Beyond the Trauma: New Perspectives for Preservation, Management and Museum Representation of Jewish Cultural Heritage in post-Soviet Cities

by

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Abstract

The thesis is based on three starting points. The first is on the acknowledgement of the lamentable condition of buildings of Jewish-related heritage in cities with a multicultural past across the present-day former Soviet Union. The second is on the acknowledgement of a slow process of gradual recognition of these traces as examples of tangible heritage and a provisional resource for heritage commodification. The third is the on the acknowledgement of ‘heritage’, ‘memory’ and ‘space’ as phenomena that are subject to manipulation on various levels.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the understanding of what constitutes national heritage in the newly-appeared independent states has conformed to correspond with the interpretations and values of national histories. In managerial terms some immovable heritage of ethnic minorities has been returned to the symbolic successors of previous owners. This defined provisional sources of funding for partial renovation of this heritage, as well as its use. The remaining sites, the majority of which are monuments protected by the state, most frequently stay unattended. In order to design policy recommendations to improve the situation, a complex understanding of factors that influence heritage protection, interpretation, and promotion in the post-Soviet space is needed.

Within this state of affairs, the thesis aims to analyze agency behind 'top-down' policies and 'down-up' grass-roots initiatives towards (non)interpretation of Jewish-related heritage sites in Chişinău (Moldova), Odessa and L’viv (Ukraine) and Minsk (Belarus). This selection of cities is chosen to reveal the multiplicity of factors that determine apparent similarity in heritage condition and management in the post-Soviet space, but instead reveal diverse dynamics of interaction between heritage and politics; heritage and nationalism; heritage and civil society, etc.

The methodology utilized here includes archival search, participant observation, media and expert opinion analysis, as well as examination of museum exhibitions. The fieldwork included data collection on the actual condition of Jewish heritage in the cities under discussion and interviews with various agents. Elite interviews were analyzed as basis for authoritative heritage discourse before discussing actual heritage projects in these cities.

Based on interdisciplinary analysis, the thesis provides an embracing overview of the broad spectrum of agency behind Jewish heritage-related initiatives (or their absence). It then offers recommendations for the advancement of managerial strategies.