



## Multimedia Historical Parks and the Heritage-based “Regime of Truth” in Russia

By  
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### Abstract

This article focuses on the 2013–2016 exhibitions in Moscow Manege which were later transformed into a network of entertainment centres (“historical parks”) *Russia–my (hi)story*. The exhibitions are built on multimedia technologies and include no authentic artefacts/museum objects. There is a growing network of such centres all over Russia, all organized in a similar manner, appealing to the visitor’s emotions and creating a relation of affect through the unravelling of a nationalistic historical narrative.

Claimed to present “the objective picture of the Russian history” the exhibitions are following the recent developments in Russian cultural policies and history curricula. By analysing narratives presented at the “historical park” exhibitions, in policy documents and in media, this article follows the changes in public attitude towards history, which heritage is perceived as ‘difficult’ and ‘contested’ and how the digital representations influence these perceptions.

Based on this analysis I argue that the reduction of the museum mechanism to only digital and multimedia form can bring along very serious issues in different political contexts. Russian historical parks enterprise, which combines the methods of fostering patriotism by the means of historical narrative templates both from the 19th and the 20th centuries, enhanced with the 21st-century technology in a form of “multimedia museums,” is only one of such examples.

**Keywords:** Multimedia museums, Russian cultural policies, nationalism, Russian history, historical narrative templates

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**Author's disclaimer:** This article was written before 24.02.2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine and is, therefore, outdated. There is no more need of meticulous analysis of how the State propaganda can affect the society and how militarization of the past by the means of museum technologies can lead to tragedies in present. However, I have no intention to update and correct this text any further but leaving it as a sort of documentation: how things were looking in 2020-2021.

In 2016, the Russian Ministry of Science and Education recommended the historical park “Russia – my (hi)story”<sup>1</sup> in Moscow as a source for teaching history at the universities and for the retraining of History teachers (Ministry of Science and Education 2016a). The first ‘park,’ which is in fact a set of multimedia indoor exhibitions, was opened in a permanent venue at the All-Russia Exhibition center (VDNKh) in 2015, and in 2020 there were already 23 such venues in different Russian regions, from Makhachkala to Sakhalin, all organised in a similar manner. These institutions, referred to as “historical parks” and “exhibition networks”, occupy an ambiguous position between traditional museum exhibitions (by employing the same narratives and means of representation, albeit with no museum objects) and entertainment centres which are using immersive digital technologies. The “Russia – my (hi)story” homepage declares that the parks are serving for the “better and easier perception” of complex historical issues and present “the objective picture of Russian history” (*O projekte* n.d.).

The claims to objectiveness are reinforced by the Internet-based side projects, such as the “historical park’s journal #Non-facts” (*Nefakty* n.d.) which aims to “debunk popular beliefs about Russian history” and “examine the historical truth” (in most cases in a way that glorifies Russia and its rulers). However, some narratives



Fig. 1: The entrance to 20th century exhibition hall, Moscow historical park “Russia – my (hi)story”, 24.08.2019

mediated by historical parks and their partners are questionable, to say the least. Thus, in January 2020 the Omsk branch of “Russia – my (hi)story” hosted an event dedicated to the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory in Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and the “personal contribution” of the Russian Emperor Nicholas Romanov (1868–1918) to this victory which is “paradoxical but proved by facts” (Timepad 2020).

This fixation on “truth”, “facts” and “objectivity” places the case of “Russia – my (hi)story” parks into the field which studies “uses of history” (Aronsson 2004) and falls within the recent cultural policies<sup>2</sup> fighting off “falsifications of history” in Russia. In the following text, I will address the political role of the past in current Russian politics and the uses of historical narratives<sup>3</sup> in heritage institutions with the focus on the “Russia – my (hi)story” parks as an utmost expression of such uses. I am arguing that the historical parks are used as political and didactic devices designed to strengthen a patriotic Russian narrative. The exhibitions of the parks (and preceding exhibitions in the Moscow Manege) are modelled after traditional museum exhibitions and use a lot of museum patterns in organizing the space and narrative. They are also positioned as “museums” in public discourse, using the inherent institutional authority to mediate somewhat simplified frameworks or “templates” of history. By introducing the historical parks as the legitimate source of historical knowledge on the State level, Russian cultural policies place them in the specific point traditionally occupied by museum institutions. Tony Bennett in his writings examines the connections between truth, power and knowledge in the museums (Bennett 1995, 2015; Bennett *et al.* 2017) which he considers the Foucauldian *apparatuses*, institutions with power, that are supposed to convey discourses deemed as “true” in a specific context. Or, to put it in other words, “the ‘truth’ in *regimes of truth* is knowledge deemed to be so legitimate that it is privileged to guide cognition and action” (Reyna and Schiller 1998: 337, italics added).

The inner structure of these *apparatuses* and their way of producing knowledge, being “affected by the operations of power, ideology, legitimacy and rationality” (Gray 2015: 26) is what I understand as museum mechanics, and, together with Clive Gray (*ibid.*) I am arguing that museums are political institutions. Therefore, in this text I am focusing more on the political element of the museum mechanics than on digital media *per se*: in my opinion, the choice of media and ICT does not overcome the structural features (and flaws) inherent to museum as an institution. In a way, the historical parks essentialize the political meaning-making that was subtly inherent to museums along the way of their institutional development, and the usage of stories and narratives to structure the experience and organize the patriotic agenda.

The very idea of using multimedia and digital technologies in museums is intimately connected to the museological focus on *visitors* and *audience* (Kidd

2014), which has emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and especially in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The museum itself, however, can be considered as a sort of very traditional media which works with information (see, for example, Stam 1993) and education. There is a common perception both on academic and policy levels that digital heritage (both the heritage that has digital origin and the digitized heritage) suggests more inclusive and democratic ways to learn: it can allegedly engage younger audiences, provide broader access and even preserve threatened heritage or reconstruct one that is lost forever.<sup>4</sup> Jenny Kidd provides a comprehensive review of recent contributions to the field, from Digital Humanities, Museum Studies, Media Studies and other perspectives (2014: 2). The field will probably grow even faster in the situation of increased distance learning and limited travels due to the Covid-19 pandemics. However, as the recent research in the field of visualization and experimental museology points out, there is a persistent presence of “mentality that feigns to ‘open up’ the museum through digitalisation while leaving intact its outdated, linear and canonical ethos as the chief custodian of heritage and authority on history” (Kenderdine 2021: 16).

The article examines how multimedia and digital technologies contribute to the formation of historical narratives in the case of historical parks network in Russia; but also how the accessibility and inclusiveness granted by “digital” but deficient of the traditional museum features can lead to politically charged knowledge production and the lack of critical perspective. I also intend to investigate if the digital form provides new entry points to the framing, maintaining and (re) producing national history in museum-like settings – or else if this form is just an application of new tools for old means. To do so, it is important to map the development of national history narratives in Russian museums, as the case in focus represents this development with the use of multimedia technologies. After examining the existing narrative templates (Wertsch 2008) and traditional approaches used for history didactics in museal institutions, I will dwell on Russian memory policies and the invention of (patriotic) commemorative practices in the late 2010s, resulted in the chain of historical parks “Russia – my (hi)story” as a museum-like supplement to these policies and state-imposed practices.

### **Museum Mechanics: Sites of Pedagogy or Propaganda Devices?**

Museums have the power to influence behaviours, organise and represent reality in a certain way and foster change. Museums of cultural history are also often involved into the forming of national historical narratives as “discursive devices that combine history, collective memory, and myth into teleological communications of a nation’s past, present and future” (Anderson 2017: 4).

The educational role of museums was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century alongside the institutionalization of the modern museum as we know it. According to museum studies scholars, museum institutions emerged alongside with other “disciplinary technologies” (Hooper-Greenhill 1992) and developed as a “civilizing device” set up to fulfil “the task of the cultural governance of the populace” (Bennett 1995: 21). This educational function has been reflected in museums’ nature ever since, as one of the base museum purposes, together with collecting, conserving, researching, and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage (ICOM 2007).

The connection between the educational function of museums and official historical narratives can be studied from different angles. Mario Carretero in his book *Constructing Patriotism* (2011) suggests that history teaching, both formal (schools and textbooks) and informal (museums and media) “tends to focus on intimate emotional adherence to national identity symbols and narratives” (5). National museums of history emerged often alongside the formation of the nation-state and for a long time have remained true to the “moral necessities of didacticism” (Knell 2011: 4). In a sense, national history performed in a museum setting can be deemed more ‘true’ than the one written in a textbook due to the inherent authenticity of objects (claimed to be authentic by the heritage institution itself) and the unshakeable materiality of presented “facts”. This kind of popular belief was studied by a few generations of museum scholars (Karp and Lavine 1991; Witcomb 2003; Conn 2010) and the discussion is being propelled in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the developing both of the digital heritage field and “museums of ideas” based on a topic rather than on an existing collection<sup>5</sup> – this type of museums can also be called “narrative museums” due to its “appealing and interactive methodology of display – based on multimedia and interactive scenography – which is distinct from the traditional object-centered museum” (Manikowska and Jakubowski 2021: 43). These developments alongside with the musealization of intangible heritage (e.g. oral history and other forms of collecting and preserving the living memory of the past, cf. Bradley and Puri 2016) were intertwined with the shifting focus: from research and collections to publics. The Russian multimedia parks represent the extreme (and somewhat grotesque) point of this development, as the contemporary “museums of ideas” are still keen on collecting artifacts and perform research despite the use of immersive digital technologies in the exhibition halls. Stripped of these traditional forms of museum work, multimedia parks are closer to the spatialized textbooks and history teaching rather than to the museum institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Carretero argues that “history teachings social objectives” can include “a positive assessment of one’s own social - both local and national - group’s past, present and future” and “a positive attitude towards the country’s political evolution” (2011: 15). Staging a national history in the museum setting can

sometimes also simplify complexity and ambiguity of the nation's past and reduce the educational function to one hegemonic narrative. Such a way of "politico-pedagogical" use of heritage (Thorp 2016: 26) becomes even more apparent in comparing museums of cultural history with other kind of institutions, for example museums of natural history and science centers.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of a certain institution's flexibility and willingness to change, museums which are staging the nation belong both to the fields of official history and collective memory; they are being used both as the sites of pedagogy and propaganda devices – depending on *who* orchestrates heritage performance and which kinds of identities are being constructed. In the case of "Russia – my (hi) story", as it will be shown further, one can observe the claim for "historical truth", related to the "noble dream of objectivity" of formal history (Wertsch 2008: 146) alongside with the sense of continuity, belonging and reduction of events to mythic archetypes (145). This conflation can be reinforced further by the emotionally loaded narrative and the use of cinema-like multimedia in exhibition design instead of the subtle and dry objects-based narrative.

This manner of exhibiting history is neither new nor specific only for the state-run official historical narrative; however, the discussed phenomenon of "historical parks" can be considered somewhat an excessive example of it.

### Official Historical Narratives in Russia

In Russia, the interest in creating the official historical narrative and presenting it in the museum context can be divided roughly into three periods, or, as James Wertsch (2008) calls such models of organizing historical knowledge, "narrative templates".<sup>8</sup> This process was connected both to the emergence of the concept of national patrimony and identity in Russia and to the subsequence of three different states: Russian Empire, Soviet Russia and Russian Federation.

History and heritage scholarship in Russia flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in other parts of Europe, with the emergence of new concepts of "monuments"<sup>9</sup> and ideas of monuments protection, as well as the growing public and artistic interest in Russian antiquities. The demand for "authentic" Russian historical narratives manifested itself through the increasing number of publications, archaeological societies and historical ethnographical studies which intended to gather and preserve "remains of the past" – and also was supported by the State's agenda.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an array of state policies was introduced in the Russian Empire, such as an *Official Nationality* (or "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality") agenda in the 1830s and the *Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy* which was issued by Alexander III in 1881. These policies were focused on the importance of national<sup>10</sup> and religious unity of Russian people and their "natural

devotion” to the emperor and monarchy. National history and heritage were widely used as an argument for such condition, and the monuments connected to the first tsars of the Romanov dynasty came into focus of public and scholarly attention (Zabalueva 2017: 40). Another unifying factor for “Russian people” in these policies was a foreign (or inner, but supported by the foreign forces) threat, be it other nation-states or diverse liberal, democratic and revolutionary movements. The political demand for preserving national integrity<sup>11</sup> and combating possible external and internal threats engendered the focus on the pre-Petrine Russian history (according to the popular belief, only Peter the Great made a decisive choice turning Russia into a Europe-oriented empire, so the search for “authentic Russian” – non-foreign – heritage was directed beyond that). The monuments connected to the history of the first Romanovs (early seventeenth century) were considered of national importance and restoration works on them were performed on the emperor’s commission. The big role was played by the historical anniversaries, such as the Romanov Tercentenary in 1913, when most celebrations were aiming to revive the spirit of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Muscovy – a ritualized attempt of using heritage sights and historical narratives to inspire “reverence and popular support” for the monarchy.

This period was also distinguished by the strong focus on the ruling dynasty’s history and patrimony – the patriotic feelings of the nation were channeled through people’s devotion to their sovereign.

The second “narrative template” in Russian history (and hence in museums that deal with history) was formed after the 1917 revolutions and shifted focus from the sovereignty to ideology. During the Soviet period (1917–1991), the national historical narrative went from the radical theories of the 1920s towards the conservative turn in the 1930s, when Marxism was adapted to “produce the ‘formation theory’ of historical development, organizing all history into a progression of five socioeconomic formations” (Kozlov 2018: 377). Museums of cultural history during this period were aiming to construct the progressive evolutionary narrative with the 1917 Russian Revolution as the turning point. Soviet State was widely using arts and culture for instrumental purposes – one can name Lenin’s Plan of “Monumental Propaganda” – a strategy of employing visual arts (revolutionary slogans and monumental sculpture) as an important means for propagating revolutionary and communist ideas. Vladimir Lenin’s Museum (1924–1993) and the Museum of the Revolution (planned already in 1917, opened for publics in 1922) in Moscow, as well as the Museum of the October Revolution in Petrograd<sup>12</sup> (opened as the State Museum of the Revolution in the Winter Palace in 1919) became crucial instruments for creating citizens of the new State. In the early Soviet period, a whole network of “museums of the revolution” had been established across the country to perform the “politico-pedagogical work”

(Scherbinina 2016). Not to mention that only in 1917–1921 more than 250 new museums were founded in Soviet Russia (Polyakov 2017), most of them in the forcedly “musealized” residencies of the “exploitative class” with objects expropriated from palaces, private collections and monasteries as a part of the Soviet nationalization policies of private properties.

The didactic role of cultural institutions was supported by the part of Russian museum professionals, many of whom shared the idea of making the arts and heritage accessible to the wider public (Polyakov 2017) and contributed a lot to the early Soviet model of museums as “instruments of popular democratic instruction” (Bennett 2015a: 69). One of the extremes of this role was represented by the anti-religious museums and the means of atheistic propaganda, designed to substitute religious consciousness with the communist ideology (Pimenov 2017).

However, it is important to remember that aside from being didactic tools for “cultural governance of the populace” (Bennett 1995: 21), the early Soviet museums were among the very few official institutions that preserved Russian cultural heritage from destruction during the years of the Revolution, Civil War (1917–1922) and the harsh policies of secularization. The idea of endangered heritage, alongside with the positivistic approach in creating a national historical narrative (Kozlov 2018), has engendered a specific perception of museums as sacred sites for preservation of objective, material facts, which can endure any political turbulence and keep the “historical truth” for future generations.<sup>13</sup>

The dissolution of the Soviet Union alongside with the changes in Russian cultural landscape in the 1980s–1990s deconstructed the “historical truth” of the previous period and left a free space for interpretations. The Soviet “narrative template” went out of the State’s and cultural institutions’ agenda; the Bolsheviks and Communist party were often depicted as antagonistic, evil entities in media and cultural production. At the same time, the 1990s and the early 2000s brought in the heterogeneity of narratives and points of view and made possible a multivocal “palimpsest” of historical interpretations, where the heroics of the Soviet soldiers in the Second World War could be found side by side with the veneration of Orthodox clergymen repressed by Soviets, and where the tsarist generals of the Russian Civil War received the similar epic portrayals in media as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century revolutionaries who conspired against the tsar. The meta-narratives which were formed and reinforced in this period engendered the further development of more homogeneous cultural policies: some researchers consider the cult of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) as a core for new concept of the nation (Apor 2015: 33) whereas others name the broader topic of the “Expulsion of Foreign Enemies” as such (Wertsch 2008: 143).





Fig. 2. The “Civil War and Foreign Intervention” projection screen, Moscow historical park “Russia – my (hi)story”, 14.10.2017

## Governance of Memory: Russian Cultural Policies in the Twenty-first Century

After the period of the relative freedom in the interpretation of history in the post-Soviet Russia, the State’s involvement in establishing cultural policies increased in the late 2000s and culminated in the mid-2010s with the introduction of the *Basic Concepts of Russian Cultural Policy* (Russian Federation Presidential Decree No 808 from 24 December 2014) and the *Strategy of National Cultural Policy until 2030* (The Russian Federation Government Decision No 326-p from 29 February 2016).

These documents are constructing the nation through the notions of “Russian language and the great Russian culture” (“Basic Concepts...” 2014: 4) and “common spiritual experiences” (24) and also claim that culture secures national and territorial integrity of Russia. The essential role of culture both as civilizing and governing device is underpinned in these documents by describing the recent “diffusion of the traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” and the “reducing of the unity of multinational people of the Russian Federation” as the “national security threats” (“Strategy...” 2016: 6). One of the reasons that could lead to this critical condition is the “distortion of historical memory, negative evaluation of important periods in Russian history and spreading false perceptions of Russian Federation being historically underdeveloped” (“Basic Concepts...” 2014: 6).

“False perceptions” imply that there are true ones, the “regime of truth”

which can be channelled by cultural institutions and is supported by the State. Implementation of new cultural policies appropriates the narrative templates both from the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a new model, which supposes the continuity of the historical “truths” and merging the different layers of the historical palimpsest into one meta-narrative: the greatness of the Russian Empire transcends through the revolutions into the greatness of the Soviet Union and both of them merge into one patriotic narrative of Russian history continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s Russian Federation (quite literally, as we will see later in the example of transformations of the Crimea peninsula’s history). There are several gaps or ruptures (using Erica Wagner-Pacifici’s term, cf. 2017) that are breaking the presupposed continuity of this narrative and can be read and presented ambiguously; these points usually evoke heated public discussion – for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Russia they concern the wars and revolutions as well as the changes of the regime. One of the most controversial of such “ruptures” were the democides of the 1930s in USSR (“Stalinist purges”) as well as the whole Gulag system; followed by the ambiguous figure of Josef Stalin himself who can be represented both as a cruel totalitarian dictator and as a savior of the young Soviet nation, the victor in the Great Patriotic War (another “rupture” which is even more controversial due to the importance of it for Russian memory culture). The State cultural policies, introduced in the late 2010s, alongside with innumerable local projects and events, provided only one “objective” vision for these ruptures and denied public dialogue around them. These developments continue, and already in the proposed changes for the Russian Constitution in 2020 the article 67.1 reads as follow: “Russian Federation is united by the thousand years of history, it keeps the memory of ancestors from whom we inherited ideals and belief in God, and the continuity of Russian state. [...] Russian Federation commemorates the defenders of the Motherland and protects the historical truth. The denigration of the importance of the people’s act of valour while defending the Motherland is prohibited” (*Vedomosti* 2020).

Therefore, in five years the “narrative template” of Russian history imposed by the State has found its way from strategies and suggestions into the State’s principal law where any defiance of the current policy can be considered as an offence.<sup>14</sup> Cultural policies of the 2010s are now official memory politics that regulate fields of memory, history and heritage.

The memory politics in current Russia concentrates on some significant dates in the country’s history, mainly connected with the ruling dynasties, the Russian Orthodox Church history or with the military successes; the nation-founding myths and emotional engagement of the public are being employed in creating a patriotic community of belonging, where visitors, readers and watchers can identify with the shared “us”.<sup>15</sup> In the next section, this “narrative template” of continuity is analysed on the material of historical multimedia exhibitions.

## Exhibiting Successes: Historical Anniversaries Go Digital

The range of historical anniversaries in Russia celebrated nation-wide in the middle of the 2010s provided an extensive material to form an official historical narrative by the means of cultural institutions, whereas earlier (in the 1990s – the beginning of 2000s) Russian museums often tended to focus their attention on private and personal histories and everyday life (Bezzubova 2016: 84). 2013 was the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, which brought a whole scope of historical exhibitions, such as *Romanovs. Portrait of the Dynasty* in State Historical Museum or the first historical multimedia exhibition at the Moscow Manege, *Orthodox Russia: The Romanovs*. The difference between museum projects and the *Orthodox Russia* was striking: where the State Historical Museum employed all the means of their rich collections and academic vocabulary, the Manege display invested in popular science, “fun” and “entertaining” narration and consisted of 4 thousand square meters of multimedia collage – posters, screens, touchscreens, video and audio presentations as well as interactive elements.

The full title of the exhibition was “The 12<sup>th</sup> exhibition and forum of Church and society *Orthodox Russia. My history: The Romanovs*”. The series of these Orthodox exhibitions was launched in 2003, and became annual in 2005, when its timing coincided with the newly inaugurated state holiday: *The Day of the National Unity* on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November. The history behind this holiday relates a lot to the change of “narrative templates” and memory politics: until 2004, there was another “red day” in November in the Russian calendar – the October Revolution Day on November the 7<sup>th</sup>. Since the 1990s several moves were made to rename or abolish the commemoration of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 from the calendar, until in 2005 it was replaced by the commemoration of the expulsion of the foreign forces from Muscovy in 1613, which signified the end of the Times of Troubles and the beginning of the Romanov’s dynasty as rulers of the unified Russia, the same age which the Russian Empire’s historical narrative venerated as the origin of the modern nation.

The “Orthodox Russia” exhibitions between 2005 and 2013, however, were mostly religious- and community-focused. They presented arts and crafts, as well as educational projects of the Russian Orthodox Church, and for each occasion miraculous icons were displayed at the exhibition venues – not as pieces of art, but as relics for believers, accompanied with church services and religious processions. *Orthodox Russia: The Romanovs*, however, became a real success for the organizers: Patriarchal Council for Culture, the state-run Russian Military History Society and other entities. More than 300,000 people visited Moscow Manege between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013 (it was initially supposed

to close on the November 12<sup>th</sup> but prolonged twice due to the public interest) – more than at any of previous exhibitions (*Patriarchia.ru* 2013). The triumph of “Romanovs” gave the ground to the project of permanent multimedia exhibitions about Russian history, which then evolved into the “Russia – my (hi)story” parks.

In 2014 the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of St. Sergius of Radonezh, a patron saint of Russia, was celebrated nationwide. St. Sergius was represented as the “spiritual gatherer” of the Russian nation. During 2014 the *Ryurik dynasty* exhibition was presented at the Moscow Manege with the focus on the early Russian princes and the forming of the state of Muscovy.<sup>16</sup> The “Orthodox turn” continued in 2015 with the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Repose of St. Vladimir, the Baptist of the ancient Kievan Rus (marked, for example, with the exhibition *Baptist of Rus* at the State Historical Museum).

The year 2015, however, had another important timestamp: the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory in Great Patriotic War (the Russian name for the 1941–1945 part of the Second World War). The next exhibition at Moscow Manege was titled *From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory. 1914–1945*; Museum of Contemporary History of Russia presented during this year a range of 10 different exhibitions dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, not to mention other museums, educational programs and “patriotic activities”. This “military turn” was enhanced by the inauguration of the outdoor “Patriot Park” (Military-patriotic recreation park of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation) in Kubinka near Moscow in June 2015.

The same 2015 the entertainment centre (so-called “historical park”) *Russia – my (hi)story* in Moscow was opened that has gathered all the three recent multimedia exhibitions from the Moscow Manege. The chain of the centres grew rapidly, the second one was opened in June 2017 in the city of Ufa, followed by Ekaterinburg, Stavropol, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Yakutsk, Saint Petersburg, Volgograd and others; at the moment of writing there are 23 such institution across the country, the spread comparable to the museums of the Revolution network after 1917.

The Manege exhibition from 2016, *Russia – my (hi)story. 1945–2016* was planned to be added to the Moscow historical park in 2018, and in December 2018 it was opened as a combined exhibition *Russia – my (hi)story. 1914–2017* that includes both the *From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory* exhibition and the historical narrative from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the *Russia – my (hi)story* historical park has listed on its website on December 21, 2018, this combined exhibition presents “the new facts, bright installations and a bare beautiful design which can help the visitors to perceive better and easier the details of somewhat complex themes” (*Dve vystavki v odnoj* 2018).<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 3. "Anticlerical politics of the Soviet State" projection screen, exhibition "From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory" in Moscow historical park, 14.10.2017

### Loaded with Patriotism: Historical Parks and the Construction of the Nation

The significant feature of the multimedia exhibitions and the parks is the lack of authentic artefacts or museum objects. Instead, they are built on projection effects as well as static and dynamic video mapping and include a lot of audio-visual material and interactive multimedia panels. This way of building a narrative strikingly resembles the early Soviet museum practices e.g., the usage of posters and specially commissioned paintings in the first exhibitions of the Museum of the Revolution, unless the present days exhibitions are adjusted to the digital means. Being basically big multimedia publications, the exhibitions embody official historical narrative. As in the classical national museums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in *Russia – my (hi)story* centres “nation itself gets staged or is narrated in nationalism’s favourite genre, the epic” (Bal 2008:17). Mieke Bal compares museum narratives with the cinema, “the art of the masses” and “an effective tool for political activism” (22). Indeed, one can remember the Soviet tradition of cinematic and monumental propaganda, exemplified in Sergei Eisenstein’s artwork, and the close attention that early Soviets paid to “the most important of all arts” – the cinema (Gak and Glagoleva 1965). Nevertheless, *Russia – my (hi)story* parks are actively using the vocabulary and toolbox of museums: apart from “exhibitionary” activities, the parks are participating, for example, in the program

“accessible museum” and in “Museum Night” festival. They are also widely called “interactive museums” in media.<sup>18</sup>

Historical parks are extensively incorporated into the pedagogical processes. They are recommended by the Russian Ministry of Science and Education as a methodological source for teaching history on all school levels, identifying the narrative presented at the *Russia – my (hi)story* centres as a didactic tool in the strict sense. The mission statement of the parks in Ministry’s guidelines reads as follow: “disseminating humanities in Russia; stimulating social activism, civil responsibility and spirituality; educating citizens who will identify themselves with Russia, its history and culture, and providing them with the positive values and qualities” (Ministry of Science and Education 2016b: 1). The parks and exhibitions are also supported and promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church, implementing, therefore, a specific religious context into the narration of Russian history and giving a certain angle to the “spirituality” matter. Another important actor that contributes a lot to the enterprise is the Military History Society, a governmental NGO<sup>19</sup> created in 2012 by the presidential decree to “consolidate the state and society efforts in studying the military history of Russia and fight the attempts of its falsification, to popularize the advancements of the military-historical science, enforce the credibility of the national military service and foster patriotism” (RVIO 2012). As the part of extra-curricular school activity (e.g. “Loving the Motherland” lessons for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade), the multimedia parks are evidently doing “constructing patriotism” work which “produces a particularly deformed or biased understanding” of history and “comes to constitute the core of adult’s historical representation” (Carretero 2011: 18). Biases and contradictions are apparent, as soon as one starts to look closer at the parks’ events and activities, from mentioned in the beginning revelations about “personal contribution of the Nicholas Romanov to the victory in Great Patriotic War” to such projects as “Family – the hymn to love” in *Russia – my (hi)story* park in Saint Petersburg which drew on “key dates for Russian spiritual history, such as the 8<sup>th</sup> of July – Day of Saint Peter and Saint Fevronia, celebrated as the Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness since 2008; the 17<sup>th</sup> of July – the commemoration date of the execution of the last Russian emperor and his family in 1918; and the 28<sup>th</sup> of July – the Day of the Baptism of Rus” (Katkova 2019: 117) where only first “key date” seems to be connected to the *family* educational topic.

The stories told in *Russia – my (hi)story* exhibitions are based on the vast amount of historic and archival material, the literature list used as references for creation the historical park in Moscow includes more than 400 titles (*Spisok literatury k vystavkam*, n.d.). The positivist approach is reiterated in recurrent mentions of “objective” and “true” history that is supposed to help debunking “false perceptions”.

At the same time, *Russia – my (hi)story* parks are clearly following the trend of “edutainment”. Balloffet, Courvoisier and Lagier (2014) discuss the possible convergence of museums and amusement parks where both “worlds” are borrowing approaches and techniques from each other. Indeed, the focus on visitors’ experiences and “a shift from the didactic to the spectacular” in the museums (id.: 8) has brought a lot of concerns into the field of museum scholarship (on museums and cultural economy see, for example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). In Russia, this shift stumbles across the positivist paradigm entrenched in cultural institutions: even the Russian translation of the ICOM’s museum definition renders “enjoyment” function of the museum as “satisfaction of spiritual needs” (Leshchenko 2016). Therefore, the introduction of “multimedia historical parks” allows the inclination towards the entertainment sector (there are no museum objects involved hence the narrative can be less “scientific” and “complex”) on the one hand. On the other, these are still “exhibitions” which implies that the sacred museum space is somewhat present in these arrangements, even though the museum objects which could provide the “authenticity” of the displayed narrative were missing.<sup>20</sup> This point allows to claim the historical narrative presented at the parks to be objective, as Russian museums of cultural history are usually perceived as the technologies of the official memory and often represent the politics of the State.

This becomes apparent when the historical narrative is being constructed around the political events from the recent past. In 2014, the State Historical Museum opened the exhibition *The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783* that was claimed to coincide with the celebration of the museum’s 131<sup>st</sup> anniversary. More explicitly the theme of the “modern” annexation was formulated in the exhibition *Crimea: the history of homecoming* (Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia, 2015). Among other objects displayed there was the pen with which Russian president Vladimir Putin has signed the treaty of annexation on March 18, 2014. In *Russia – my (hi)story* exhibition in the Moscow Manege in 2017 the current tension between Russia and Ukraine followed the contemporary political debate and the State media’s stance in the question (as in “Crimea was historically a part of Russia”, “there was no annexation but a homecoming” and the “Western media are leading the information war against Russia”). Such an effort to construct a national cultural memory based on the recent events creates the further polarization in Russian society which is already being fuelled by the conflicts over “difficult history” (on representations of Stalinist repressions in museum context see Zabalueva 2017).

## Future (of the) Past

What about the series of multimedia exhibitions “Orthodox Russia” in the Moscow Manege? In 2017, the annual exhibition’s theme was *Russia Futureward* with the focus on new technologies and innovation. The “progressive” history line culminated in the bright “tomorrow” image of the nation, finishing the historical continuity from the ancient Ryurik and grand princes of Rus, through the unified Muscovy state and the first Romanovs, towards the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the modern Russian Federation as the very same entity – and the same nation, though in the multinational reality of the current Russian State I would call this narrative template “statist” (Klimenko, 2021a).

In 2018, the Moscow Manege continued to host “Orthodox Russia” exhibitions, but this time it was not a multimedia narrative which constituted the attraction. The 2018 exhibition was called *The Treasures of Russian Museums* and consisted of approximately 280 objects from different museums with the geography as wide as the historical parks network. The exhibition’s webpage announced it as a unique collection of art objects representing the “unshakable cultural unity of the nation” (*Sokrovishha muzeev Rossii* 2019). Thus, the multimedia turn in presenting the national historical narrative has been framed in the 2013–2016 exhibitions and the “historical park” linear concept: a visual-based entertaining package of finite historical sequences, easy to copy-paste into different environments nation-wide and containing the official view on the Russian history.

The use of heritage in the construction of politically loaded collective memories is not unusual in Russian practice. The introduction of the *Official Nationality* policy in the 19th century has led to the institutionalised idea of the Romanovs dynasty’s legacy as a national heritage alongside with the first national historical narratives put into action by the educational and cultural technologies (as, for example, the museum of the first Romanovs, which was opened in Moscow in 1859). The contemporary Russian museums inherited practices of the Soviet period alongside with its problematic heritage. The explanatory, didactic discourse based on the historical essentialism is still taking place in the most museums and semi-museal institutions which are trying to reconsider this heritage in an attempt to construct a national historical meta-narrative. The multimedia exhibitions and historical parks, due to their adjustable presentation (one can easily program the content which is displayed on screens and interactive devices) can therefore be assumed to be always in tune with the current memory politics imposed by the State.<sup>21</sup> In a way, this project essentializes the idea of disciplinary museum as Foucauldian institution of power (Bennett 1995: 59).

Even though the multimedia parks can be considered as a somewhat simplified and reduced answer to the implicit redefinition of museums as memory and technology institutions (the “museum of ideas”-lite), they introduce several



concerns and further questions to the Museum Studies field. First, due to almost grotesque forms of expression they mobilize certain resistance in the professional community – which is being translated in the “museums do not have to change” agenda.<sup>22</sup> And secondly, it is these very forms that make ideological load visible; the example of historical parks brings to light the inherent political bias of the museum institution, especially in the context of authoritarian state, which is balanced neither by the collecting and safeguarding, nor by museum research or producing scientific knowledge.

The construction of national cultural memory with the means of the surrogate narratives results in the further division and polarization of the opposite groups. Museums as places for public dialogue might still be a tool to elaborate the language for the whole society to perform a critical discussion on the difficult past (cf. Bezzubova 2016). However, even though today’s museums have undeniably the political, philosophical and ideological role as media (Kidd 2014: 3), the reduction of the museum mechanism to *only* digital and multimedia narrative can bring along very serious issues in different political contexts. Russian historical parks enterprise, which combines the methods of fostering patriotism by the means of historical narrative templates both from the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, enhanced with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology, is only one of such examples.

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<sup>1</sup> “Россия – моя история” (Rossija – moja istorija) in Russian; I am using this spelling for the reason that the Russian word ‘история’ means ‘story’ as well as ‘history’. This and following translations from Russian are made by me.

<sup>2</sup> In the following text the term ‘cultural policies’ includes the legislation and activity of the State and its representatives in the cultural field, nowadays as well as in the past.

<sup>3</sup> Historical narratives frame history into ‘story’ instead of the list of dates and facts. In this sense history can be narrated in a textbook, a documentary or a museum exhibition. It is important not to mix up though museum narratives and narrative museums (cf. Padiglione 2016): if the latter means the specific form of the museum emerged in the new museology in the 1990s, the former (which I am using in the article) is more inherent to the theoretical view of museum as media and the specific role of historical museums and exhibitions as the didactic tools (Wertsch 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, UNESCO 2015 Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in the Digital Form (Safeguarding the Memory of the World, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, or Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg – or the projected Swedish museum for democracy and migration – Museum of Movements in Malmö. On “museums of ideas” see also Stephen Weil (2012).

<sup>6</sup> According to the current museum definition by ICOM, “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (2007). The UNESCO glossary suggests also expansion of this definition to diverse set of institutions, such as “cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity)” among others (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/museum>).

<sup>7</sup> Fiona Cameron in her research of new ontologies for the museum in the 21st century demonstrates how the traditional positivistic stance of museums (in her case – science centers) tends to simplify complex issues such as climate change, and turn the exhibition narrative into a “mechanism to persuade people to reduce their carbon footprint” (2015: 349). Cameron appeals to reinventing museums as complex adaptive systems, liquid and flexible institutions; however, it is hard to argue that today the majority of these institutions are rather rigid and traditional and narratives presented there are depending heavily on ownership, specific cultural policies and a country’s political regime.

<sup>8</sup> “A past that is imagined through narrative templates is one in which interpretation relies heavily on abstract-meaning structures not anchored in specific places, times, characters, or events. Information - especially the information that contradicts these schemas - is routinely distorted, simplified and ignored. Such tendencies are found when using specific narrative tools as well, but they are carried to an extreme in the case of narrative templates” (Wertsch 2008: 142).

<sup>9</sup> “Pamyatniki” in Russian language are often used to describe historical buildings or environments, with the “architectural monument” being used in heritage science, cultural geography and urban development more consistently than in memory studies.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth to mention that Russian Empire comprised many nationalities, however, many ‘national’ policies considered first and foremost Russians as citizens of a nation-state, not as a specific ethnic group (even though ethnic and racial discrimination in this state was practiced in different forms and manifestations). They can also be referred to as ‘statist’ (cf. Klimenko 2021a)

<sup>11</sup> The discussion around Official Nationality policies in Russia has resulted in the shaping of two antagonistic intellectual movements – paternalistic (slavophiles) and western-oriented (Zapadnichestvo).

<sup>12</sup> The name of the city has been changed several times during the 20th century: Sankt-Petersburg was renamed to Petrograd in 1914, then to Leningrad in 1924. The historical name “Sankt-Petersburg” was returned in 1991.

<sup>13</sup> The history of Russian policies in preservation of the heritage and the public reaction to them is entrenched in the museological curricula (cf. Polyakova, 2015) and in the civil society movements (as in the “Preservers of the Past” initiative, see <https://hraniteli-nasledia.com/>).

<sup>14</sup> The most recent example is the liquidation of the non-governmental organisations International Memorial and the Human Rights Center “Memorial” (HRC Memorial) in Moscow in December 2021, ruled out by the the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation. Both NGOs are active in the memory work of the “difficult past” of the 20th-century Russia, especially in commemorating the victims of Stalinist purges; “during the trial, prosecutors accused International Memorial and HRC Memorial of ‘distorting historical memory, especially that of the Great Patriotic War’ and ‘creating a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state’” (Human Rights Defenders 2021).

<sup>15</sup> The success of this politics, though, is arguable, as the recent research demonstrates the existence of “counter-memory” narratives, rooted in civil society and distanced from the official propagandist model (Yudin and Khlevnyuk 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly enough, after the success of the “Romanovs”, the 2014 exhibition was initially planned to commemorate the centenary of the Great War and “the country we’ve lost”, whereas the 2015 exhibition was supposed to display the Russian history from the times of Rurik, and the 2016 one – to tell about the “terrors and tragedies” of Russian revolution (Patriarchia.ru 2013). Nevertheless, the “Orthodox Russia” exhibition series focused instead on glorification of victories and successes, even when it considered the turbulent 20th century.

<sup>17</sup> In her paper presented at the MSA Annual Conference in July 2021 Ekaterina Klimenko (2021b) pointed out that the “revamped version” of the exhibition in Moscow historical park became somewhat less “orthodox-focused” but kept the narratives of the sins, atonement and revival.

<sup>18</sup> Including official webpages of the VDNKh exhibition center and Tripadvisor.

<sup>19</sup> “Общественно-государственная организация” (Obschestvenno-gosudarstvennaja organizacija, “Societal and governmental organization” – traditionally, NGOs are called “obschestvennaja organizacija” in Russian). In practice, the Military History Society was constituted by two Russian ministries: Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Defence.

<sup>20</sup> Among the variety of appraisals on the historical park homepage the one made by the director of the Hermitage museum Mikhail Piotrovsky is prominent: “This is a fair experiment, very well-made. The exhibition is based on multimedia and does not try to mix multimedia and authenticity” (10 dekabnja v Sankt-Peterburge otkrylsja 15-j istoricheskij park «Rossija – Moja istorija», 2017).

<sup>21</sup> One example, ironically embodied in the traditional media, was a paper poster with the historical timeline of the recent history in the Moscow park: in 2019 one of the visitors saw that some of the “important dates” were taped over (the Kursk submarine disaster, Nord-Ost and Beslan terrorist attacks) whereas other were left untouched (the dates of Putin’s and Medvedev’s presidency). The multimedia parks’ spokesman later commented that it was the part of the props and not used in the actual exhibition (Ufimceva 2019).

<sup>22</sup> As can be seen, for example, in the roundtable discussion of the ICOM Russia on the museum definition, 2018: [http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minisites/icofom/images/Museum\\_definition\\_roundtables\\_Russia\\_2018.pdf](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icofom/images/Museum_definition_roundtables_Russia_2018.pdf) (accessed 18 May 2020).

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