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Gulag Heritage Conservation, Visualisation and Interpretation for Tourism

Development: A Multi-stakeholder Perspective

In Kazakhstan, the development of a tourism sector that highlights the repressive historical period of Soviet domination is limited. This study investigates the managerial practices of the conservation, visualisation and interpretation of Gulag heritage for tourism development at Kazakhstani museums from a multi-stakeholder perspective. A qualitative case study research approach based on interviews with museum management, policymakers, NGOs, tour operators and historians of the Kazakhstani Gulags is adopted to examine stakeholders' positions on practice. Various development and planning implications are identified: increase the cooperation between stakeholders for proactive cooperative fundraising for commercialisation and conservation of sites; and the need to consider the centrality of visual imagery in museum interpretation and initial multimedia development.

Introduction

Kazakhstan has limited commemoration of the loss of life experienced under the Soviet period of rule and has a small number of national museums or national monuments created by government to commemorate these traumatic periods of history. Since the end of the Soviet period of domination and Kazakhstan independence in 1991, the country was led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev who ruled until March 2019 before handing power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The country's economic shift to a market-economy and the modernization of Kazakhstani lifestyles has led to recent international tourism development. Tourism suppliers now capitalise on the dynamic nature of Kazakhstan's cultural heritage and the potential of new niche tourism experiences including nomadic home-stays (Tiberghien, Bremner, & Milne, 2018) and dark tourism based on the Stalin-era camps in Central Kazakhstan (Sarmento & Serikboluly, 2014). These dark tourism sites include the former Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp (Karlag), which housed more than one million prisoners between 1931 and 1959, and Alzhir, where thousands of female prisoners were held.

In Kazakhstan, the Gulag museums within what was once the Soviet Union have not really been developed for tourism and were initially curated by local historians and

specialists of the Gulags before being developed as politically sanctioned cultural sites. Visitation to these sites is mostly undertaken by local schools and local tour operators such as Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan who bring a relatively small number of local and international visitors. Recent debate (Astana Times, 2019; Khabar Television Channel, 2019) questioned why the number of tourists who visited the Gulag museums in 2018 was very low (around 25,000 visitors in total), and in particular why foreign tourists did not know about them (sic). Similar discussions (The Times, 2019), noted:

> "There is plenty of evidence that people are interested and there is an important story there…They are places where visitors can learn about the enormous evil that was perpetrated across the Soviet Union…In an era of fake news and revisionism, such sites are hugely important".

In the politics of reconstruction of Kazakhstani national identity since the independence of the country, Laruelle and Peyrouse (2006) argued the colonial and Soviet years are deliberately omitted by the government officials who preferred to ignore the historical continuity with the Soviet era to avoid confusion with the contemporary discourse of nation-building. Rather than fostering the development of civil society in Kazakhstan, state actors' managerial style of governmentality 'produces a discourse that reinforces the primary role of the state as managing society through beneficence, efficiency and progress that only superficially propagates ethno-national and historical content rather than moral authority' (Adams & Rustemova, 2009, pp. 1250, 1251). Kudaibergenova (2016, pp. 917-933) further details:

> For President Nursultan A. Nazarbayev's nationalising regime, the status of Kazakhstan as a colony represented a vital item in post-1991 nation-building projects… manipulating postcolonial constructs to achieve a further set of political ends […]. Finally, the regime had managed to elaborate a new ideology of civic nationhood that could act as a stabiliser vis-à-visa post-Nazarbayev ideological crisis […]. Kazakhstan is a postcolonial state where memories of former oppression and domination by the Russian and Soviet empires are framed in dangerously loose, yet very popular, political narratives.

Yet, how Gulags are currently portrayed and presented in Kazakhstani museums by various stakeholders including museum management, local NGOs and policymakers in terms of historical narrative and continuity from the Soviet past into the present are key

managerial and developmental issues for these museums to consider. An understanding of the stakeholders' views in the development of Kazakhstani Gulag tourism practices is thus necessary in the interpretation and use of Gulag heritage for the construction of visitors' heritage experiences. More specifically, how various stakeholders involved in the conservation, presentation and interpretation of Gulag heritage perceive, validate and manage tourism practices and the stewardship of Gulag heritage in the museums is critical to the formulation of this paper.

To date, there has been limited research concerning the planning and development of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. Tiberghien (2018) investigated stakeholders' managerial and authentication positions of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices, and questions of authenticity, ideology and performance in Gulag tourism were considered by Tiberghien and Lennon (2019). Penal tourism and the cultural representation of prisons were explored across a number of research contexts and studies (Strange & Kempa, 2003; Walby & Piché, 2011; Welch, 2013). However, no study specifically addressed the contemporary managerial practices of the heritage experience as conserved, visualised and interpreted at Gulag museums and sites. The Gulag museums in Kazakhstan are inherently entangled in complex relationships with texts, histories and imagery. The emotional attraction of these heritage sites with difficult past is neither new nor culturally straightforward. They offer more than sites of reflection and learning for the visitor. Such sites are critical to both historical record and evidence yet have simultaneously become part of the visitor experience. Lennon (2018) reflected on the role of photography in dark tourism visualization, but not in the Kazakhstani Gulag tourism context. However, the contribution of photography and its pivotal role as evidence of atrocity and evil is critical in the case of Kazakhstani Gulag museums.

In the context of contemporary Kazakhstani heritage tourism development, it is thus paramount to examine various stakeholders' roles in the planning and management of Gulag museums and sites and the extent to which they are represented both visually and in the stewardship of their history (Heidelberg, 2015). More specifically, this study investigates the managerial practices associated with the conservation, visualisation and museum development issues of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan and how they intersect with the interpretation of Gulag heritage for tourism. Various development and planning implications are identified: increase the cooperation between stakeholders for proactive cooperative fundraising for commercialisation and conservation of museums and sites;

and the need to consider the centrality of visual imagery in museum interpretation and initial multimedia development.

Interpretation of Gulag heritage and multi-stakeholder cooperation for tourism development

For Byrd (2007, p. 6), 'tourism development cannot be achieved if imposed without regarding the stakeholders' interests', as more stakeholder participation enables the integration of multiple perceived issues and reflect better community interests and opinions. Analysing the history, policies and impacts that relate to the development and management of heritage tourism in the various areas, and how different agencies and organisations involved in tourism work together in the production and supply of places that reflect difficult pasts, can also lead to competing interests between various entities involved.

Although best practices of tourism development and planning highlight the importance of involvement of all those affected by the proposed development (be it as the cultural resource) within the planning process (Jamal & Getz, 1995), the ideological and institutional context of heritage tourism needs to be looked after with caution (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). If not carefully managed and planned, tourism can be a means of projecting and affirming post-socialist identities that reconfigures identity through wider state identity-building and ethnic policy issues (see Light, 2000; Palmer, 2007). Who has the <u>right</u> to participate does not equal the <u>capacity</u> to participate (Jamal & Getz, 1995, 1999). Museums as institutions need to respond to demands from various stakeholder groups in order to secure support, legitimacy (Friedman, 2007) and long-term funding. As the sustainability of museum finances is more directly dependent on its central stakeholders, strategic stakeholder management is essential in diminishing the economic fragility of museums (Lindqvist, 2012) for the funding and development of practices and preservation of their constituents. Grimwade and Carter (2000, p. 37) discuss the key issues for participants in conservation and presentation of cultural heritage namely:

- recognising cultural heritage resources as positive attributes;
- devising a practical conservation and interpretation plans that consider both community-based issues
- the technical needs of a specific site; developing a sound working relationship between community and heritage professionals;

- demonstrating a commitment to implementing a conservation strategy;
- appreciating the need for sensitive utilisation of archaeological resources; - managing security and minimising vandalism;
- identifying and acquiring adequate financial support; staffing and staff training;
- providing suitable visitor access;
- marketing the resource; and
- maintaining the site.

As a means to create a sound conservation plan from heritage tourism opportunities, there is a need to take into consideration the practical role of the local community and their public involvement in conservation measures (Haddad & Fakhoury, 2016). The development of heritage policies that facilitate and encourage the development of public awareness about the cultural significance of Gulag heritage sites so that local communities can use them as a contemporary economic resource has validity in the case of Kazakhstan.

Evaluating heritage with difficult past requires, as Wight and Lennon (2007) detailed, to understand how these locations are used to convey themes of dominant ideology or selectivity of interpretation record. The objects and events of a particular time period may be appropriated to construct a story (or a myth) that conforms to the economic, social and political interests in a particular domain (Bruner, 1994; MacDonald & Alsford, 1995), 'an authentication process socially constructed and sanctioned by the government with little consideration for local opinions and attitudes' (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, p. 1307). Sharpley and Stone (2009, pp. 112-115) further argue that:

> 'The interpretation of dark heritage sites should ideally authenticate the events they represent or commemorate in a manner which recognises and responds to the emotions of potential visitor or visitor groups, and as far as possible, present an authentic narrative that reflects its emotive content'.

For Sharpley and Stone (2009), effective interpretation enhances the visitor experience by animating a site of dark heritage by providing facts about the place and its heritage. However, this rarely permits a relationship between the place or object and the visitor (Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008; Uzzell, 1998), as Bennet (2013) and Williams (2007) discuss that museums increasingly seek to balance visitors' physical movements by offering different fairs and exhibitions or 'organised walking' to enable objects from the

past to be interpreted and appraised in innovative and creative ways. In Kazakhstan, more 'spontaneous' memorial events about the Gulags are organised during anniversaries and events such as the 'Night at the museum events' and on the 31st of May for the day of remembrance of the victims of political repression (Figure 1) during which public rituals of commemoration are reflecting the contemporary Kazakhstani attitude about the Gulag tragedy and the affective conditions of death as well as the 'national legacy of violence' (Doss, 2006).

FIGURE 1

Beyond the re-enactment of atrocity and Gulag tourism performances, examining various stakeholders' roles in the planning and development of Gulag museums and sites is critical in ensuring that the Gulag narrative is based on current research and falls in the context of modern interpretive and curatorial practice.

Photography and multimedia development in the Gulag museum experience

The fastest growing area of applied technology in museums 'lies in the display and dissemination of images' (Tufts & Milne, 1999, p. 623). When atrocity has occurred, in the recent past such as the history of the Gulag, this can be manifest in a particularly intense manner as people struggle to make sense of, and interpret, what has occurred. When the location of the atrocity becomes an educational and/or tourist site, the complexity of, and demand for, 'interpretation' usually increases (Ashworth, 2002). Indeed, Rojek (1993) has argued that death-related sites can also be referred to as 'sensation sites', and that they reflect some aspects of what Debord (1970) referred to as the 'society of the spectacle'. Herein, visitors understanding is mediated by the images, narratives and staged interpretation of Gulag life. The extent of suffering and incarceration is obscured by the narrative spectacle. Debord suggests a separation of the individual from their own actions which clearly negates individual agency and independence. However, the theory of 'spectacle' provides a useful lens to consider how Gulag heritage is interpreted and recreated and which elements are omitted.

In the case of many of dark tourism sites, this sensation is experienced and re-experienced through photographic and filmic imagery as well as multimedia development. This occupies multiple meaning, both as evidential and interpretation

material but also as material transmitted and displayed. The place of such visual evidence in a range of multimedia may limit their ability to catalyse shock or elicit concern becoming simply decontextualized cues for memory (Williams, 2007). However, learning from the past is frequently cited as a critical reason for visitation. In a range of locations dark tourism sites offer evidential narrative, providing historical context and photographic and filmic evidence of man's ability to do evil. The Kazakhstani Gulags examined here are such places. In the Kazakhstani context, Gulag tourism is synonymous with recognition and visual evidence of the past. For those remembering and validating the past (such as in Figure 2) photography holds critical memories and collapses space and time.

FIGURE 2

Photography and visual imagery are at the core of evidential interpretation and is a critical element of Gulag heritage. The incarceration and punishment of children (Figure 3) is evidenced by such imagery, as exemplified in one of the Gulag museums.

FIGURE 3

Invariably, the viewing of such imagery by visitors is usually defended by suggesting the victim's tragedy must not be forgotten and that we must be alert and responsive to genocide, if it were to reoccur. These photographs of the incarcerated are re-photographed on Smart phones by visitors and tourists to extermination and incarceration camp sites, re-enacting the terror and dehumanization of the victims (Figures 4 and 5).

FIGURES 4 and 5

In the museum environment, new technologies are transforming heritage and the relationships visitors have with heritage. The benefits of technology implementation in heritage interpretation for museums with a traditional interpretative layout can be seen as enhancing visitors' mindfulness, subsequent learning outcomes and satisfaction (Reino, Mitsche, & Frew, 2007). With the increase of the participatory culture and ubiquitous technologies, 'digital heritage' can incorporate a wide range of multimedia outlets and interactive technologies including audio guides, virtual and augmented reality but can also relate to public outreach communication tools such as social media. While audio guides only allow one channel of information with limited interaction for

the museum visitor, interactive multimedia is an effective interpretative medium for museums that can add to existing interpretative techniques by fostering a culture of participation and providing interactive multi-sensory experiences (Evans & Sterry, 1999). The increasing use of virtual and augmented reality in museums and heritage sites since the last decade enables museums to supplement access to and interpretation of heritage sites allowing for a complete immersion experience while also promoting conservation of heritage (Ferguson, Harrison, & Weinbren, 2010). However, while interactive environments enable to collect a wide range of images and media contents, Morgan and Pallascio (2015, p. 261) warn that in the context of dark or difficult heritage, 'understanding the potential for harm and unforeseen consequences of digital heritage is of paramount importance'. Engaging with all stakeholders involved in the dark heritage when designing and promoting interactive exhibits is key as digital exhibitions need to be designed and tailored to educational tools and be brought to visitors in the most effective and impartial way. Additionally, for public outreach, museums can endorse social media to promote their constituents and to connect with wider audiences but it is important to contrast the use of social media outreach for heritage commemorations when produced by institutions or by community-led instances (Simon, 2012). In the case of Gulag museums in Kazakhstan, online promotion is almost inexistent or only performed by the museum management (Alzhir Museum, 2018).

Research context and case studies

The Gulag (see Figure 6) was both a concentration camp and a penal system, and corrective labour were involved a combination of economic output (extracting rich deposits of natural resources) in places like Vorkuta and Kolyma in Russia, and Karaganda in Kazakhstan) with human transformation. Administrative exile usually required no trial and no sentencing procedure and was a punishment for all sorts of opponents of the regime. As Appelbaum (2003, p. 27) details:

> In the Soviet system, the dehumanisation process also began at the moment of arrest, when prisoners were stripped of their clothes and identity, denied contacts with outsiders, tortured, interrogated and put through farcical trials, if they were tried at all.

Outside Russia, Kazakhstan has the most Gulag sites of any former Soviet republic.

FIGURE 6

Case studies provided the major source of empirical evidence for the analysis of the practices associated with the development of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. The Alzhir Gulag museum and the Karlag Gulag museum in Central Kazakhstan were used as sources of empirical evidence for the study. Figure 7 shows the location of the two museums.

FIGURE 7

The two case studies offered contrasting situations (research setting, structure and organisation of the tours, activities proposed to visitors) compared with those of a single case alone (Eilbert & Lafronza, 2005). The region of Karaganda in central Kazakhstan occupies a special place in the history of repressions, where the Kazakhstani part of Soviet heritage is presented in Karlag and Alzhir museums and sites, the two largest museums dedicated to the victims of Stalinism located on the sites of the former labour camps. Despite their historical importance, the museums welcome a relatively small number of visitors per museum (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Alzhir museum and premises

The sites in Kazakhstan comprise the Karlag and Alzhir Gulag museums located in the centre of the country. The Soviet forced labour camp 'Alzhir' located about 30km south of Nur-Sultan city was a special subdivision of the Karlag camp system, held women arrested between 1937-1939 and housed more than 18 000 women from 62 nationalities and ethnic groups. The Alzhir' museum-memorial complex of victims of political repressions and totalitarianism was opened on May 31, 2007 for the day of victims of political repressions in Kazakhstan by the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Alzhir museum was opened to pay tribute to the women and to all those victims of totalitarianism in various years. Imprisoned for an average of 5-8 years, more than 18,000 women stayed at Alzhir and were mostly wives of famous state, political and public figures on the simple

grounds of being wives of traitors as "CHSIRs" - "members of families of traitors of motherland" (Alzhir Museum, 2018). Imprisoned in a condition of strict isolation (a number of women prisoners arrived with children who were sent to Osakarovka orphanage at the age of 3-4 years old), the camp (Figure 8) was dismantled at the end of the Great Terror and its prisoners were then integrated into the general camp population. Brought essentially from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Central Asia, the women prisoners of Alzhir camp were highly-educated and literate, and undertook a wide variety of economic tasks, including the construction and operation of a major textile factory that primarily produced clothing for the Red Army (Barnes, 2012).

FIGURE 8

The museum includes a commemorative stone memorial established by foreign embassies and reconstruction of prisoner barracks (Figure 9) with mock figurines as a means to reconstitute the atmosphere and 'usual way of life' in Alzhir. Built by women inmates themselves, each barrack could accommodate 200-300 people, with temperatures in the barracks not exceeding 6-8 degrees in winter.

FIGURE 9

A train carriage (Figures 10) from Stalin's era (designed in 1927 in Odessa, also called 'Krasnuha' because of the red colour) that was once used for the transportation of up to 70 prisoners (Alzhir Museum, 2018) is also represented on the museum premises.

FIGURE 10

The museum collection (Figure 11) includes an archive of letters, memoirs of former prisoners and a collection of personal items that belonged to them. The first floor of the museum is dedicated to the introduction, development and break down of the forced labour camp system as well as its political, administrative and economic role. It comprises photographs and documents (copies of personal files, interrogation and crime sheets) of repressed public and political figures as well as the well-known poets and writers from Kazakhstan. The second section "Alzhir prisoner" introduces with the history of the camp. Some dioramas portraying the story of the prisoners' everyday lives in the camp,

including the reconstituted camp garment factory and the office of the investigator can be found. Photographs, documents, memoirs, personal belongings of Alzhir women-prisoners and their children can also be found on the first floor.

FIGURE 11

Karlag museum and premises

The Karlag (i.e. Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp of The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs – the NKVD, Figure 3) refers to one of the hundreds of camps referred to as Gulags, that were organized by Josef Stalin in the period of mass political repressions between 1929 and 1953. The Karlag museum, also named as 'The Memory Museum of Victims of Political Repressions', located 45 kilometres south west of the city of Karaganda is one of the largest Gulag-related museum in the former Soviet Union and is housed in the building of the former administrative centre of Karlag in Dolinka village. The building was renovated in 2011 in a Soviet neo-classicism style (Figure 12), with dioramas depicting a range of aspects of the Gulag life including prisoner cells, interrogation rooms, torture chambers and replica execution rooms in the basement of the building.

FIGURE 12

Encompassing around thirty halls and exhibitions on three floors, the Karlag museum mixes traditional displays of artefacts and experiential cultural museum practices (Prentice, 2007) including cells and torture chambers (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13

Since 2013, the Karlag museum organises an annual 'Night in Karlag' event attended by 500–1000 visitors which encompassed a night-time tour of the museum with museum staff staging dramatic scenes of the Gulag (Figure 14). Visitors are additionally offered to taste "Gulag-type meals" as a means to reproduce the condition of the Gulag during Soviet times.

FIGURE 14

Tours of Karlag are organised by operators such as 'Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan' on the Gulag premises and include visiting the museum, "the house of officers" that used to be a cultural centre for the local military men, "the house of technics" where exhibitions of achievements of the national economy were held, the maternity hospital and "Mamochkino", the Children Cemetery where the remains of thousands of children were buried. Visitors can also encounter "the chapel and numerous ruins of buildings built by the prisoners, as well as the rusty barbed wire, which intensifies the gloomy atmosphere of this place" (Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan, 2018). Visits to Karlag premises additionally include the visit of the Spassk Memorial (Figure 15) situated 30 km to the south of Karaganda where foreign prisoners of war were imprisoned after the end of World War II, and which hosts various foreign plaques commemorating the remains of 5152 prisoners of different countries (Russia, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Italy, Romania, France, Finland, Lithuania, Philippines, and Japan) who were buried in this cemetery. Long unmarked, Spassk was a division of Karlag and a division of the post-war special camp Steplag (Barnes, 2011) where Alexander Solzhenitsyn was incarcerated in 1949.

FIGURE 15

Research methods

This study follows a qualitative case study methodology and adopts a constructivist/interpretivist research stance for uncovering the planning and development implications of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. Purposive or judgmental sampling method was used in order to select unique informants that were directly or indirectly linked to the development of Gulag tourism in the country. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted in July 2018 with various tourism stakeholders who were directly and indirectly involved with the development and operation of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan including senior management of museums, government officials, local NGOs, tour operators and experts in the history of the Gulags. The study encompassed visitation and direct observations of the Karlag and Alzhir museums and sites by the researchers in terms of museum galleries, constituents and

premises surrounding the museums including architectural heritage and mass grave sites, and documentary research on the history of Gulags for each museum. The breakdown of semi-structured interviews conducted with various stakeholders is detailed in the Table 2 below.

Table 2

The review of semi-structured interviews followed a content analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a textual analysis methodology of documents, books, photographs and illustrations from each museum. Following Yin's (2009) approach that the examination of word tables from cross-case patterns relies on argumentative interpretation, the interview transcripts were coded line by line to look for recurrent themes which were developed and refined with the integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature on Gulag tourism. An inductive approach taking emergent themes from the interview responses was used and themes were generated through the interpretation of the empirical materials by constantly comparing the codes identified from the semi-structured interviews. Some questions used in semi-structured interviews, such as:

- "What are the roles of visual imagery and photography in the Gulag tourism experience?
- How is the narrative documentation and evidence presented?
- What are the roles of interpretative panels and technology in the Gulag tourism experience?
- How could the narratives and information displayed be improved?"

catalysed elaborate answers from the interviewees. Multiple iterations of coding were used to confirm the validity of the data analysis using complementary word tables to establish cross-case patterns about various stakeholders' positions of Gulag tourism practices in Kazakhstan. Results were finally compared with empirical data in order to make the findings and conclusions plausible.

Research findings

Stakeholders' cooperation and Gulag tourism development

A number of stakeholders emphasised the lack of cooperation and organisation to develop Gulag tourism in the country, as advocated by one of Karlag museum guides:

> We don't cooperate yet with tour operators. They bring tourist groups to the site but I have no idea how much money they charge from tourists. We get only a small amount of money from tourism. That is why we don't have collaboration with tourist companies. We need to work with our tour operators so that they know about these places as 'dark' tourism destinations and collaborate with us further.

The lack of tour operators' involvement and cooperation with government authorities was reinforced by a government official who highlighted the need to further increase a multi-stakeholder strategy and governmental support for developing Gulag heritage tourism:

> Not so many tour operators organise tours to Gulag museums, I know maybe one or two. Kazakh Tourism and the Ministry of tourism are developing a national state programme to support travel businesses, but it's not related to one type of tourism in particular. In this document, more attention should be given to public-private partnerships for tourism development.

The cultural programme "Ruhani Zhangyru" (Modernisation of Kazakhstan's Identity) instigated by the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev advocating; the study of regional history and restoration of cultural and historical monuments and cultural sites of local significance, for the modernisation of the Kazakhstani identity (2018) was also a factor here. It does not make note of any specific legacy of the Gulag nor plans to integrate the heritage of the Gulag into a more specific heritage tourism strategy, despite being advocated by a number of governmental officials interviewed:

> We regularly meet with the government delegations from the Akmola region where Alzhir museum is situated. After various excursions around Kazakhstan, we will look at how to implement the historical aspect of the project "Tugan Jer" (Native land) which is part of "Ruhani Zhangyru" program.
> (Regional government official respondent)

Regardless of the low visitation to the museums and Gulag tourism being perceived as a specialist 'niche', government officials mentioned they would consider including this in

the national strategy as a cultural heritage product, 'however with less emphasis on the promotion side of it' as one of them mentioned.

Funding for the development of museum animation and events

Adequate resources at both museums need to be planned to increase the number of visitor numbers during the year (in particular during special events such as the 'Night at the museum'). At the Ministry level, senior management of the museum advocated more legal developments on licensing so that Gulag museums could generate retail revenue. The lead curator of Alzhir museum recommended more commercialization of the museum related contents:

> Who will risk buying these Gulag souvenirs and then distributing them for free? That is why
> the interaction between heritage and tourism doesn't work well here…As a heritage museum
> we are not allowed to sell anything as the Ministry of Tourism commented we are not a
> 'commercial object'. As a founder of the "the heritage of Alzhir" Fund, we can sell books
> that we publish. This can be done only by public funding. We have a number of international
> tourists who are interested in brochures and articles but we publish them ourselves. We also
> sell pendants and magnets related to the heritage of the Gulags.
> (Lead Alzhir museum curator)

New funding for developing tourism heritage halls and trails with appropriate language skills' training for museum staff were suggested by lead museum curators and directors as being sorely needed to improve the experience at the Gulag museums. The lead curator of the Alzhir museum emphasises that she would need further state funding to be able to implement new Gulag heritage trail development within the museum's premises:

> Historically, our village near Alzhir museum is very interesting from a heritage tourism
> perspective. I used to write a project – "On Alzhir's track" but this project needs to be funded.
> It consists in telling visitors the story of Alzhir but we walk them along the track that women
> of the camp used to walk very day. During the walk, we show them trees, tranches, fields,
> buildings, the lake where they used to work...so, we explain tourists how women inmates
> worked at the camp and we show visitors the places where the victims are buried.
> (Lead Alzhir museum curator)

For international visitors, Alzhir museum staff went on developing it would be interesting not only to see the museum but also experience a 'Gulag museum trail' of Alzhir, so that

they can experience it further and visit the mass grave sites as well. Funding for training guides of the museum was judged deem necessary for further planning and development of the museum. This opinion was echoed by the director of Karlag museum emphasises the necessity to have some new funding to train local guides for the new 'Spassk hall' for foreign prisoners of war were imprisoned after the end of World War II under reconstruction at the Karlag museum, as they are currently almost non-existent:

> At this stage our work is based only on our enthusiasm…We can only pay a very low salary for staff. In order to avoid staff turnover and make people feel proud to work at the museum and meet both ends at the end of the month we need more state funding for training our staff.

One of the museum curators believed there is an important narrative of Alzhir prisoners' story to be created through new media contents such as a short documentary format to lead the visitors, particularly school children ones, towards an initial understanding of the Gulag tragedy:

> When I was talking to schoolchildren who recently visited the museum, I was asking them– Today you've seen a number of Gulag artefacts, photos and stories what are your emotions about the Gulag tragedy, what do you think? And they replied – I know that this is our history, and when we see what happened during the Soviet times, we start to value life. Kazakhstan survived great sorrow, whether people who were part of the Second World War, or the ones who were involved in the repressions.
> (Alzhir museum curator)

The need to create new media contents for communicating about the Gulag tragedy was also commented by Karlag lead museum curator who devised for the need of specialists in website design for the museum as well as various types of social media to advertise the museum internationally.

Funding for conservation of the museums and sites

A majority of the museum curators and historians indicated the pressing issues of the curation and conservation of the museum premises, particularly the graveyards around the museum sites:

> Our museum is under governmental protection but the graveyard - because it belongs to the local authorities – is not under protection. It comes down to our own initiative to curate the graveyard – drawing the fence around it and cleaning the area. But this should be done by

local authorities, which I know, do nothing in this regard. To me, the graveyard is a sacred place; therefore, we need to put signage to be able to find the site from the museum, and build a proper road for cars there, as it is in a bad condition now. But everything has a cost – we need money for that. To be honest, nobody is interested in doing it.

(Lead Alzhir museum curator)

They highlight in particular that the conservation issue gets forgotten as very few members of the government are involved in making decisions for the funding and the conservation of the sites:

> They forgot about this issue. Nobody suggests dealing with the conservation of the museums and sites, despite we had it in our plans for development. For that, we need someone at the government who would initiate and address these specific issues. The local governmental council under which jurisdiction the Alzhir museum falls has officials who focus on other issues, so we need additional initiatives from the government.
>
> (Alzhir museum curator)

The issue for the funding of the site is highlighted as particularly key to respecting international conservation standards for these types of sites, as one government official stated (Figure 16):

> Yes, in case of cemeteries, there should be some improvements, something should be done for the purpose of conservation because we know it is important in terms of international standards. For ex. in Spassk or Mamochkino cemeteries, various governmental embassies have already erected monuments for their victims, ie Poland, Germany… so if our country allowed to put these monuments in place, the government should look after them.
>
> (Government official respondent)

FIGURE 16

For this government official, 'including the museums in the country's new national strategy for cultural revival and modernisation of Kazakhstan's identity "Ruhani Zhangyru" (2018)' was additionally perceived as critical for the longer sustainability of the museums.

Visualisation, multimedia technology and imagery in experience development

As means to increase international visitation, curators of the Alzhir museum are planning a new exhibition in three languages, using photography of prisoners in a chronological fashion as means of narrating prisoners' and their families' lives (Figure 17). As one guide of the Alzhir museum detailed:

> We are planning to portray women's life before their arrest, during their arrest, and after their arrest. And then the documents and other photos with their husbands and children. It's our idea because when people come without a guide, they don't have enough information, they only have the photos of the prisoner of Alzhir and their names but nothing else. We want to create a unique story for each prisoner. And there will be audio guides in three languages so that visitors can also have more details if they wish to do so.
> (Alzhir tour guide respondent)

FIGURE 17

However, the selectivity in use of photographic imagery and inherent political agendas remain evident in the context of Gulag. For example, the Alzhir Museum provides somewhat pedestrian coverage of the creativity and intellectual ability of the female prisoners (see Figure 18 below).

FIGURE 18

Male narratives of rebellion and independence struggles occupy prime ground floor positions (see Figure 19) whilst the female narrative is relegated to a secondary/ peripheral position.

FIGURE 19

Undoubtedly, this is an important narrative of tragedy and selectivity. Dominant narratives are evident in terms of nationalism, gender and current relationships with Russia. The selectivity also affects the entirety of the prisoners' lives and how they are depicted in the museums. To counteract this, the development of technologies such as audio guides and holographic narration are developments both museums are considering, as they are perceived as appropriate means to render for the first time the 'reality' of the

prisoners' lives in a more holistic way. For a majority of stakeholders interviewed, new technologies could enable a broader visitor experience of the tragedy and help in connecting various places such as museums and mass graves to a more coherent narrative of the prisoners:

> The audio guide would be interesting to develop because it would be like a female prisoner would take you around the museum site. And she would talk about the stories of her private life. To do this in Alzhir I think it would add to the visitor experience. The stories of these women who died as well as their children are very moving.
> (Tour operator respondent)

The director of the Karlag museum exemplified further the need for new initial interactive media:

> LED screens were put up in a hall of the museum in order to showcase the road from the terminal of Karaganda train station to the Spassk graveyard where commemorative signs were established. We opened this hall this year, on the 31st of May, and now we are gathering information according to each nationality of the prisoners who were incarcerated in Karlag. If you don't have an opportunity to visit Spassk graveyard, this hall will help you to "experience" Spassk.

The director of the Alzhir museum aims to use multimedia under the development of a 'total' visitor experience 'to make all the moments of the Gulag tragedy come alive'. Under the frame of 'Digital Kazakhstan' (2019), the state funded programme for new pathways of development, the director of Alzhir museum explained:

> If I need some information about a famous Russian prisoner and painter -such as Afonina Taisia– The use of multimedia devices would help me to get all information regarding this particular prisoner– how she was deported, who was her husband, what memorabilia she left – everything will be presented in a multimedia format. We are also planning to add sounds to the dioramas that are presented on the second floor and for the door with hands in chains (Figure 20) – so that the outcry of women would be heard. The same kind of development can be applied to barracks which should also be equipped with modern technologies. We have all of these new potential developments detailed in our planning documents that we would like to submit to the government for funding.

FIGURE 20

Augmented and virtual reality are additional technological means advocated by government officials, perceived by one of them as a possibility to 'not only visiting, but also to experience it almost physically'. However, despite the necessity for enhanced visual technologies to enliven visitor experience at the museums, the difficult past of the Gulag creates 'limits' of the type of technology that can be used to help visitors experience and understand the Gulag tragedy, as highlighted by a governmental official:

> I think it's almost inevitable to start using technology in experiencing cultural heritage, but for this particular dark part of our history, I think technology shouldn't be dominating the tourism experience at the museums, with holograms or other technological means. Because technology automatically prompts you to the idea that 'it's fun'.
> (Government official respondent)

Here, direct experiences are perceived as being devalued by the potential to exist at a meta-level (Foley, 2010). As technology allows visitors to access a created reality that is exciting and unique, this dramatization of contemporary tourism experiences in turn is commented as potentially devaluing and overshadowing the familiar of the lives of Gulag prisoners.

Discussion and conclusions

The need for multi-stakeholder approach to Gulag tourism development

Beyond the geographic location, the research contributed to advancing the literature in the planning and development of Gulag tourism by exploring how various stakeholders cooperate in the fundraising, commercialisation and conservation of Gulag museum and sites; and by considering the role of visual imagery in museum interpretation. This study provided some new insights about the conservation, visualisation and interpretation processes of Gulag museums from a multi-stakeholder perspective, and how Gulag museums and sites could develop and benefit from governmental support at a multiple level including museum content development using a range of new visualisation and initial multimedia tools, Gulag heritage trails, and conservation measures surrounding mass grave sites.

As found by Tiberghien and Lennon (2019), the commodification and selective interpretation of heritage at Kazakhstani Gulag museum and sites is often constructed in a dyadic way between the perspectives of museum curators and the ones of the government. One of the many challenges for local cities in Kazakhstan with the Gulag

heritage is whose story is to be told and how it will be told in a non-exploitative manner, as well as what local policies and procedures will be in place when hosting visitors. This exploratory study poses the question about the need for a stewardship model based on mutually beneficial partnerships between various stakeholders involved in the management of the Alzhir and Karlag Gulag museums, including government officials, tour operators and lead museum management that could help understand how they can position themselves in the future in relation to collections and constituents (Welsh, 2005).

In Kazakhstan, financial sustainability and the participation of different stakeholders are crucial for the long-term future of Gulag museums and Gulag tourism. This study reaffirms the question of how various Kazakhstani tourism suppliers need to be balanced in regard to questions of funding, conservation and stewardship of heritage practices within the Gulag museums. In the case of Karaganda, a city where geographies of displacement from the Gulag era continue to structure urban and social relations (see Till, 2012), the commodification, interpretation and ideological aspects of the Gulag tragedy is notably sensitive, in particular for the senior management of the museum who are seeking investment and development of contemporary museum interpretation the challenge is considerable.

The term 'dissonant heritage' is a useful way of describing the seeming incongruence between people's current lives in Kazakhstan and their dark heritage (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Without acknowledging the importance of the consultation and involvement of all stakeholders in the stewardship of the sites for tourism development, issues linked to the exploitation of victims and attracting foreign and local visitors could lead to adverse reactions from the local communities and provide the opportunity for local authorities and government to diminish the level of public involvement and funding of such dark heritage. Presently, the stigma of the Gulag tragedy as presented in these two Kazakhstani museums is not embraced by local communities surrounding the Gulag sites. Unless they can have an input at community level, in collaboration with the city council. Furthermore, there is no guarantee the private sector (e.g tour operators) will provide a sustained involvement into the development and promotion of Gulag heritage museums and sites. To help joint planning and policy-making development may flounder. A multi-stakeholder approach to Gulag tourism development could involve working in partnership with the cities' heritage preservation commissions as a mean to make the sites more financially sustainable by increasing

fundraising and governmental funding or culturally sustainable by deciding how and what to additionally include in the Gulag museums. Additionally, as Heilderberg (2015, p. 85) notes, 'including a historic resources inventory to develop a heritage preservation plan as well as a historic preservation ordinance' could give additional chances for both Alzhir and Karlag museums and sites to receive dedicated public funding and grants towards preservation and stewardship. Developing public-private partnerships for tourism development involving tour operators, as it was suggested by some government officials, would increase the potential for growth or lasting Gulag heritage legacies.

Developing Gulag heritage interpretation and education

The importance of the Gulag sites as physical records of atrocity, crime and tragic events, merits additional interpretation and understanding that is unambiguous, neutral and derived from historical record (Lennon, 2009, 2010, 2018). Yet, in the Kazakhstani case, interpretation is complicated by the limitations of language, which when measured against visual imagery is often found inadequate. Imagery can also occupy similar levels of ambiguity and complexity. In the case of the horror of something like the Gulags, it is the impossibility of reconciling the reality and unreality of such enormous evil that is so difficult to comprehend as a visitor to related heritage sites. In considering images of the Gulag prisoners in museums and sites in Kazakhstan, an immediate connection with their pain can be observed; as the visitor glimpse their agony and anticipate their demise. These photographic images illustrate the darkest elements of the shared Kazakhstani histories but reveal only limited information about identities of the victims, their personal histories and the wider historical context, which new multimedia outlets (such as augmented reality) could potentially provide.

The importance of such Gulag sites as historical record, and the complex arguments in relation to imagery, multimedia displays, and motivations to view are heightened by the willingness and behaviour of visitors in visually being part of such sites. This visualisation phenomenon allows visitors to consider the enormity of viewing such sites as part of contemporary tourist behaviour. Photographs and subject matter of the Gulag presented in the Kazakhstani museums should challenge the nature of the response, understanding of place and the societal relationships with the mass deportations as this visualisation attests to the relationship with tragedy, incarceration and evil. Because photography mediates and is an interpretation, it comes between what is

mediated and how the history of these places can be rationalised and 'understood'. The images of inmates presented in the Gulag museums are evidence of an evil perpetrated on many, and in the case of Karlag and Alzhir museums the photographs and envisaged multimedia outlets are the new catalysts for visualisation, narrative and evidential record. What we observe in the images of tragic Gulag sites is also the 'tourist gaze', visually choreographed, composed and framed for consumption (Urry, 1990). In such Gulag museums, images are connected with emotions of fascination and horror which is in turn are frequently recorded and photographed.

As the directors of both museums and historians acknowledged, Karlag and Alzhir sites are places of political and historical remembrance which participate in the shaping of contemporary Kazakhstani identity, but also, as one historian emphasizes, are sites that enable society to be held 'accountable for their political actions if these complicated and horrific years repeat again'. How Gulag museum and sites are managed and presented to the public to ensure visitation and conservation, but without giving the impression of exploitative or over commodification of the Gulag heritage, is a key concern for the stewardship and future visitation of the museums and sites. The ethical and practical implications regarding the role of heritage practitioners towards selective interpretation and popularisation of Gulag heritage for tourism development when this conforms to political agendas are important to consider. Because the establishment of socially and ideologically constructed cultural institutions such as Gulag museums is influenced by central control and legally limited practices of the stakeholders involved, such as for the museum curators, ignoring aspects of the colonial and soviet era when constructing a contemporary discourse of nation-building signifies that "stewardship" and "mutually beneficial partnerships" might neither be autonomous nor effective. An inclusive destination governance system that effectively encourages tourism policies based on the cooperation, sharing of information and engagement of all stakeholders is thus needed (see also Akbar, Yang, Han, & Kanat, 2020).

New developments of Gulag museum exhibitions and constituents would need to consider the level of community involvement, resilience and acceptance in regard to the Gulag tragedy. When developing Gulag tourism in the country, the community involvement in the heritage agendas, curatorial practices and interpretation protocols of these museums will be equally important if they are to satisfy both local and international visitors. The involvement of local communities including schools and universities from

the villages surrounding the museums in the operation and management of both Alzhir and Karlag Gulag museums could also offer a key channel in the communication, interpretation and the digital and public display of information presented in the museums. This could be a way forward and help impact positively on the visitor experience by building local partnerships with government and tour operators involved in the development and promotion of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. A separate research agenda could consider how the contemporary interpretation and commodification of the Gulag heritage and sites can be further developed and benefit from local community input and governmental support as part of conservation and enduring heritage tourism and educational sites.

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