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# Dark tourism, thematic routes and possibilities for innovation in the Slovak Republic

## Abstract

*This research note describes an interconnection between touristic potential of localities impacted by the First and the Second World War, by focusing on a case study of cemeteries in the North-East of Slovakia. The case study proposes to create a Slovak part of the 'dark tourism thematic trail' through cemeteries from the First World War that could join the existing Polish part of the trail and thus gaining an international importance. The case study gives some directions for suitable touristic marking and marketing support by the official tourism bodies in respective localities, which can assist the necessary cross-border cooperation as well as the process of tourism innovation in the Slovak Republic. The conservation efforts to revalue sites and to promote thematic trail linking war heritage in the region have gained interest mainly from the non-profit organisation - Beskydy War History Club. A significant effort has been made to conserve and to exploit war heritage, however, site management and visitor interpretation for international tourists' needs seems to be neglected. Further dark tourism development is preconditioned by a cooperation of Beskydy War History Club and parties supported from public finance for marketing activities in tourism (DMOs).*

*Key words: World War I cemeteries; battlefield sites; dark tourism; thanatourism; Slovakia.*

## Introduction

Slovakia is a country with progressive tourism potential, majority of which is still unknown to foreign visitors. Slovak Tourist Board defined a uniform Slovak communication philosophy with a motto that present Slovakia as a "Small - Big Country" as a reflexion of the huge amount of natural and cultural values in a rather small area. In the field of competitiveness, Slovakia strives to focus on sustainable tourism and to refer foreign visitors to destinations that are little known, non-overcrowded and authentic. In 2013, the tourism share of GDP of the Slovak Republic was approximately 2.7 % (2.5 % in 2012 and in 2011). The national tourism strategy assumes that the tourism share of GDP will be 2.8 by 2016 and 3.2% by 2020 ("Tourism Development Strategy by 2020"). This sector is not economically and socially recognised as much as in other countries. In Europe, tourism as economic activity is the third largest social-economic activity contributing by more than 5% to the GDP of EU.

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In terms of arrivals, Slovakia has realised 1.670 million international tourists (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic). The main source markets are the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Hungary and Austria. Although Slovakia has a huge tourism potential covering almost all the main forms and types of tourism, it will never become an equal partner with strong Central Europe competitors. The communication strategy of the Slovak Tourist Board for 2014-2016 states that in 2016 it will focus on the “Cultural Heritage” product line. The main campaign motifs will include understanding history, culture, UNESCO. The campaign partners will include DMOs (Destination Management Organisations) and event organisers, while the campaign will focus on Bratislava, Košice, UNESCO, thematic and cultural trails. The case study in this research note explores the potential of dark tourism thematic trail and how it can innovate tourism potential of the Slovak Republic.

## Literature review

“Dark tourism” - tourism to sites related to death and disaster, battlefields, cemeteries and sites of natural disasters have long drawn tourists and it has received increasing attention by researchers in recent years (e.g. Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2012; Stone, 2013). Literature has been dealing with dark tourism and thanatourism from various points of view. Seaton (1996) describes the historical development of dark tourism. The literature focuses primarily on the dark tourism offer (Seaton, 1999; Stone, 2006; Farmaki, 2013); less attention, however, has been paid to the demand for ‘dark’ tourism experience (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011; Farmaki, 2013; Miles, 2014) and to insights into motivations (Dunkley, Morgan & Westwood, 2011). Cohen (2011) emphasizes an authenticity of location as one of the key elements.

Authenticity of localities in Slovakia and support by official tourism bodies are the key elements in Slovakia. In our work we focused on an analysis of data classified by Craig and Thompson (2012) and Seaton (1996) who provide a similar dark tourism classification, namely tourism to memorials, including graveyards, cenotaphs, crypts, trenches, re-enactments or simulation of death. Works covering the Central Europe that have been published so far deal in particular with Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (Miles, 2002; Biran *et al.*, 2011). With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the removal of travel barriers between the west and the east, many sites of Nazi atrocity in the Czech Republic, Poland, Eastern Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, and Ukraine became accessible. One of the results of destinations opening throughout Eastern Europe was the emergence of Auschwitz as a leading travel destination (Hartmann, 2014). However, this region has the potential to offer other destinations connected with horrors of the World Wars. Concentration and work camp in Sereď for example has a potential that has not been used so far.

## Methodology

Of the various methods of analysis available, field research and case study approach was considered to have the key requirements for our line of inquiry as it illuminates the complex processes surrounding the historical aspects and its impacts on the tourism industry. This information was complemented by secondary data sources such as Marketing strategy of the Slovak Tourist Board for 2014-2020, Tourism

development strategy up to 2020. Based on the mentioned documents the possibilities of support and utility of developing tourism by this way was discussed and evaluated.

Our field research focused on bigger war cemeteries with more than 10 victims buried, followed by mapping suitable object based on a well defined set of criteria. The first criterion was the technical condition of cemeteries, such as technical facilities (a central cross, graves with crosses, natural/ built fence, entrance door, etc). The second criterion was the authenticity reflected in the preservation of original architectonic design and its reconstruction based on the historical cemetery sketch. The third criterion was evaluation of tourism marking in the cemetery and existence of information boards. The cemeteries were classified in two categories – A-category for the cemeteries complying with at least 2 of the criteria and B-category for other cemeteries complying with one criterion. The aim was to select the objects that could be a part of a thematic trail in their current condition. Other existing historically valued dark tourism objects are briefly mentioned in the analysis.

## Analysis of the current dark tourism offer

In general, Slovakia has not been presented as a country offering dark tourism destinations of international importance. The primary research reported here identifies unique dark tourism destinations in Slovakia and possible interconnection with the existing projects in Poland. Along with the need to develop tourism in this region, it is necessary to expand the offer by restored and trimmed cemeteries and monuments from the First World War and the Second World War. Such intent has been successfully implemented in Poland where, for example, a huge restoration of military cemeteries was completed. The Poles have a special tourist trail connecting military cemeteries and other objects from the First World War called “Trail of the Eastern Front during the First World War in Podkarpackie Province,” which is part of a Polish national project entitled the “Trail of the Eastern Front during the First World War” involving the provinces of Lubelskie, Łódzkie, Małopolskie, Mazowieckie, Podkarpackie, Podlaskie, Świętokrzyskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie. This product is presented in the given regions by regional DMOs – “Regionalne Organizacje Turystyczne” (Poland). According to Burał and Slepšov (2005), it is planned to be extended to the territory of Slovakia through of cross-border cooperation.

In Slovakia, dark tourism will hardly reach an international importance unless a common platform covering the existing offer is created and the involved organisations start cooperating. There are over 200 war cemeteries (WW1) in north-eastern Slovakia, where approximately 50,000 victims - Slovaks, Czechs, Russians, Poles, Germans, Austrians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Romanians, Italians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Turks and people of other nationalities are buried (Burał & Slepšov, 2005). An internet map of the locality and cemeteries from the First World War in this region – Database of War Cemeteries from the First World War - was prepared already by Beskydy War History Club (2014, June 1).

These cemeteries are currently a part of two educational-historical tourist trails and one cycling trail. The first trail is the tourist military-historical trail of village Výrava. The trail leads through 3 war cemeteries in the territory of the village. The cemeteries were reconstructed and the educational tourist trail was created in 2011. The second trail is a planned tourist military-historical trail by the village Stebník. Cycling trail R-63 called “Following the Stories of Švejka, the Good Soldier” is 52 km long. Another object is the crypt in Osadné. Currently, the crypt in Osadné is a part of the tourist trail No. 8819 that starts in Poland and leads to Slovakia through Balnica-Osadné border crossing.

Several historical monuments from the Second World War are preserved in the mapped territory (German military cemetery in Humenné, Russian military cemetery in Humenné, German military cemetery in Hunkovce, Russian military cemetery in Svidník, German military cemetery Zborov). A large museum in nature called “Death Valley” is situated in the district of Svidník. Further, remains of a defence fortification from the Second World War, so called Arpad’s line, can be found in this location. The Arpad’s Line is 600 km long and stretches from Slovakia (at village Ulič) through Subcarpathian Rus to northern Romania. The most important hiking artery in Slovakia is also connected with the Second World War. It leads through such places that played an important role during the Second World War. Major part of the trail is identical with the international tourist trail E8. In Slovakia it is called the “Trail of heroes of the Slovak National Uprising in 1944”. Military Museum in Svidník also plays an important role.

## Discussion

As the outcome of this research, it is suggested to create a long trail connecting cemeteries from the First World War. In six districts where the field work was conducted (Humenné, Bardejov, Medzilaborce, Svidník, Stropkov, Snina) 40 cemeteries classified as A-category objects and 45 cemeteries classified as B-category objects were identified. The cemeteries classified as A-category objects should be connected by a thematic trail as a precondition of further development of this kind of tourism. A successful development of the trail linking these cemeteries depends on the cooperation of several key stakeholders - Beskydy War History Club, Club of Slovak Tourists - and DMOs – Regional tourism organisation Upper Zemplín and Upper Šariš, Regional tourism organisation Northeaster Slovakia, Slovak Tourist Board, Regional self-government and individual municipalities. The final product should be marked uniformly (direction and information boards), have a uniform marketing support – promotion materials, web site, cooperation with tourist information centres, be presented at tourism fairs and exhibitions and within information tours for tour operators and journalists, and supported by media. The international relevance can be achieved by connecting the trail with the Polish trail in a form of cross-border cooperation, since such product is already available in Poland and popular with tourists.

Our proposal complies with the goals of national Tourism Development Strategy by 2020. One of the aims is to improve navigation by creating and maintaining marked educational trails. Financial transfers for tourism development in regions should be preconditioned by provision of high-quality informative direction marking of sites. Another support tool is to secure funding within cross-border tourism projects. As defined by the strategy, DMOs, regional self-governments, Slovak Tourist Board and relevant ministries should be responsible for achieving these goals. In spite of requests for a grant pursuant to the Act No. 130/2005 on War Graves, projects of municipalities and non-profit organisations (Beskydy War History Club) focused on reconstruction of war cemeteries are not supported sufficiently due to the lack of finance. A contribution is provided mostly for the basic case and maintenance. However, DMOs activities are supported from public resources. DMOs in Slovakia are created on public-private partnership principle.

## Conclusion

Further tourism development is heavily dependent on a cooperation of parties that currently perform partial activities in the field of dark tourism development in north-eastern Slovakia (Beskydy War History Club) and parties supported from public finance for marketing activities in tourism (DMOs). Creation of a complex cross-border tourism product requires a support by official tourism bodies. With regards to the tourism platform in the given locality that consists of small organisations, coordination of activities brings synergic effects. Furthermore, the destination marketing should also provide for such activities that cannot be secured by a single organisation (Holešinská, 2007).

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