for



"In a Blue Dream," at the Kharkiv Literature Museum, commemorating writers purged by Stalin during the 1930s. Courtesy Linda Norris.



Exhibit detail showing shelves containing authors' books. Courtesy Linda Norris.

experiencing how exciting reading itself could be.

The Literature Museum in Kharkiv is very intimate, and that is another reason why it is not so likely to be used to stage huge collective statements as is the case with the two museums mentioned above. But Kharkiv is the city where the Soviet Ukrainian avant-garde flourished in the 1920s, and collective representation and consumption was one of its major inventions. It rarely allowed for

intimate personal histories and representations. And—paradoxically—books of that time, avant-garde poetry, are exactly what is shown in a relatively non-spectacular, human-scale way at the Literature Museum.

*Linda:* Olesya, I think you've provided the perfect way to end this conversation—perhaps for us to truly understand and memorialize human events, what museum visitors need to understand is not the enormity of tragedy, but rather the human scale. ✨

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