

LONELY PLANET TRAVEL GUIDES, DARK TOURISM AND THE BALTIC STATES: A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is to take a comparative, longitudinal study of the role of travel guides and the growth of niche tourism. Specifically this study examines the concept of Dark Tourism, or as defined by Sharpley and Stone, “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” to better understand the growth of such tourism sites and attractions in the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Drawing on this broad concept of Dark Tourism, the more narrowly focused perspective of ‘Soviet’ tourism in these former Soviet republics is examined. The longitudinal nature of this research will aid in the understanding of the development of both tourism and marketing theory by way of historical research, and shed light on the growth of this tourism niche. The popular Lonely Planet travel guides are used as the source material for this research.

Keywords: Travel Guides; Dark Tourism; Baltic States; Historical Research

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to take a comparative longitudinal study of the role of travel guides and the growth of niche tourism. Specifically, this study examined the concept of Dark Tourism, or as defined by Sharpley and Stone (2009), “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (p.10) to better understand the growth of such tourism sites and attractions in the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Drawing on this broad concept of Dark Tourism, the more narrowly focused perspective of ‘Soviet’ tourism in these former Soviet republics was examined. The longitudinal nature of this research will aid in the understanding of the development of both tourism and marketing theory, by way of historical research (Miller, 2006), and shed light on the growth of this tourism niche. The popular Lonely Planet travel guides were used as the source material for this research.

The first Lonely Planet travel guide (henceforth LP), titled “Across Asia on the Cheap”, was published in 1973 and focused on backpacking and affordable travel (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2005). Since then, LP has published over 500 different guides that cover almost 200 countries (www.lonelyplanet.com). A significant growth of LP guides resulted from the collapse of the former Soviet Union. One of the earliest guides to this region, which preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union, was “Eastern Europe on a Shoestring” (Stanley, 1989). In 1991, the first and only edition of the LP guide “USSR” was published (Noble & King, 1991). Beginning in 1994, the first LP guide was produced. This guide specifically focused on the newly independent, or technically, re-independent Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Noble, 1994). It is important to note that, during the years between the two World Wars, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were independent countries. This LP guide was published two years before the first LP guide on the much larger region of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (Nebesky & Selby, 1996). In the two decades that followed, LP published five additional revised editions for the Baltic States.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

As noted, the specific type of dark tourism sites that were examined related to the Soviet or Communist period of the Baltic States (e.g., roughly 1941 – 1991). All editions of the LP guides were acquired by the author. The first step in the research was a search of the index using the terms “Communist” and “Soviet” as well as derivations of these terms. Table 1 provides a summary of the findings.

Table 1. Summary of the Findings

<i>Lonely Planet Guides</i>			Index
Year	Guide		References *
1989	<i>Eastern Europe on a Shoe String</i>		0
1991	<i>USSR</i>		0
1994	<i>Baltic Stages and Kaliningrad</i>		0
1997	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>1st Edition</i>	0
2000	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>2nd Edition</i>	1
2003	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>3rd Edition</i>	5
2006	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>4th Edition</i>	8
2009	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>5th Edition</i>	14
2012	<i>Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania</i>	<i>6th Edition</i>	17

* Derivations of “Communism” and “Soviet”

The second step in the research was to make a more in-depth search of the editions for all sites that would be considered “Soviet”. Beginning with the Baltic States and Kaliningrad (Noble, 1994) edition there was a section entitled ‘Soviet Nostalgia’ (p. 137). Although not a promotion of the sites as a tourist attraction, per se, the section discussed where Lenin’s statue used to be in the capital city, Tallinn. It also contained a short reference to a 1924 statue of the armed uprising of the Tallinn proletariat which is located near the Tallinn train station. Interestingly, there were no similar sections about Latvia or Lithuania and the term ‘Soviet Nostalgia’ was not found in any subsequent editions.

Each edition, although not under the title of ‘communism’ or ‘soviet, included a number of Soviet dark tourism sites; predominantly the occupation museums and World War II

cemeteries and memorials. In the third edition, a discussion of the Latvian People's Front Museum was present. The museum housed an exhibit that depicted an office where the main participants, who worked on the campaign, met to lead Latvia's re-independence from the Soviet Union. The exhibit included Soviet period furniture and an early Apple computer; it provided visitors (i.e., predominantly international tourists) an opportunity to view firsthand the trappings of the 'Soviet' period.

The fifth edition (Bain 2009) represented the first time that the term 'Soviet', in the guise of both heritage and nostalgia sites, was mentioned in the book's index. Interestingly, there were no sites in the index listings for Estonia. There continued to be a number of references to Soviet-related tourist sites and this edition saw the first inclusion of a company that offered Soviet tours.

The most recent sixth edition (Presser, Baker, Dragicevich, Richmond, & Symington, 2012) provides the most overt references to Soviet dark tourist sites, including the heading "Soviet Relics" (p. 13) rated 16th of the "Top 17 Experiences" (pp. 6-13).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to provide an initial entrée into a specific niche market of dark tourism and to present insight into the role that tourism guides do or do not play in advancing or silencing this form of tourism in a region of the world that continues to experience significant tourism growth. Although the findings and observations may appear limited in scope, nonetheless they play an important first step in the analysis and understanding of how different voices and materials help to shape and define a body of research. Future steps will involve other "voices" supporting or suppressing "Communist" and "Soviet" Dark Tourism in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The expectation is that through a similar analysis of competitor tourist guides and related tourism ephemera, that was created prior to and during the period of the publishing of the LP guides, will enhance the understanding of this phenomenon. In addition, a better understanding of the value of such guides to both tourists and tourism attraction providers in the Baltic States will be of interest. These findings represent the first step in a greater understanding of the longitudinal success of both a travel guide itself as well as the contribution to success of sights themselves.

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