



GRUTAS SCULPTURE PARK

Druskininkai, Lithuania

54.02207, 24.07944



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Executive Summary

The Grūtas Park was created to collect and display Soviet-era monuments that had been removed from public spaces following Lithuanian independence. This case study provides an example of an effective and alternate remedy to destruction or erasure of contested historical legacies but also shows the political, social, and economic complexities related to the construction of statue parks.

Introduction

The Soviet Sculpture Museum Grūtas Park (Grūtas Park) was officially opened on the first of April 2001. It is an open-air 20-hectare park located near Druskininkai, about 130km southwest of Vilnius. It houses dozens of Soviet-era statues, depicting prominent Communist Party figures, including Lenin, Stalin and Marx, that were removed from public spaces after Lithuania became independent from the USSR in 1990. The construction of the park, which began in 1999, was highly controversial. Its owner, Viliumas Malinauskas, and the park itself were accused of commodifying the Soviet past and not adequately acknowledging the gravity of Lithuania's painful half-century under Communist rule. By contrast, Malinauskas and supporters of the park see it as a way to remember and confront the historical realities of the Soviet period.

Background

Lithuania and the Soviet Union

Lithuania's experience with Russian rule long predates the Soviet Union. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a sovereign political entity with its roots in the 13th century. From 1569-1795, it was part of a political union with Poland known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The commonwealth was partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795, removing Lithuania from the political map for over a century.¹ During this period Lithuania became a non-Russian province of Imperial Russia, economically stagnant and resentful of the Russian administrative state's programs of Russification.² Following a period of liberalisation after the Russian Revolution, Lithuania declared itself an independent state in 1918.³

During the Second World War, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 and then by Germany in 1941. Towards the end of the war, along with Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union and became one of the Soviet socialist republics.⁴ Lithuania would spend almost 50 years under Communist rule. Lithuanians typically characterise this period as Soviet occupation and reject the Soviet framing of voluntary national alignment. During that time, the Lithuanian population experienced mass deportations to camps in Siberia and Central Asia. It is estimated that from 1941-1952, 131,340 Lithuanians were forcibly deported and relocated within the Soviet interior.⁵ The time period is also associated with goods shortages, mass state repression and censorship, and restrictions on civil liberties present elsewhere in the USSR.⁶

After Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet

¹ Kazimieras Meškauskas, "Lithuania," *Britannica*, Oct 7, 2021.

² Thomas Balkelis, "Imperial Periphery: Lithuanian Provinces in Late Nineteenth Century," In *The Making of Modern Lithuania*, ed. Tomas Balkelis. London: Routledge (2009).

³ Kazimieras Meškauskas, "Lithuania," *Britannica*, Oct 7, 2021.

⁴ Michael J. Bazylar et al, "Lithuania," in *Searching for Justice After the Holocaust: Fulfilling the Terezin Declaration and Immovable Property Restitution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2019)

⁵ Arvydas Anusauskas, "Lietuvos gyventojų trėmimai," *Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija*.

⁶ Rami K. Isaac and Laurencija Budryte-Ausiejene, "Interpreting the Emotions of Visitors: A Study of Visitor Comment Books at the Grūtas Park Museum, Lithuania," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 15, no. 4 (2015): 400-424.

Union, the fate of Soviet statues, monuments and artwork became a much-debated question. A photograph of the removal of the Lenin statue from Lukiskiu Square in Vilnius in 1991 became a powerful symbol in the post-Soviet Baltic region and many similar statues were torn down by crowds across the former Soviet Union.⁷ The process of officially removing Soviet symbols and statues from public spaces in Lithuania continued, as many felt they were physical incarnations of the marks left by Communism and occupation on Lithuanian society. Many of these objects were then stored in warehouses and yards that belonged to local municipalities.⁸ In 1998, a parliamentary committee announced a competition to design a solution to the problem of preserving statues and monuments. Viliumas Malinauskas, a wealthy mushroom exporter, won the competition with his proposal for Grūtas Park.⁹

History of the Contestation

Building the Park

Construction began in 1999. Soviet statues, monuments and artwork, which had remained the property of the state, were relocated to the Grūtas Park site. The outdoor park is set in woodland on the edge of a national park (*Dzūkijos nacionalinis parkas*) and altogether, the park houses 86 statues, spread in a 3km loop.¹⁰ The Grūtas Park website details its mission and explains that its task of remembering Lithuania's Soviet past is aided by the fact that:

Taking the 'idols' off the pedestal, changing the location and status of...the monuments and using a special exhibition technique...have substantially altered the ideological content of the monumental sculptures. [...] The aim of this exposition is to provide an opportunity for Lithuanian people, visitors coming to our country as well as future generations to see the naked Soviet ideology which suppressed and hurt the spirit of our nation for many decades.¹¹

This approach suggests that meaning can be altered through the process of relocation. It sees remembrance as the appropriate response to painful histories. Malinauskas exhorted crowds of visitors on the park's opening day to remember their past, saying 'Without history, there is no future'.¹²

A Soviet cattle truck, which once provided transportation to labour camps, stands at the entrance to the park. The site is surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and replica watchtowers play music from Soviet Lithuania. There are also two barrack-style buildings where historical artefacts and context-setting documents are displayed. Other features of the park include a zoo for children, a playground, a 40s-50s-style Soviet 'house' with displays of artwork and propaganda and a café

⁷ Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 185-198.

⁸ Rami K. Isaac and Laurencija Budryte-Ausiejene, "Interpreting the Emotions of Visitors: A Study of Visitor Comment Books at the Grūtas Park Museum, Lithuania," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 15, no. 4 (2015): 400-424.

⁹ Gruto Parkas, "About Us – Grūto Parkas," 2020.

¹⁰ Rami K. Isaac and Laurencija Budryte-Ausiejene, "Interpreting the Emotions of Visitors: A Study of Visitor Comment Books at the Grūtas Park Museum, Lithuania," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 15, no. 4 (2015): 400-424.

¹¹ Gruto Parkas, "Cafe," Gruto Parkas, 2020.

¹² Delfi, "Melagių Dieną Oficialiai Atidarytas Grūto Parkas," *Delfi*, April 7, 2009.

servicing 'themed' food (sprats 'po ruski', cutlets 'proščaj molodost', cocktail 'elnio akis').¹³ The park opened on April Fool's Day, a fact that has been deemed significant by some observers.¹⁴ Several hundred visitors attended the opening of the park. It featured a Lenin impersonator and groups dressed as members of the Soviet-era League of Communist Youth (*pionieriai*).¹⁵ As is suggested by the choice of opening date, entertainment and overall style of the park (for example, the inclusion of a zoo and playground), Grūtas Park takes a lighter approach to its more serious aim. While it does not seek to glorify the Soviet past, it does seem to be treading a line between elements of nostalgia (themed food etc.) and historical representation.



Figure 1: "Cattle truck at the entrance of the park" Image by Adriaio via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

The majority of the guestbook comments thank Malinauskas for building the park and hope that the park and its events continue.¹⁶ Furthermore, a state-commissioned opinion poll found that 70% of the Lithuanian public were in favour of the park.¹⁷ However, the opening of the park was met with harsh criticism and it sparked a polarising debate in Lithuania. Some saw it as an innovative commemorative project while for others it was 'sacrilegious' and 'criminal.'¹⁸ Critics accused the park of ridiculing and trivialising Lithuania's Soviet past. Unofficially the park is often referred to as 'Stalin World', with reference made to a 'Disneyfied' amusement park.¹⁹

The strongest opposition to the park came from Labora, a 'pressure group' made up of 'former political prisoners and partisans who fought the occupying Red Army...in the forests around Grūtas Park.'²⁰ Members of Labora staged a hunger strike to protest the building of the park.²¹ For them, the historical significance of the site made it an inappropriate location for the statues. Juozas Galdikas, a former Member of Parliament and a spokesperson for the 60,000 survivors of Soviet

¹³ Gruto Parkas, "Cafe," Gruto Parkas, 2020

¹⁴ Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 185-198; Valdas Svilas, "Grūto Parkas Tradicijų Nekeičia," *Respublika*, April 5, 2009.

¹⁵ Gediminas Lankauskas, "Sensuous (Re)Collections: The Sight and Taste of Socialism at Grutas Statue Park, Lithuania," *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (2006): 27-52.

¹⁶ Rami K. Isaac and Laurencija Budryte-Ausiejene, "Interpreting the Emotions of Visitors: A Study of Visitor Comment Books at the Grūtas Park Museum, Lithuania," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 15, no. 4 (2015): 400-424.

¹⁷ Kate Connolly, "Soviet Theme Park to House Fallen Idols," *Guardian* December 6, 1999.

¹⁸ Gediminas Lankauskas, "Sensuous (Re)Collections: The Sight and Taste of Socialism at Grutas Statue Park, Lithuania," *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (2006): 27-52

¹⁹ Dirk Olin, "What Lithuania can Teach Us about Grappling with Confederate Statues," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2020.

²⁰ Kate Connolly, "Soviet Theme Park to House Fallen Idols," *Guardian* December 6, 1999.

²¹ *Ibid.*

deportations in Lithuania, led the opposition to the park and strongly supported Labora's position.²² He criticised both Malinauskas and the park:

Malinauskas, a former farmer, does not care that these forests where Grūtas park was built, once served as shelter for Lithuanian freedom fighters against Soviet occupants. He does not care about painful [sic] history of Lithuania. What is purpose [sic] of this park? To laugh at our pain?²³

Contrary to the stated aims of the park, Galdikas and others believed that it was an inappropriate means of memorialising Lithuania's Soviet past stating: 'We need monuments in Lithuania which reflect the reality of how people suffered - not a park that puts these murderers back on their pedestals.'²⁴

Galdikas and a group of lawmakers lobbied to have the park shut down, but were ultimately unsuccessful.²⁵ The statues, however, are not treated with the reverence that was mandated in Soviet Lithuania and their pedestals have largely been removed. Visitors can pose with and even on the monuments without being reprimanded by park staff, something that would not have been possible during the Soviet period.²⁶ In response to the criticism he received, Malinauskas placed wooden figures of Galdikas and four of Galdikas' supporters amongst the Soviet statues on display in Grūtas Park. Malinauskas saw this as a way of highlighting the ambiguity of continuity and change in post-Soviet Lithuania, with many of those in influential positions at the time also having occupied influential positions under Communism.²⁷

Decision-Making Processes

The decision to build Grūtas Park and house the Soviet statues and artwork there was based on a relatively open, design proposal competition run by a parliamentary committee. However, choosing the winner of the competition had a financial dimension. It is widely acknowledged that Malinauskas' success was also related to his willingness to invest his own funds in the project.²⁸ Unlike most of the other applicants, his proposal did not require public funding. The construction and opening of the park were met with criticism from organisations and individuals representing survivors of deportation and political imprisonment (specifically those for whom Grūtas park held strong symbolic value). Furthermore, not all aspects of the park received approval, for example, a later proposal to use cattle trucks to transport visitors around the park and 'recreate' the experience of deportation was rejected by the Ministry of Culture and deemed inappropriate.²⁹

²² Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 185-198.

²³ Liudas Dapkus, "Stalin's World Theme Park Draws Thousands," *NBC News*, May 5, 2006.

²⁴ Kate Connolly, "Soviet Theme Park to House Fallen Idols," *Guardian* December 6, 1999.

²⁵ Liudas Dapkus, "Stalin's World Theme Park Draws Thousands," *NBC News*, May 5, 2006.

²⁶ Darius J Ross, "Retirement Park for Soviet Monuments," *Baltic Times*, June 1, 2006.

²⁷ Aro Velmet, "Occupied Identities: National Narratives in Baltic Museums of Occupations," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2011): 189-211.

²⁸ Gruto Parkas, "About Us – Grūto Parkas," 2020 ; Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 185-198 ; Darius J Ross, "Retirement Park for Soviet Monuments," *Baltic Times*, June 1, 2006.

²⁹ Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 185-198

The conversation about how to treat Soviet-era landmarks in Lithuania is ongoing, as some have been swept up in heritage and cultural preservation legislation. Four Soviet-era sculptures on Vilnius's Green Bridge, the last major Soviet monuments still standing in Lithuania's capital, were declared protected landmarks in 2005. These sculptures, which depict idealised types of Soviet citizens, were seen by many as relics of Soviet propaganda. In 2013, a proposal to relocate them to Grūtas Park was supported by the Lithuanian Political Prisoners and Deportees Union.³⁰ This contrasts with the stance taken by members of Labora on the building of Grūtas Park and highlights the multi-layered nature of opinions and preferences that exist amongst former political prisoners and deportees.

The Green Bridge statues were quietly removed in July of 2015, ostensibly for safety reasons, as the statues were corroded and in need of repairs.³¹ However, their removal was widely viewed as a political move. Some ethnic Russians living in Lithuania denounced the removal.³² Some, like Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė, expressed relief that these sculptures were no longer standing in the centre of town.³³ Other observers would have preferred that the statues remain standing, albeit recontextualised by the addition of some new element to the sculptures.³⁴ Architect Audrius Ambrasas had proposed leaving the statues standing, but enclosing them within a metal frame 'enclosure' of his own design. 'Obviously, [the sculptures] radiated a negative connotation, which is why I suggested leaving them, but enclosing their space. But now...the common thought is 'don't remind me of them.' It's such an ambiguous relationship,' he said.³⁵

In 2016, Lithuania's Real Cultural Heritage Assessment Council voted to strip the statues of their cultural protections, making it unlikely that the statues will ever return to the bridge.³⁶ Lithuanian officials made it clear that they would not rush to determine the fate of the sculptures, but debated options have included trading them for Lithuanian treasures currently in Russian possession,³⁷ or allowing museums, including Grūtas Park, to bid on them.³⁸

Summary and Conclusions

Dealing with the legacies of Communism, authoritarianism and occupation is a challenge that has presented itself across the post-Soviet space. Grūtas Park represents an alternative approach to collective memory insofar as it is not a typical museum space nor is it state-run. Grūtas Park is a private enterprise that was designed and funded by Vilius Malinauskas. It has been harshly criticised for its 'irreverent' treatment of Lithuania's Soviet past and is seen by some to ridicule the hardship and suffering experienced under the Communist regime. A large proportion of this criticism

³⁰ James Kanter, "Silent Sentinels at Center of Lithuanian Debate on Bygone Era," *New York Times*, November 11, 2013.

³¹ George East, "Vilnius Mayor: Green Bridge Statues Represented 'Big Lies' about the Soviet System," *Baltic Times*, July 20, 2015.

³² BBC News, "Lithuania: Soviet-Era Statues Offered a Home in Russia," *BBC News*, July 29, 2015.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Austėja Mikuckytė-Mateikienė, "Ant Žaliojo Tilto Atsiraso Ambraso Siūlomoms Konstruksijoms: Nukeltos Skulptūros Tapo Radioaktyvios," *LRT*, April 9, 2021.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Delfi, "Žaliojo Tilto Ir Jo Skulptūrų Likimas Nuspręstas," *Delfi*, March 9, 2016.

³⁷ BBC News, "Lithuania: Soviet-Era Statues Offered a Home in Russia," *BBC News*, July 29, 2015.

³⁸ Ignas Jačasuskas, "Sovietines Žaliojo Tilto Skulptūras Ketinama Nuomoti," *Delfi*, March 3, 2018.

has come from Juozas Galdikas and Labora. However, according to a state-commissioned poll, the park enjoyed broad public support. Humour played an important role in subversive movements during the Soviet period and it has been suggested that Grūtas Park succeeds in capturing and repurposing humour in the process of remembering Soviet Lithuania. However, this is not universally accepted. Certain stakeholders continue to oppose the location and specific features of the park.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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