

# The Overflow of Secrets

## The Disclosure of Soviet Repression in Museums as an Excess

by Eglė Rindzevičiūtė

This article uses the metaphor of overflow to understand the role played by the revelation of previously secret experience in the controversial Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, Lithuania. It shows how efforts to disclose Soviet repression and to consolidate and sustain a particular community of survivors, the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees, produced an “excess” of revelation in a context of radical political change that in the process led to a failure to represent the complexity of Lithuania’s past by sidelining the Holocaust in its narrative of repression. In contrast to other studies that understand this museum as an instrument of a particular governmental ideology, I suggest an alternative explanation of the origins and character of this museum, arguing that it should be understood as a community museum. I argue that the museum’s failure to provide a balanced presentation of the past is better understood as an effect of an excessive desire to reveal the particular experiences of this community, which I describe as an overflow of meanings, not merely a result of the governmental elite’s will to suppress alternative versions of the past.

The public disclosure of state-sponsored repression played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1986 the head of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated a *glasnost* (openness) campaign, thus allowing greater freedom in public debate. Originally meant to combat the economic inefficiency of the Soviet system by encouraging constructive citizen criticism, *glasnost* spilled over into political debate around the repressive origins and character of the Soviet regime. Arguably one of the most significant and unforeseen developments was the shattering of the myth of the Soviet Union as a voluntary federation of sovereign republics. On August 23, 1987, groups of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian dissidents staged public demonstrations to commemorate the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939), which was signed just before Germany invaded Poland and ceded the three countries to the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>1</sup> This commemoration opened the door to unprecedented publicity about Soviet repression in the Baltic states: the deportation of members of the local population to the gulag, postwar anti-Soviet resistance, and KGB terror (Kasekamp 2010: 160–171). Although this political shift toward transparency was not the only factor behind the collapse of the Soviet Union (the declining economy played an important role), the revelation of Soviet repressions was central for the mobilization

of Baltic populations and the eventual independence for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1990.

In this political context, a complex dynamic of the revelation of past experiences of violence emerged. In Lithuania, the repression, deportations, torture, and killings performed by the state’s repressive organizations, including the State Security Committee (Komitet gosudarstvennoĭ bezopasnosti [KGB]), affected about a third of the population. This was known to many, yet until the decline of the Soviet regime, neither victims nor perpetrators were publicly discussed, albeit for different reasons. Knowledge of Soviet repression was kept secret by both the state authorities, to protect the legitimacy of the regime, and survivors, out of fear. The disclosure of Soviet repression, therefore, involved confronting a highly complex asymmetry of power but also a difficult problem of stabilizing the transient, ephemeral character of individual, personal experiences that would be lost with the passing of that generation.

In this context, those who survived Soviet repression resorted to the institution of the museum to make a particularly strong, symbolic statement of commitment not only to reveal but also to solidify their revelations in a complex material assemblage, assuring its perpetuation in the future. From the late 1980s, about 40 museums and exhibitions dedicated to Soviet repression were organized by grassroots community organizations across Lithuania (LPKTS 2014). As noted by

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1. Knowledge about the pact circulated in small dissident circles in Lithuania from the 1970s. For more, see Šepetyš (2006). On Soviet deportations, see Khlevniuk (2004); on deportations from Lithuania, see Grunskis (1996).

Autry (2013:60–62), new museums that emerge around a conflict-ridden past do not necessarily bring about more social cohesion; often, instead, such museums contribute to the fragmentation of society and perpetuation of conflict. This turned out to be the case in post-Soviet Lithuania.

In this article, I examine the formation of the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, Lithuania, as an attempt to reveal Soviet repression that led to an excessive focus on an ethnocentric narrative of the past. Following David Shearer (2009), I define Soviet repression as the coercive means—such as arrests, jailing, torture, and killing—by which state security organizations such as the KGB and its predecessors controlled the population.<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet Union the first wave of mass repressions began as part of the collectivization of the countryside in the early 1930s; this was followed by the political purges at the end of the decade. When the Soviets annexed the Baltic states in June 1940, mass repression of the local population began; thousands were classified as enemies of the state and deported to the north and far east. Soviet repression resumed after the end of the Second World War and continued until 1953. The lives of those who survived punishment and returned from deportation were marred by social alienation. Until the late 1980s, knowledge about Soviet repression was a “public secret” so ill defined that it hovered in the air as an amorphous cloud of fear.

Giving exact content to this secret ruptured Soviet control of Lithuanian society but also caused huge social tensions, as many locals collaborated with the repressive apparatus, either directly or indirectly, while some fighters against the Soviet occupation in 1944–1953 turned against countryside people. Further, some survivors of postwar atrocities mistreated returning deportees and political prisoners who, in turn, revealed stories about mutual injustice and violence in the gulag. In this context, in line with Autry’s (2013) study on black museums in the United States, I suggest that the shaping of Lithuanian cultural organizations dedicated to the commemoration of Soviet repression is best approached as a highly complex, plural process of revealing that cannot be reduced to a governmental strategy to establish one hegemonic truth. What I propose, therefore, is a substantial revision of the prevailing interpretation of post-Soviet history museums in Lithuania, where an excessive focus on the victimization and heroizing of titular ethnic groups clashes with a requirement to balance the narratives of the suffering of the Lithuanian population with stories about Lithuanian perpetrators, who collaborated with either the Soviets and/or the Nazis. This is a requirement placed on these museums by representatives of minority groups and the international community.

The Museum of Genocide Victims was established in a building that served as the headquarters of both the Gestapo and Sonderkommando, which conducted the extermination

of Jews from 1941 to 1944, and the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del [NKVD]), renamed the Committee for State Security (KGB), from autumn 1940 to June 1941 and from 1944 to 1991. The Holocaust was only acknowledged in passing in the first version of the museum’s exhibitions, which was dedicated mainly to Soviet repression: from the early 2000s until 2010, the extermination of Lithuania’s Jews was only mentioned on an informational plaque in one of the museum’s corridors. This omission and the use of the word “genocide” in the title, led commentators such as Mark (2010) to argue that this museum was an example of the propaganda of post-Soviet ethnonationalist elites trying to obfuscate the participation of the local population in the Holocaust. In order to construct ethnic Lithuanians as a suffering and victimized nation, Mark argued, the Museum of Genocide Victims actively concealed, even made secret, the participation of the local population in the killings of Jews, in the deeds of the communist government, and in the civil war. Their involvement instead was simply framed as anti-Soviet resistance.

Whereas critics correctly register the tension between secrecy and disclosure in the museums of Soviet repression, by constructing their argument around calculated censorship and ideological struggle they disregard the complexity of the social mechanisms at work. Deconstruction analysis offers many perspectives for studying concealment, distortion, and propaganda. But we lack the conceptual tools to understand the social and semiotic mechanisms of revealing as a distinct social practice. One such useful tool, I suggest, can be the metaphor of overflow, which so far has been used to explore consumption and management but also social interaction (Callon 1998; Lakoff 1987) and which was applied by Czarniawska and Löfgren (2014:6) to study the process of meaning making in organization. In line with Czarniawska and Löfgren, I define overflow as excess, generated when a substance leaves one area and enters another, in consequence transforming the new context. This transformative capacity of overflow, write Czarniawska and Löfgren, tends to be evaluated in moral terms, as good or bad. It is in this sense that I use the metaphor of overflow to understand the consequences of the post-Soviet shift from an “acute scarcity” of information about the Soviet repression to an excess. The desire to reveal the particular experiences of Soviet repression crowded the discursive space, with better organized grassroots groups being most effective at disclosing their own secrets. In this case, the overflow, produced by the revelation of Soviet secrets, can be understood as a historically contingent phenomenon, which is not necessarily an expression of censorship, or in other words, a structural dismissal of particular stories.

This is clearly revealed in the case of the Museum of Genocide Victims, where the revealing led to an excess of a particular type of meaning reflected at several levels of the organization: the rationale of the museum, the thematic choice, and the objects on display. In making this case, I draw on a historical and ethnographic study conducted from 2010 to

2. I use the notions of “Soviet repression” and “Soviet terror” interchangeably to refer to the atrocities inflicted by the Soviet regime both through local and occupying actors.

2014, when I made repeated visits to the museum, taking notes on the composition and contents of the exhibition displays and interviewing members of staff.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I first situate my analysis of the Museum of Genocide Victims in the context of wider studies of Soviet and post-Soviet secrecy. I then outline two circuits through which secrets were revealed in this museum, describe the origins and the exhibits, and detail the ways in which the revelation of the Soviet repression became an overflow.

### Soviet Repression as a Public Secret

In order to understand the importance of the institution of the post-Soviet museum in revealing these secrets, we need to begin with an overview of secrecy under the Soviet regime. The practices of secrecy were central for the existence of Soviet authoritarianism, but, somewhat surprisingly, they have rarely been studied as a sociocultural phenomenon. Relevant, albeit scarce, work engages with national security and the control of information in the Soviet Union (Ganley 1996; Hutchings 1987), but the role that secrecy played in controlling the Soviet population continues to puzzle social researchers. According to Oleg Kharkhordin (1999), state control and mutual surveillance pervaded the fabric of the entire Soviet society, which leads him to suggest that secrecy was the prerogative of the state and not individuals. In contrast, Yurchak (2005) and Siegelbaum (2006) argue that social surveillance was not a mere instrument of state control but an instrument of self-regulation whereby Soviet citizens had some room to resist by using irony, complacency, and even indifference toward the official state organizations.

Soviet citizens could, and did, ignore, mock, or even challenge many of the ideological postulates of the Communist Party, but there were very clear limits as to how far one could go. Even after the death of Stalin in 1953, Soviet repression—deportations, the gulag, and the KGB terror—remained a strictly guarded territory about which most people did not joke. This discursive void was formally assured: the state made sure that there was nothing to talk about in concrete terms by concealing the scale of the repressions. The documents pertaining to the NKVD/KGB terror were classified as *sovershenno sekretno* (in Russian, completely secret) and were thus official state secrets. Although during the Thaw (1954–1964), the mass repressions were acknowledged (and attributed to Stalin) by the Communist Party, concrete data on their scale and character were not released into the public domain in the Soviet Union.

Stalin's terror was first condemned in the famous "secret speech" by Nikita Khrushchev, delivered to the Central Committee in Moscow in June 1956. In this address, the script of which was promptly and intentionally leaked to the West,

3. The data involve fieldwork observation of museum exhibitions and interviews and correspondence with the museum staff as well as with relevant heritage specialists and academic historians in Lithuania. Fieldwork was carried out in 2011, 2012, and 2013.

Khrushchev blamed Stalin for the repression of innocent individuals, wrongly stigmatized as "enemies of the people," and he defended Lenin, who, he argued, used violence only when necessary. Khrushchev's leaked speech was published by the *Observer* and the *New York Times* in June 1956 (Reitt 2006), but it took a while before the repression surfaced in the Soviet media, and then only briefly. The prominent Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recalled that in spite of Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin's repression, he did not dare to show his writings on the gulag even to his close acquaintances. Solzhenitsyn's intuition was correct: his story about an inmate of the gulag, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published in 1962, was attacked by the Moscow Party Secretary in 1965 and withdrawn from public libraries (Allén 1993). This act of censorship signaled that Stalinist repression was not a legitimate subject for public discussion. The legacy of this policy shift was enduring: for example, recent research indicates that the restriction of the information about gulag appeared to have strongly contributed to the absence of this theme from the public knowledge in Russia (Schuman and Corning 2000:929–930).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, in Soviet Lithuania, local party leaders were just as willing as Moscow to repress this knowledge. The first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Antanas Sniečkus, passed particularly harsh laws that obstructed the return of rehabilitated Lithuanian deportees and political prisoners from the north and far east to Lithuania; this was, according to historians, a tactical maneuver, because some of the returned deportees successfully sued their denouncers (LGGRTC 2007).

The collapse of the Soviet regime brought about an unprecedented wave of transparency toward the Soviet past (Werth 1989), but the actual disclosure of Soviet repression continued to be limited. In Russia, many survivors of Soviet repression lived in fear of being repressed again as late as the 1990s. This fear was perceived by some Western researchers as rather irrational: for instance, an oral historian described a case when an interviewee, a Russian woman who lived through the Stalinist repressions, became upset with an oral history researcher who was interviewing her, fearing that she had disclosed too much about herself (see Figs 2008:122–123). But such interviewees were right to be concerned: many oral historians did not bother to anonymize their interlocutors, ignoring the sociopolitical conditions in Russia that made revealing risky. In Lithuania, the context for revealing Soviet repression was radically different, as this type of revelation was legitimized by the overall popular support for the secession from the Soviet Union and the overhaul of the repressive state structure. I detail this in the next section, where I analyze the

4. In contrast to the gulag, some writings on the Holocaust were allowed, albeit in a highly censored form. Although these admitted the participation of the local population in the killings, they did not specify it, and they placed all blame on the Nazis (Bendikaitė 2010:137; Gaunt 2010). As a result, Jewish suffering was hopelessly lost in the narratives of the great patriotic war (Weiner 2001).

ways in which the flow of the previously repressed knowledge of Soviet repression led to an overflow of meanings requiring new modes of coping.

### An Overflow of Revealing: The Community Origins of the Museum

The idea of memorializing the headquarters of the Soviet Lithuanian KGB was suggested by the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees (UPPD) and adopted in a decree of the Lithuanian Supreme Council in August 1991,<sup>5</sup> even before the Lithuanian branch of the KGB was officially disbanded.<sup>6</sup> Established as a club in 1988, UPPD united the surviving, previously repressed citizens of Lithuania and, in its first publication, declared that it would take up the responsibility to become “a bridge between our own dead ones and the ones who would live after us” (Butkevičius 1988:2). Outlining different means of bringing back previously suppressed experiences of life under the Soviet system, this program involved the making of a museum of the Stalinist repression. When, 3 years later, the KGB left its headquarters, the UPPD quickly mobilized to lobby for the establishment of a museum on the premises. Thus, the initiative to create and also select the highly controversial title for the Museum of Genocide Victims did not come from academic circles or the government but from the UPPD, a grassroots organization. Furthermore, the idea of establishing a museum of Soviet repression built on a rather striking practice of private and secret collection: it appeared that Lithuanian survivors of the Soviet repression kept thousands of images and everyday objects hidden away in family archives with the hope of using them in the future. To compare, far fewer previously repressed Russian citizens preserved objects as mementos of their terrible experiences as gifts for the future, thus making the establishment of the Russian museums of Soviet repression a more challenging task.<sup>7</sup>

The physical location of the KGB headquarters was far from secret: a grand building, built in a historicist style in 1899 and used for different administrative purposes, it was situated on the main Gediminas Avenue, leading from the Cathedral Square to the then Supreme Council, now the Parliament House and the National Library, in the heart of the city of Vilnius, with extensive pedestrian and road traffic going past it. The UPPD wished to turn the whole building into a memorial, a material reminder of the death and torture concealed

by its walls for the previous 50 years. However, although the new Lithuanian government officially condemned the Soviet crimes against humanity, it also needed space to house new state institutions, and pragmatism won against idealism: a large part of the building was given to the courts. The remainder housed the newly established Special Archives of KGB records. One wing was allocated to the museum.

Deeply concerned that the memory of the KGB's crimes would be lost in the turmoil of post-Soviet transformation, the UPPD produced a particular discourse that would soon be criticized as an overflow. Committed to the idea that Soviet crimes were a case of “genocide,” the UPPD's plan for the museum disregarded the fact that the building also housed the Gestapo headquarters in 1941–1944. The verbatim transcription of parliamentary debates and also my interview with a historian involved in the establishment of the museum show that this striking omission appeared in the very particular context of turbulent political and economic change: the Lithuanian economy was collapsing, and it was feared that the newly elected president, an ex-Communist Party leader, would clamp down on the revelation of Soviet repression. Government interest in tracing individuals who cooperated with the Soviet repressive apparatus was not immediate; it was only in November 1999 that a lustration commission was founded to identify and make public the individuals who cooperated with the KGB and other authorities of the Soviet regime and to formulate a policy limiting the employment of these individuals in strategically important state institutions, including banks, schools, and the government. In spite of a slow start of the lustration process, in the end Lithuania adopted a rather strict policy in comparison to other East European countries (Ravaitytė 2015:49–50, 76).

In addition to this complicated political context, the cultural administrative context was averse to new initiatives that required high expenditure, such as museums. Like many other new cultural organizations of the 1990s, the museum was hastily organized with a limited budget and without any systematic support from heritage or history professionals. In an interview, an official who specialized in the heritage sector at the then Ministry of Culture and Education recalled visiting the newly established Museum of Genocide Victims to find a confused staff, abandoned hallways, and the UPPD's members sitting in the former prisoners cells as a sign of protest because they were concerned about plans to repaint and sanitize the basement. In the 1990s, the museum was so severely underfunded that it “barely functioned,” according to a member of UPPD (LR Parliament 1997). This situation changed only from the late 1990s, when the museum was transferred from the Ministry of Culture to the Center for Research on the Genocide of Lithuania's Inhabitants and Resistance.<sup>8</sup> The first

5. LR nutarimas [The decree of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania], “Dėl VSK/KGB aukų atminimo įamžinimo” (Vilnius, August 1, 1991).

6. For more, see Anušauskas (2012), Burinskaitė (2011), Rindzevičiūtė (2013). In the 1990s many ex-KGB officers formed private security firms; see Juska (2009).

7. I base this statement on personal communication with Irina Flige, the director of the St. Petersburg Memorial Research and Information Centre, Paris, May 23, 2014.

8. The museum's mission is “to collect, conserve, study, exhibit, and promote historical materials and documents that reflect the repressions of the occupational government against Lithuania's inhabitants” (charter of the Museum of Genocide Victims, July 30, 1997).

exhibition displays were installed in 2000, and since then the museum has boasted a consistently growing number of visitors (63,791 visitors in 2014), has been performing well economically, and is receiving considerable governmental funding (data from the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, 2013).

However, the excessive focus on the Soviet repression stirred an international controversy. The use of “genocide” to describe Soviet terror in the title of the museum was criticized, and the museum attracted further criticism for dedicating only a very small part of its exhibitions to the Holocaust (Steele 2008). Rohdeval (2008:179), for instance, wrote that the museum solely focused on the hegemonic, ethnocentric narrative framing the Soviet crimes as a disruption of Lithuania’s sovereignty, conflicting with the involvement also of local, ethnic majorities as perpetrators. In all, scholars and commentators saw the museum as evidence that the Lithuanian elites refused to engage with a complex past in which Lithuanians were both victims and perpetrators.<sup>9</sup>

However, as I indicated earlier, it was not “the elites” who organized this museum but the members of the UPPD, previously repressed, socially and economically disenfranchised individuals, many of whom were elderly at the time of the controversy and who sought to make their experiences known to the public. To be sure, the UPPD saw its mission as a struggle for the “historical truth,” yet its members were building on their personal experiences of Soviet repression. As the UPPD’s efforts eventually crystallized in an increasingly well-attended museum, their community-building efforts overflowed into the wider agenda of the public cultural sector, thus becoming an uncomfortable excess.

Subsequent development of the museum can be understood as an attempt to manage this overflow of the community’s narrative into a public museum. At the beginning of the controversy, the museum’s staff representatives reacted defensively to criticisms of the insufficient coverage of the Holocaust in their exhibitions by pointing to the existence of Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum, which had several exhibitions on the Holocaust, and arguing that in Lithuania, state cultural organizations avoided duplicating each other (although if one applied the same logic to art museums, this argument appears weak). Later, staff agreed that the focus of the museum exhibitions be widened. Substantial changes began in 2010 when a documentary video on the Holocaust was included in the exhibition, with explicit acknowledgment that Lithuanians were involved in killing Jews. In 2013 a prison cell in which Jewish prisoners had been held was refurbished to acknowledge this horrific aspect of the building’s past. In October 2012 and again in 2013, a group of members of Parliament suggested that the title of the museum be changed from the Museum of

9. See Steele (2008). In the museum, the killings of Jews in Lithuania were initially only referred to in the texts that accompanied the exhibitions, although the research center, to which the museum belonged, had done a lot of research on the Holocaust. For a good overview of Lithuanian scholarship on Jewish history and the Holocaust, see Liekis (2011).

Genocide Victims to the Museum of Terror and Resistance (LR Parliament 2013). Although the UPPD protested against the renaming, these changes clearly show that museum staff sought to adjust the excessive revealing of the UPPD’s version of the past, thus questioning the idea of a consensual, elite-driven ethnocentrism (BNS 2013).

To summarize, the holding, sharing, and revealing of secrets was central to the origins of the museum as it was established and initially maintained by a particular community of survivors of Soviet repression. Whereas these survivors held it imperative to disclose the details of their terrible experiences, they paid little attention to a more inclusive historical narrative to account for historical complexities during which perpetrators exchanged their positions with victims and for the complex ethnic, political, and social dynamics of Soviet repression. The establishment of the Museum of Genocide Victims was driven by the imperative of gifting previously suppressed experience and knowledge to the future (Davis and Manderson 2014; Gradén 2013; Mauss 2000 [1954]). Yet the museum staff found it necessary to face the requirement of objectivity as posed to them by both professional historians and representatives of the Jewish community.

Whereas the establishment and general thematic orientation of the museum can be attributed to the UPPD community’s wish to reveal its own secrets, the actual exhibitions, which were professionally produced, constituted a rather different instance of the revelation of secrets. In the next section, I draw on the idea of strategic disclosures, selective as to what to reveal and what to conceal (Davis and Manderson 2014: 160), to probe the ways in which excessive meaning occurs in the presentation of victims and perpetrators of the Soviet repression in the exhibitions at the Museum of Genocide Victims. My purpose is to alert the critics of the museum to the presence of different kinds of excess at different levels of organization, which should open up analysis to look beyond an ethnocentric narrative. Having briefly described the settings and exhibitions of the museum, I detail several salient examples of such excess.

### Overflow in Strategic Disclosures

Curatorial framing plays a fundamentally important role in the Museum of Genocide Victims. The museum is housed in an imposing, large building, but the visitor enters not through the impressive porch (which leads to the courts and the Special Archives) but through a smaller door in a side wing not visible from the main street. The front of the building is marked, however, with the engraved names of people killed by the KGB in its basement. The framing also continues inside, where the spatial setting clearly speaks to the visitor that this is not a purpose-built museum. The entrance hall is crammed, consisting of a midsize stairway and a tiny box office that also sells relevant publications. The exhibitions about the history of repression are situated in the former KGB offices, situated along corridors on the ground and first floors. The basement

contains in situ expositions: prison cells, punishment cells, and an execution room.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the visitor is offered a mediated experience of the history of repression through exhibitions and (relatively) direct experience of the KGB's prison.

It is a historical museum, and the exhibition narrative is organized around a chronological frame: it begins with the Soviet occupation, briefly touches on the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, and proceeds to detail postwar resistance fights and deportations from the 1940s to 1953 and KGB activities in Lithuania from the 1950s to the 1980s. In all, the curators introduce eight principal themes, the titles of which mark the halls and are briefly presented in the accompanying catalog. Two sections tell the story of anti-Soviet resistance, three sections are dedicated to the experiences of Lithuania's inhabitants in the gulag, and two sections detail the activities of the KGB and societal resistance during the post-Stalinist period, from the late 1950s to the 1980s. The most recent addition, from 2011, details the history of the Holocaust in the Vilnius region.<sup>11</sup> At the moment of writing in 2015, therefore, the historical narratives articulated in the exhibition are considerably better balanced than they were in the first version of the displays, installed in the early 2000s. However, there are further unresolved tensions rooted in the overflow of meanings at the level of the exhibits.

It is a widespread educational practice among contemporary history museums to frame their exhibits and guide visitors' attention with accompanying texts. The Museum of Genocide Victims is no exception. The texts, providing background historical information, are printed on the glass that separates visitors from the exhibits. The exhibits themselves largely fall into four categories: objects, original photographs and documents, copies of photographs and documents, and video materials. The overall effect of the exposition is to create an environment appealing to different senses by using sound, alternating dim and bright light, and aesthetically appealing, modern exposition designs that combine glass, color, and decorative installation while at the same time trying not to overdo it by letting the exhibits speak for themselves. The building itself, particularly the prison and punishment cells in the basement, forms an experiential environment. The cells are ghastly: the walls are dilapidated, although not necessarily authentic: for instance, the cold water punishment cell is a reconstruction, the original one having been removed in the 1950s. In

such a cell a prisoner would be left to stand on a small platform just above the surface of ice cold water. Another punishment cell features soft-padded walls; its function is unclear. Nevertheless, these punishment cells require little curatorial framing to emotionally affect the visitor. More surprisingly, the execution room, where about 1,000 individuals were killed from 1944 to the mid-1960s, has been refurbished into a memorial, featuring exhibits and, under a glass flooring, forensic archaeological findings from the KGB's secret burial grounds.

Thus, the museum exposes to the visitor two environments: one orderly, mediated by the exhibition design, historical narratives, and labels, and another one, relatively raw and untamed, perceived by some as excessive: for instance, an exposition guard told me that it was high time to repaint the basement so that "it would be neater and nicer." However, as I show below, the part of the exposition that is carefully framed by professional curators also spills over with excessive meanings that are not addressed in the curators' explicit narratives.

The curatorial framing, as mentioned earlier, principally involves a historical chronology, the division of the exhibition into thematic blocks. But it also provides perhaps the most important disclosure of the scale of Soviet repression and anti-Soviet resistance, something that can only be revealed by numbers that set individual events and cases into a larger context. Numbers, as Porter (1996) has noted, are a powerful rhetorical instrument in political debate. Based on an abstract system of signs, quantification posits a highly depersonalizing technique of governing the social. Neither lives nor deaths can be straightforwardly compared with each other; numbers can. Numbers evoke a feeling that something was big or small; they may impress the beholder and help to contextualize an individual case. Thus, a large number of victims would efficiently illustrate the evil of the Soviet system; the small number of anti-Soviet resistance fighters might be interpreted as the futility of patriotism.

The numerical discourse of Soviet crimes is an important context-setting tool that augments the previously abstract awareness that repressions had taken place with a new sense of scale and significance. In cooperation with the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania, the museum not only displays but also produces numbers; for instance, it runs a database of Lithuania's inhabitants who suffered from the Soviet regime. In 2012 this database contained information on about 178,000 victims, approximately 47,530 participants in anti-Soviet resistance fights, and about 17,700 perpetrators of repressions. (This database does not include the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust; the latter are counted in other, interconnected databases).<sup>12</sup> Although this database is not made available online to the public, it is used internally by museum staff and visiting researchers as a heuristic tool,

12. In 2014 it was established that at least 2,055 Lithuanian inhabitants directly or indirectly participated in killings during the Holocaust (LGGRTC 2012).

10. Because of limited space, I leave out the museum's branch in Tuskulėnai, established in 2002.

11. The themes are "Lithuania in 1940–1941," "Partisan War, 1944–1953," "Uneven Fight—Suppression of Armed Resistance," "Lithuania's Inhabitants in the Gulag, 1944–1956," "Deportation, 1944–1953," "Life Continues," "KGB, 1954–1991," and "Civil anti-Soviet Resistance, 1954–1991." The exposition also includes an eavesdropping office, prisoners' chambers, and an execution room. The most recent addition is an exposition titled "Nazi Occupation and the Holocaust in Lithuania," installed in one of the prisoner cells in the basement in 2011.

a reminder of the growing gap between the incrementally growing knowledge of the scale of the repression and the stability of the exhibition displays, which soon might be out of date.

If the prison and punishment cells speak through their materiality, exhibitions speak through objects and photographs that represent individuals. Many museums of contemporary history rely on the medium of photography to communicate the past; so does the Museum of Genocide Victims. The first thing that a visitor entering the museum encounters is hundreds of photographs, printed on the glass walls surrounding the entrance. If the numerical discourse was produced by professionals, the material part of the exhibitions came from individual voluntary donations to the museum. These donors provided the museum with the means to develop detailed knowledge about the Soviet repression but had little influence on the ways in which the museum curators chose to frame these objects in the exhibitions. This is, naturally, a legally regulated situation: the act of donation includes a clause that allows the museum to use the donated material in any way it chooses in its expositions as well as any other public presentations.<sup>13</sup> The museum's charter does not cover issues of personal data; according to an interviewed museum employee, instead of drawing on formal guidelines, staff are guided by a tacit understanding of what is an appropriate exposure.<sup>14</sup>

However, giving an object to the museum means opening oneself up to the possibility of being exposed in public with little control over such exposure. Former deportees, for example, donated photographs depicting persons in conditions of distress. All photographs on display are labeled; when known, these labels reveal names, dates, locations, and biographical details. As these labels do not tell any stories, the photographs, I would suggest, are exhibited to turn the visitor into a witness of the Soviet repression rather than a reader, a critic of a historical narrative. As a result, it is not always clear what is being witnessed. The images overflow with potential meanings.

One such distinct example of an overflow of meanings in images, intended by curators to reveal the extent of suffering and ability to endure, is the visual references to issues of class and gender. Here the images of women and anti-Soviet fighters are particularly telling. One photograph, included in the catalog, shows Lithuanian women, in worryingly light clothes, laying rails across a snow-covered forest (*Laying a narrow gauge railway*, Irkutsk, 1956). Although malnourished, these women do not look unhappy or ashamed of their situation: they pose, some of them holding axes, as elegantly as they can

13. The museum law regulates only the distribution of the data about collections, which are held elsewhere. However, in addition to this legislation, the Museum of the Victims of Genocide regulates its activities on the basis of the Law on the Protection of Personal Data. According to the modification of 2011, this law does not apply to data about deceased persons.

14. Written communication from an employee of the Museum of Genocide Victims, January 14, 2014.

for the camera. But the very existence of this picture of working women deportees and its presence in the museum's collection is, in fact, telling much more than just detailing the hard conditions of labor. According to Dalia Leinarte (2012), the Lithuanian female deportees spoke about the hard labor that they had to do during deportations more candidly than the deported Polish women. Leinarte attributed this difference to the different value of manual labor in these cultures: Polish women found the admission of being able to survive hard work as damaging their class status; they were ashamed of having done and survived hard work and effectively refused to share this experience in public. In contrast, Lithuanian women deportees, as they revealed in their memoirs, did not hide their ability to work hard; this is manifest in this picture.

Similarly overflowing with references to social class are the photographs taken by postwar anti-Soviet resistance fighters. Many pictures show men immersed in their everyday tasks, such as shaving, bathing in a lake, or cooking. Whereas some images are amateurish snapshots, very many are carefully and professionally produced: the film was correctly exposed to the light, the prints are of high quality, the figures elegantly composed. In turn, the depicted Lithuanian partisans appear to know how to pose and sport their uniforms elegantly. For instance, the image labeled *The partisans of Šarūnas division on the bank of the river Šventoji, 1947–1948* shows a group of six men and one woman looking pensively over a scenic river, an idyllic scene, set 3 years into armed resistance. Other images show the partisans' liaisons, often attractive young women. The women seen in the image *The chief of the East Lithuanian sector with liaisons* (no later than 1949) look cheerful and charming; their hair is nicely done. Some, it seems, even flirt with the camera. But, as noted by Čepulyte (2011:122), the contrast between self-representation and the real conditions of the partisans was stark. Partisans dwelled in poverty; they were dependent on food provisions donated by, or, in some cases, extorted from the local population. They mainly lived in secret bunkers, claustrophobically tiny spaces dug in the forest, expecting support from the West that never arrived (Statiev 2010). It is very likely that these photographs were created in order to add an aesthetic dimension, perhaps as a memento of prewar life, and they were framed by the curators exactly as such (this part of the exhibition being titled "Life Continues"). But these images also overflow with class connotations, suggesting that the upper strata of the society was involved in the fight against the Soviet occupation, something that so far has not been addressed systematically either by the museum staff or academic researchers.

My third example of the curators' strategic disclosure leading to an overflow concerns the issue of privacy in the process of revealing Soviet repression. The sections on the Soviet and Nazi occupations and Sovietization of the 1940s to early 1950s contain many pictures taken by members of the repressive organizations, the NKVD/KGB, which present shockingly graphic images of the mutilated bodies of the anti-Soviet

partisans, some of which were displayed in public places such as the market squares of small towns. One image showed the wife of a doctor, Antanas Gudonis, mourning the body of her husband, who was tortured to death by the Red Army (dated June 26, 1941). This is a private, emotionally charged picture, taken, most likely, as a memento by a friend of the devastated wife. Another group of pictures shows executed anti-Soviet partisans, photographed, most likely, by members of the Soviet security organizations. These pictures illustrate the act of display, intended to perform governmental power through public demonstrations of brutality. In the Stalinist era, according to Verdery (2014), the presence of the NKVD/KGB was made public through such violent displays. In Soviet Lithuania, the display of death in public space was an extraordinary communication device through which the Soviet government sought to terrorize the local population into submission. This changed after the death of Stalin: by the time that the student Romas Kalanta immolated himself in public in front of the central administration of Kaunas as a means of protest against the Soviet regime in 1972 (see Swain 2013), the Soviet government had shifted from proclaiming its power through public displays of violence to actively suppressing knowledge about the victims of the anti-Soviet resistance it had formerly made so public. From the 1960s, the KGB increasingly operated not through displays of violence but through instilling a fear of its omnipresent surveillance; its key features were no longer the severity of violence but its possibility, omnipresence, and predictability (Beissinger 2002:333; Kharkhordin 1999). In this context, any revelations were scarce and were confined to very carefully controlled spaces, for instance, the hidden commemoration of the victims of the NKVD in the 1940s–1950s, when secret monuments were erected in the Lithuanian countryside (Čepulytė 2011:117), or the memoirs of deportees, copies of which were circulated underground, within a small dissident circle (Davoliūtė 2013).

My fourth example of overflow refers to the asymmetry between the material presence assumed by victims and perpetrators in the museum. If the images of the anti-Soviet fighters and deportees seek to bring back their private experiences of fragile lives into the public domain, the Soviet regime's formal secrets are revealed in the halls dedicated to the history and activities of the KGB. Small in size, so that only a few visitors can enter them at once, these halls are filled with hundreds of passport-size photographs, normally black and white, fixed on organizational charts. The structure of the KGB, both the all-union and Soviet Lithuanian sections, is revealed as a tree of faces, names, and birth dates. Several photographs document formal occasions, such as the office parties of KGB employees. There are, noticeably, hardly any images of the private lives of KGB officers; the photographs depict only official scenes at the KGB offices, although some pictures of NKVD officers at leisure in the 1940s–1950s are presented.

This absence of images of the private lives of perpetrators could be an instance of the lack of an appropriate form of

cultural mediation, enabling the disclosure of either the Soviet perpetrator or what Hannah Arendt called a banal, everyday evil. In Soviet history, Lynne Viola (2013) notes, the figure of the perpetrator, albeit borrowed from the literature on the Holocaust, has remained incompletely conceptualized. There is no established way of presenting an ordinary KGB officer, for example, a desk clerk who spent her or his days eavesdropping on telephone conversations. It is particularly difficult, Viola (2013:10) argues, to populate the bottom of the pyramid of Soviet perpetrators, for where does one stop? Should one include the individuals who provided social support to the KGB officers? Should the members of the Communist Party be included? There is no easy answer to these questions. However, as a result, the museum discloses the private lives of victims but not of perpetrators, thus leaving the prerogative of perpetrators to stay invisible, unchallenged.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated how the disclosure of previously secret Soviet repression has led to an overflow of meanings in the Museum of Genocide Victims. First, the establishment of the museum was in itself a statement of disclosure of the Soviet repression as a public secret, its original idea being to commemorate the experience of a particular group of the survivors of Soviet repression. However, when the “public secret” had to be fleshed out with concrete information in order to be revealed to society, the museum initially failed to manage the overflow of the survivors' own version of the past into the public presentation of Lithuania's history. As a result, the story about the Holocaust, particularly as it was associated with the museum's building, was sidelined.

The metaphor of overflow is a good analytical tool enabling us to understand not only the origins of the museum but also the complexity of its expositions. Whereas scholars have so far analyzed the museum through the critical prism of balancing the accounts about the Soviet repression with the participation of the local population in the Holocaust, an ongoing and still not fully resolved issue, the central tension in the museum in fact concerns the multiple effects of revealing where the revealing itself is driven by the tension between the Soviet state and the individual. This state-individual tension is central to understand the asymmetric power to suppress and disclose information in the context of Soviet repression. It is not coincidental that in Soviet studies, privacy is generally defined as an individual's ability to disclose and not to retain personal information. According to Reid (2006), for an individual, “privacy is constituted not by concealment or solitude per se, but by discretion over disclosure of information about oneself, the right to make decisions, to promulgate rules of action, to dispose over resources and space” (148). Accordingly, to reveal her personal experiences of Soviet repression in public was the ultimate way for a Soviet person to assert her right as a private individual. Here the revelation of past secrets emerges as a highly transformative and complex process of



meaning making concerned not only with historical truth but also with the ethics and aesthetics of revelation.

Some victims of the Soviet regime wished to make their private lives public. They sought to show the ways in which the Soviet state brutally intervened in their private lives, stripping them of both their privacy and, if they survived, any role in public life for them or their children. For them, to enter a museum was to enter a special, elevated public sphere, to become a significant element in the grand narrative of political history. In contrast, the perpetrators, the agents of power in Soviet society, tried to keep their public lives private and their pasts secret. This post-Soviet practice of revelation cannot be properly understood when considered separately from the mechanism of secrecy in Soviet society. The keeping of a secret under the Soviet regime was a complex and ambiguous activity: people were to keep secrets from one another, particularly about the activities of the state, but they were not to keep secrets from the state, and the control of secrets about individuals by the state was a key component of its power. The existence of state repression was known to many, either directly or indirectly, but this knowledge was rarely shared, even in private. The sharing of these secrets, then, was an act of power, a demonstration from those enacting it that they were no longer under the control of the Soviet regime. The notion of overflow refocuses critical analysis, enabling a shift to a different politics of balancing the different narratives of a difficult past. The logic of revealing, rather than concealing, may lead to different conditions for dialogue and sensitize researchers to the complex motivations for the disclosure of Soviet repression.

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