

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 960

26 June 2020

Ieva Zake. "Soviet Intourist and Foreign Travel to the Latvian SSR in the Post-Stalin Era. A Case of Ethnic Tourism." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20:2 (Spring 2018): 38-62. DOI:

https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00816.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR960>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY JAN-HINNERK ANTONS, HELMUT-SCHMIDT-UNIVERSITY HAMBURG

In this article Ieva Zake identifies ethnic tourism as a new variant of tourism that the Soviet Union offered to its foreign visitors from the 1960s. The more 'exotic' sister-republics like Georgia, Estonia, and Latvia, the case at hand, in particular supplied their visitors with cultural programmes that went beyond showcasing socialism. Based on archival material from the Riga branch of Intourist, Zake analyses changes in the supply side of tourism to Latvia from the late 1950s to the 1980s. Based on her main finding of the rising importance of cultural/ethnic tourism, the author develops the hypothesis that Intourist's highlighting of ethnicity affected not only the tourists but the Latvian native population as well and that it thus ultimately fuelled the national movement of the 1980s. In the long run, Intourist may in this way have contributed indirectly to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Zake uses the anthropological concept of ethnic tourism, though she neglects the importance of the inherent differentiation between ethnic and cultural tourism for her case. The most important input the author draws from the ethnic tourism approach is to perceive the 'natives' as turned into 'tourees,' that is, a product to be consumed by foreign visitors, supplied by a third party of intermediaries, in this case Intourist. Furthermore, the concept envisages two contradictory results for the local population. While its traditional culture may become commodified and finally erode, its to a certain degree marginalized cultural identity may be revived or strengthened. Apparently, it is this last idea that stimulates Zake's analysis. The competing concept of heritage tourism, which is far more common and principally applies to the same phenomena, surprisingly is not mentioned here. It may be legitimate, however, as long as the demand side stays out of focus.¹

A limiting factor to the article is its source base. The consulted fund at the Latvian National Archives primarily contains correspondence between the Riga Intourist branch and the central Intourist office in Moscow. Second, Zake refers to literature on tourism to the USSR and on the institution of Intourist on a rather narrow base. These shortcomings preclude addressing the questions of local responses to ethnic tourism and the perspectives of the foreign visitors. However, the article gains straightforwardness by concentrating on Intourist as an intermediary institution. On the other hand, it remains relatively colourless by not deepening the analysis of the content of the ethnic tourism supply and the ways it was presented. Travel guides and advertising may be relevant sources here.

The article thus describes the way in which Intourist developed the regional tourism programmes and convincingly analyses the reasons for change. Throughout the examined time period, Intourist's two general aims of advertising the USSR

¹ Aside the volumes of literature on the economic usability of heritage tourism, social sciences and humanities focus predominantly on the motives and experiences of heritage tourism, see Benjamin Porter, "Heritage Tourism and Conflicting Identities in the Modern World," in Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008): 267-282.

respectively promoting socialism on the one hand and meeting the tourists' demand in order to gain hard currency on the other, remained conflicting and created a dilemma for the organization. It gradually shifted from an emphasis of the former to the latter.

The Riga branch of Intourist hosted its first ethnic tourism events in the early 1960s. It chose to organize trips outside Riga to historic sites in order to avoid the multiple problems that arose on walking-tours in the Latvian capital. A bus trip to a secluded space in the countryside was easy to supervise, and critical questions and contacts to locals were not to be expected. To Moscow, the Riga Intourist branch later justified new forms of ethnic tourism, like visits to the Open-Air Ethnographic Museum and celebrations of Latvian music and dance traditions, with the tourists' demand. It were especially groups of Latvian émigrés, Jews, and descendants of Baltic Germans that asked critical questions about sovietisation and about Latvian as well as national minorities' culture. Hence, Intourist developed customised programmes not only to meet their demand but also to rebut their critique and to prove that the Soviet Union cared for its diverse cultural heritage. The question that arises here is whether it was indeed only tourist demand that sparked ethnic tourism offers. It seems also possible that members of the national elite, who came to positions of power in the Soviet republics in the 1970s, simply used this line of argument towards the Intourist centre in Moscow in order to disguise their own agendas. More biographical research would be necessary to answer this question. Zake mentions the new national sentiment (45), and additionally, the more general phenomenon of searching for pre-Soviet historical roots from the 1960s stimulates thinking along this line.²

In other Soviet tourist destinations, like the Curonian Spit in Lithuania, the promoted cultural heritage had been stripped of almost all its representatives by the population exchange after the Second World War. Nevertheless, even without any 'natives,' the Soviet authorities successfully sold heritage as a tourism product after reinterpreting it in a pre-Christian Lithuanian way.³ In this region, however, they did not permit any foreign tourists for fears of stimulating their heritage agendas and revisionist claims.

In conclusion, Zake's article adds fundamentally to our understanding of the relationship between the Intourist centre and its branches in the Soviet republics. The author investigates particularly the role of the Riga branch as an intermediary between the Moscow centre, the locals as 'tourees,' and the foreign tourists. Furthermore she highlights Intourist's struggle to promote the Soviet Union while also gaining economic profit, and at the same time supervising the western tourists. The most promising issue, however, primarily marks the route for future research: To what extent and in which ways did international ethnic tourism contribute to the Latvian national revival in the late Soviet Union?

Jan-Hinnerk Antons is lecturer in Modern History (Eastern Europe) at the Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg/Germany. Currently he is working on a habilitation on the history of Baltic Sea tourism in the nineteenth and twentieth century. He studied history and social sciences in Hamburg and Copenhagen and earned a PhD for a study on Ukrainian Displaced Persons in post-war Germany.

² Denis Kozlov, "The Historical Turn in Late Soviet Culture: Retrospectivism, Factography, Doubt, 1953–91," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2:3 (2001): 577-600; The Phenomenon was indeed of a global character. See: Małgorzata J. Rymcza-Pawlowska, *History Comes Alive. Public History and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017).

³ Anja Peleikis, "Tourism and the Making of Cultural Heritage: The Case of Nida (Curonian Spit), Lithuania," *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 12 (2006): 101-114.