Navigating contested memories in a commercialised setting: conflict avoidance strategies in Kyiv city tour guiding

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ABSTRACT
While the tourism industry is oriented towards creating attractive images of destinations, histories of violence and suffering have increasingly been incorporated into tourism offers and are often actively promoted by states and tourism organisations. A growing body of scholarship has focused on how difficult pasts have been represented and have analysed the driving factors behind the rise of such heritage. Commercial tourism offers such as guided city tours have however largely been overlooked as arenas for communicating difficult pasts. This article provides an in-depth examination of memory work of commercial guides, focusing on the example of Russian-language tour guiding in Ukraine’s capital Kyiv. Drawing on participant observations of 20 guided city tours and interviews with 18 tour guides, the article identifies a wide range of narrative strategies that guides adopt to navigate pasts that have been subject to memory conflicts. During tours, guides adjust how much they say, what evidence they provide, what aspects of the past they present as relevant as well as their manner of speaking. These conflict avoidance strategies are part of a pragmatic approach to memory that deserves greater attention in the study of difficult pasts.

Introduction
Tourism routinely circulates narratives about the past as part of communicating what is ‘most important’ about a place, what makes it unique and appealing. Diverse actors such as tourism boards and agencies, heritage institutions and tour guides are involved in the production of such narratives that help to promote a place and sell it to an audience, making tourism as Duncan Light argues ‘the most conspicuous way in which history and the past are appropriated and commodified for economic gain in contemporary societies’ (Light 2015, 144). While the tourism industry is generally oriented towards creating attractive images of destinations, histories of violence and suffering have increasingly been incorporated into tourism offers and are actively promoted by states and tourism organisations (Rivera 2008). A growing body of scholarship has dedicated itself to the examination of ‘troubled’, ‘dissonant’ or ‘difficult’ heritage as part of the literature on dark tourism and heritage and tourism studies more generally. This body of literature has provided important general insights into the rise of difficult heritage and representational practices linked to it, as well putting forward interesting analyses of particular sites such as museums, memorial sites or other sites of dark tourism where visitors deliberately choose to hear about difficult pasts. Conventional tourism offers such as commercial city tours are however usually overlooked in this literature, a significant shortcoming given their popularity among tourists.

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This paper addresses this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of commercial city tours in a contested setting. It examines how tour guides talk about difficult pasts when guiding Russian-speaking audiences through Kyiv. We examine how tour guides deal with pasts that have been subject to memory conflicts within Ukraine as well as between Ukraine and Russia and look at what communicative strategies guides adopt to talk about – or silence – these pasts. The article draws on a two months focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005) of Russian-language tour guiding in Kyiv in July and August 2019 and is based on extensive participant observations of guided tours and interviews with tour guides and other tourism stakeholders.

Russian-language tour guiding in Kyiv is a particularly interesting case for studying the communication of difficult and contested pasts. The representation of the past in Kyiv has undergone profound changes since a wave of protests in 2013 and 2014 has won the city worldwide attention. The Maidan protests triggered a series of events eventually leading to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and a still simmering war on Ukraine’s eastern border and has accelerated the contest between different interpretations of the Soviet and imperial pasts. In Russia, the Donbas war is either framed as a continuation of the struggle against fascism begun in World War II (Fedor, Lewis, and Zhurzenko 2017, 5) or a revival of Novorossiya, an imperial province to which parts of the now separatist-held lands belonged (Wilson 2016). In Ukraine, both the USSR’s victory in World War II and the expansion of the Russian empire are often remembered through narratives of victimhood and martyrdom that have found continuity with the protesters killed on Maidan and along the front in Donbas (Blacker 2015). With these escalating differences, a grand narrative that accommodates Ukrainian and Russian memories becomes increasingly hard to imagine. The scholarly literature on memory conflicts in the region has so far predominantly focused on the fields of politics and international relations, commemorative ceremonies and other mass events, as well as political declarations and memory laws. In comparison to high profile ‘memory events’ (Blacker and Etkind 2013, 6) and elite-led policies and representations, we know relatively little about how memory-making is organised in the tourism industry, which continues to welcome Russian tourists and provides an important opportunity for direct transnational encounters.

The first section of the article situates the study within the literature on difficult pasts and provides some context on conflicting memories in Ukraine. This is followed by a discussion of the organisation of the tourism industry in Kyiv. We subsequently discuss commercial tour guiding as an interactive practice oriented towards hospitality and present a detailed analysis of the repertoire of strategies employed by guides in Kyiv. While some topics are so difficult that they are avoided completely, tour guides do not silence difficult pasts altogether but adopt a range of strategies for communicating them, such as regulating the quantity of what is being said, using evidence to support their narrative, and adjusting the manner in which they talk. In a concluding section we discuss the implications of these strategies.

**Communicating contested pasts**

As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) outline in their influential book ‘Dissonant heritage’, heritage is loaded with different values and interests, and its production can therefore be challenging. In the tourism sector, commercial and public stakeholders, tourists and locals, have different perspectives on heritage, creating tensions that need to be managed. A particularly important subject has been heritage associated with painful pasts, such as war, genocide, displacement and other forms of violence. Research on this topic has flourished partly due to the rise of ‘dark tourism’ – the incorporation of sites of difficult pasts into the heritage industries – as well as the rise of negative identity narratives that acknowledge national responsibility and guilt, as in Germany’s commemoration of the Holocaust (Giesen 2004; Olick 2007). How to remember difficult pasts creates representational difficulties. As Macdonald outlines:

‘How much of the horror to show? Should a representation remain coolly factual or use more emotive forms of staging? Are there groups within society that might be offended or who might draw the wrong kind of political
sustenance from what is said? How far into social, economic and political contextualisation should representation go? Does identifying individual perpetrators give them a kind of posterity or is it necessary for incriminating them? Should links be made with other atrocities or political events, including more recent ones? (Macdonald 2015, 18).

Difficult heritage not only poses challenges for national identity narratives traditionally formed around positive rather than negative heritage (Macdonald 2015; Giesen 2004), but its representation can also be challenging because it is likely to be subject to particular sensitivities and controversy. Particularly the transnationalisation of memory – the phenomenon that memory-making increasingly exceeds national borders (Erll 2011) – can pose additional challenges as the conversation around how to interpret troubled pasts now also takes place at an international level between actors whose understanding of the past has been shaped by different national traditions of historiography (Huang and Lee 2019; West 2010).

A growing body of scholarship has examined the production of texts and material objects linked to difficult heritage as well as, to a somewhat lesser extent, its communication in face-to-face interactions (Pfoser and Keightley 2019; Quinn and Ryan 2016; Skinner 2016; Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson 2011; Lehrer 2010; Macdonald 2006; Schwenkel 2006). This literature has been very valuable in identifying key dynamics and challenges of heritage interpretation but is limited in significant ways, because it tends to overlook the communication of heritage in conventional tourism offers. Most of the literature has focused either on public institutions such as museums and memorial sites dedicated to the presentation and commemoration of difficult pasts (Macdonald 2006; Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson 2011; Quinn and Ryan 2016; Ferguson, Walby, and Piche 2016) or has examined commercial offers in the field of dark or political tourism (Nisbett and Rapson 2020; Markham 2018; Skinner 2016). This literature examines for example particular visual, narrative and performative practices of representing difficult pasts and the particular political renderings of memory they generate. Tour guiding within both public and commercial contexts is seen as ideologically charged, being able to ‘(re)shape the identities, places and histories that are implicated in and by the tour’ (Brin and Noy 2010, 20). While being in dialogue with tourists, tour guides often attempt to exert interpretative control over the past when putting forward particular renderings of a place and its past. Macdonald (2006) observes on the example of the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg that tour guides encode preferred readings into their narrative that they aim to encourage among visitors. Guides use questions to tourists strategically to ‘encode a relatively “closed” audience interpretation’ (2006, 128), which encourages reflection on Nazi atrocities and works against the sacralisation of the site.

Examinations of existing representational practices of difficult pasts often fall within two categories: on one hand, as being shaped by cosmopolitan or agonistic orientations (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Radonić 2017; Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson 2011) and on the other hand, being sensationalist, commodifying suffering (Lennon and Foley 2000) and feeding existing socio-political divisions (McDowell 2008). While the former orientation is often attached to public institutions and the latter to commercial dark tourism, research has increasingly complicated this picture, highlighting the commercial pressures experienced by public institutions (e.g. Cento Bull and Hansen 2016; Ferguson, Walby, and Piche 2016) as well as the ability of commercial projects to ‘give voice to marginalised groups’ (Nisbett and Rapson 2020, 5) and encourage ethical readings of conflict heritage.

By focusing on sites and tours specifically dedicated to difficult pasts, this body of literature however leaves tourism offers that do not have a specific focus on difficult pasts underexplored. The problem is not only that this leaves a significant part of the sector out of the analysis but also, as Rivera observes, ‘acknowledgment’ is taken ‘as a given’ (Rivera 2008, 614). As a consequence other communicative strategies such as ‘social practices of avoidance’ (Tileagă 2018) are not sufficiently theorised. A comparatively small number of studies have started to look at how difficult pasts are represented as part of tours that do not specialise in difficult pasts. Leonard (2011) shows how official Belfast tours trivialise the Northern Ireland conflict to present Belfast as stable and revitalised post-
conflict city, which has moved on from its troubled past. Feldman (2007) examines how Jewish-Israeli tour guides guide Christian pilgrims on biblical tours and construct Israel-Palestine as Bible Land, rendering Palestinians invisible. Brin and Noy (2010) similarly show how tour guides in a formerly Palestinian neighbourhood of Jerusalem put forward Israeli interpretations of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and silence earlier histories of Palestinians’ inhabitation of this area. Considering commercial guided tours as an important and productive, if flawed, process of producing knowledge about difficult pasts (Pfoser and Keightley 2019), this study examines tour guides’ communicative strategies in more detail, focusing on how exactly tour guides talk about or silence certain aspects of the pasts considered sensitive. As our data shows, while these pasts are difficult to talk about within conventional guided tours – they can cause offence and potential conflicts with and among tourists or require long elaboration by the guide –, they are also difficult to ignore. Tourists ask questions, guided tours pass monuments to contested historical figures or are expected to provide an overview of the history of a place, meaning that they need to find ways of discursively engaging with them.

The case of Kyiv is exceptionally well-placed to expand our knowledge about strategies of communicating contested pasts. It is directly related to an ongoing conflict but tourists do not primarily come to visit the city due to its conflicting past and present but also because of Kyiv’s religious significance, an interest in the city’s rich heritage and culture as well as personal connections. Kyiv’s status as the cradle of Kievan Rus, a medieval East Slavic state, and the Christianisation of the Eastern Slavs continues to fascinate a diverse group of people and is therefore a place where people with widely varying interpretations of these memories come together, often in the same guided tours. In such a setting the bandwidth of the strategies used by guides must be able to deal with the entire interpretative spectrum.

After a centrally controlled Soviet narrative fell away, almost any aspect of the past considered a given in Soviet school education has been up for reinterpretation in Ukraine. The legacy of the medieval Kievan state is predominantly interpreted as the cradle of Russian civilisation in Russia. In the official Ukrainian interpretation it is presented as an early version of a flourishing Ukrainian state, the development of which was merely interrupted by Russian and Soviet rule (Kappeler 2014). The Cossack insurgency of the mid-17th century that ended with a military pact between the Zaporizhian Cossacks and Muscovy was widely portrayed as the reunification of Ukrainians and Russians in Russian and Soviet history pedagogics (Shirelman 2009) but has been interpreted as a temporary solution in the long lasting struggle for liberation in independent Ukraine. The commemoration of the man-made famine of 1932–33 had been completely silenced in Soviet times but once the lid was off became a contested political issue, handled differently in accordance with the geopolitical stance of each consecutive government (Kasianov 2010). Another hotly contested aspect of the past are the various attempts to establish a Ukrainian state after World War I, the creation of Ukrainian nationalist underground organisations and the controversial actions of their military arms during World War II (Rossolinski-Liebe 2011; Yurchuk 2017). The post-war Soviet years also remain contested because although they brought relative stability and prosperity, they also saw a Russification of Ukraine and the near absorption of the Ukrainian intelligentsia into a Russian-speaking society (Delwaide 2014). Finally, Ukraine’s gradual detachment from its Soviet past and its Russian neighbour is a process that comes with its own grievances over commemorative holidays, street names and monuments (Portnov 2013), over the status of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, Ukraine’s geopolitical alignment and the establishment of an independent church hierarchy.

For tour guides, this long catalogue of contested issues can be quite a handful. Before we examine the communicative strategies employed by tour guides to navigate such a complex landscape, we situate tour guiding practices within the context of Kyiv’s tourism sector.

A changed tourism sector

Kyiv is one of Eastern Europe’s oldest cities and a popular tourist destination with important heritage sites such as the Cave Monastery and St Sophia Cathedral, listed as UNESCO World
Heritage sites. Until recently the proportions of international visitors to Kyiv were clear. Russians used to be by far the biggest group of visitors before late 2013, attracted by the geographical and cultural proximity and existing personal connections. With the violence between Russia and Ukraine, the cancellation of direct flights between Russian airports and Kyiv and the upgrading of border security in late 2018, the market plummeted. Russians have, however, by no means ceased to travel to Kyiv. Although no longer by direct flights, there are still daily connections by sleeper trains, cars and buses and flights with a stopover in Minsk, from where Kyiv airports have seven daily connections. Russian-speaking tourists are a yet much broader group comprised of a variety of backgrounds, including recent emigrants to Western Europe, the US or Israel, but also Belarusians, Russian-speakers from Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic States or Central Asia, as well as bilingual Russian and Ukrainian speakers.

In 2019, when research for this study was carried out, city tourism in Kyiv and tour guiding in Russian was a thriving industry. Already the summer before, the overall numbers of tourists visiting the city had bounced back to the level of before the Maidan protests with 850,000 visitors. Now Russians were no longer the largest group of visitors, replaced by Belarusians, Israelis, Americans and Germans (BBC Ukrajyna, 27 September 2018). Among all these tourist groups there is a substantial subgroup of native Russian-speakers. Even in a contested environment of memory, identity and language, the Russian language remains very sought after in tour guiding and is well suited to communicate to diverse groups of visitors. On a typical Saturday in the summer of 2019, Russian-speaking visitors could choose between high-quality tours in Kyiv offered by several dozen firms from morning until late at night.

In order to gain insights into tour guiding practices, we based our research on a combination of interviews and participant observations. As part of a focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005) conducted in July and August 2019, we interviewed 18 tour guides, who conduct Russian language tours to a range of audiences. All guides depended at least partially on the income from tour guiding for their livelihood. We also undertook participant observations of 20 guided tours including overview sightseeing tours on foot or from a boat, walking tours in different parts of old Kyiv, focusing on aspects of social history, architecture and myths. In 10 out of 20 tours, guides gave their permission to make an audio recording of the tour, in the other 10 tours notes were taken and later turned into a participant observation sheet. The notetaking was supported by tracking the tour on a GPS device, so that the sequence of sites past by the tour could be easily reconstructed. Among the tour guides whose tours we attended 8 were men and 12 were women. Four were employed by state museums or tour companies, while the rest were freelancers, who additionally worked in other jobs. Tour guides in Kyiv are loosely organised in two overlapping associations and rely on websites that offer scheduled drop-in tours. The guides’ work experience ranged from three years to several decades.

In both the interviews and participant observations it became quickly evident that Russian-language tour guiding involves a lot of unknowns for guides – while tourists share the same language, tourists’ national backgrounds, ideological allegiances and preferences cannot be easily predicted. For private hires tour guides can make inquiries into the origin of tourists and their main interests. In publicly advertised tours, which were mostly attended for this study and which are open for audiences to drop-in, tour guides learn about where their guests come from only in the course of the tour, by observing accents or by checking background knowledge. Tour guides develop a skilled gaze that can quickly assess their guests’ cultural, religious or geographical background and socioeconomic status (Gelbman and Collins-Kreiner 2018), however, in a situation of an ongoing conflict and widely dispersed, highly diverse Russian-speaking diaspora, such features often offer hardly any clues about what interpretations of the past tourists may prefer.

**Being hospitable, being cooperative**

Tourism is an industry driven by hospitality and dependent on reputation. Outside of big museums and the two UNESCO world heritage sites, the city’s guiding industry is dominated by
freelance tour guides, who rely on attracting groups without big tour firms or large hotels that
channel tourists to them. Their business depends on positive reviews on social media and on
websites like TripAdvisor. As one respondent put it,

’Now it’s Viber, Messenger, Facebook, there is instantly material about you. And if you get positive reviews it
means you get jobs. If the reviews are negative, simply no one will call you.’ (Tour guide interview 7, 10 July 2019)

It is in the tour guide’s interest that the conversation with tourists proceeds in a friendly, coopera-
tive manner and produces positive reviews online.

Most tour guides who started their career in the Soviet tourism industry remember tour
guiding as an act of lecturing (Tour guide interview 2, 3 July 2019). Contemporary tour guides,
in contrast, usually see themselves as friendly service providers, whose job is to engage in
a dialogue with their guests and answer their questions. As one guide put it, ‘now we are
allowed to say anything we like, but of course we have to observe the principles of mutual
respect’ (Tour guide interview 17, 6 August 2019). In contrast to Macdonald’s tour guides who
work in the Nazi party rally grounds in Nuremberg and encode particular preferred readings
into their tours – ensuring tourists leave with the desired understanding of history (Macdonald
2006) – commercial city tour guiding is shaped by a general service orientation with tour guides
seeking to be hospitable and to create positive experiences for visitors. Whereas tour guides have
authority over their route and narrative and position themselves as experts, tourists have the
right to not pay attention, interrupt and even challenge the authority of the guide (Larsen and
Meged 2013, 91–92). Several respondents said that they preferred guests, who asked questions
and one said that there was nothing worse than working with close-lipped guests (Tour guide
interview 15, 25 July 2019). Part of the art of tour guiding is therefore to engage in a positive and
enlightening conversation between host and guests. The main task of tour guides is lighting the
way and interpreting what tourists see (Reisinger and Steiner 2006), not instructing them. The
process of guiding then is oriented towards creating an interpretation of the past that both the
guide and the guests can agree to, that can profit from challenging questions and allow for
tensions, jokes or irony, but tour guides are very careful that the conversation never turns into
antagonism.

Adapting the tour to avoid conflict: tour guides’ narrative strategies

The service orientation of tour guides frames the strategies that they adopt in relation to
contested pasts. We have identified four variables of the narrative that tour guides regulate to
navigate contested historical landscapes: how much is being said, what kind of evidence is
provided for what is being said, what aspects of the past are presented as relevant and finally
the manner of speaking during the tour. The strategic adjustment of these four variables can
result in a complete avoidance of contested aspects of the past, an emphasis on one interpretation
of the past, which is endowed with particular authority or also result in a narrative that tries to
bridge different versions of interpreting the past. This section outlines these different strategies in
more detail.

Part of the art of tour guiding is to regulate quantity of information, to say as much as is needed
to bring across a point but not to say more than necessary. The strategic regulation of how much is
being said about potentially contested topics has been described as a viable narrative strategy for
difficult memory sites by Quinn and Ryan (2016, 324) for their study of Dublin Castle. In Kyiv, all
but one of the interviewed guides said they used selective addition of aspects a particular group will
perceive positively, or they shorten their narrative to avoid conflict. The regulation of quantity is
achieved through three different strategies: The first is to keep narratives modular enough to
regulate quantity in such a way that possible challenges from the audience could be avoided. As
one guide emphasised:
'My excursion is secretly built in such a way that some pieces of it can simply be ... If I realize that there are Russians in the group, I try to even more cautiously avoid all questions connected to our mutual relations.' (Tour guide interview 12, 22 July 2019)

If tourists sense that they do not get the full story, this can sometimes lead to demands that a topic be elaborated (Tour guide interview 18, 9 August 2019). Such questions can be challenging for tour guides in particular when the regulation of the quantity was made because there is not much reliable information available. Especially in relation to the Maidan protests, leaving out some of the most pressing questions sometimes leaves audiences unsatisfied. One tour guide and one director of a tour agency reported that the lack of clear evidence as to which side shot how many protesters on Maidan, and who shot first, made tour guides go over these questions quickly, because if tourists asked about them, they could not give good answers (Expert interview 9, 20 August 2019. ‘About Maidan they sometimes ask and sometimes they don’t,’ reported one tour guide. ‘It’s probably the most sensitive topic and that’s why I usually ask ‘should we go to Maidan or should I just show it to you from the viewing platform?’’ (Tour guide interview 4, 8 July 2019). This carefully posed question – which avoids mentioning the protests directly – leaves it up to the tourists whether they want to hear more about the topic.

The second strategy goes a step further in strategically regulating quantity by completely avoiding delicate topics. Topics that many tour guides said they try to avoid under all circumstances are those that involve recent violent events or church politics, both issues in which opinions tend to be mutually exclusive. As one tour guide stated:

‘I never touch it [Maidan] myself. If they ask me, I tell them honestly how it was. Probably, Maidan is the hardest part of the conversation with Russia.’ (Tour guide interview 12, 22 July 2019)

In one of her tours she gathered the group in Hrushevskiy street, where several Maidan protesters had been shot in February 2014. As an improvised memorial, the shapes of the bodies as they fell when shot had been painted on the pavement there. The tour guide stuck to her 19th century-related narrative while standing on these very shapes, without mentioning them. Topics such as the Maidan protests, of course, are widely discussed in other social situations, which makes them what Linde (2009, 197) calls ‘noisy silences’, that can lead to further questions from tourists that then need to be addressed.

A somewhat softer form of avoidance can be found in a third strategy: taking delicate topics out of the group conversation into a private discussion. In this strategy, the quantity of information shared with the entire group is reduced to avoid conflicts and the quantity of information shared privately is raised as these are seen as more appropriate situations to offer explanations. One guide reported,

‘If someone asked a delicate question, I simply say that if you are interested then after the tour, when I am done with the official part, I can tell you my subjective point of view. There were such cases that two of us simply stayed behind and spoke for another half hour.’ (Tour guide interview 7, 10 July 2019)

During monologues at a site, tour guides generally feel the need to retain their authority, while in private conversations, it is easier to contain a potential conflict, and the guide’s opinions may be open to disagreement as they usually do not pose a challenge to the guide’s expertise (Feldman 2007, 366). This strategy was observed during a guided tour through the Kyiv Cave Monastery. The tour passed through a room where several historical maps were on display. In front of a map of 15th century Lithuania, a Russian-speaking guest of the tour said loud enough for the entire group to hear that a country named Ukraine was nowhere to be seen. The guide pointed out that neither was there a country called Russia. He began to speak to the challenging guest in a volume audible only to immediate bystanders, guiding his attention to the land of the Golden Horde that covered most of modern-day Russia at the time. This regulation of the quantity of information given to the entire group and to a single, challenging guest avoided a discussion about whether or not Russia and Ukraine had existed at a point in time when the Golden Horde and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania dominated the region.
A second group of strategies focuses regulating of the amount and quality of evidence during tours. Being truthful and evidence-based is regarded by many tour guides as a sign of quality and the best insurance against conflicts with audiences. One tour guide evoked her professional honour when saying that everything she said in her tour had been double-checked ‘300 times’ (Tour guide interview 12, 22 July 2019). While most of the interviewed tour guides so they try to give verifiable information to their guests, there are certain periods, events and figures of the past that are seen as requiring additional backup. In one case a tour guide made the potentially controversial claim that the older architectural features of a church were typical for Ukrainian architecture while a bell tower added later was typical for Russian architecture.

Tour guide: ‘If you look at the bell tower, what does this remind you of? What painting comes to mind?’

Tourist: ‘The Rooks Have Come Back.’

Tour guide: ‘Exactly! That’s what I wanted to hear. The Rooks Have Come Back by Savrasov, one-to-one. This is the architecture of Russia’s Golden Ring.’

He simultaneously showed the painting on his tablet computer as evidence.

Alongside with visual evidence such as reproductions of paintings and historic photographs, old maps or archived newspapers, presented in a folder or a tablet computer, tour guides can use quotations to support their narrative. During the observed tours, direct quotes were made from prose and poetry, from letters, speeches, songs, military commands and official documents, while references were made to sources as diverse as the bible, medieval chronicles, popular movies or the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the latter for the especially delicate question of how many people died as a result of the man-made famine of 1932–33. Not only can such sources add colour to a narrative, they also add authority and show that the guide has done the research in a broad array of sources. References to sources can also be used selectively to circumvent discussing the contradictory heritage, as in the case of one tour guide who said he would limit his evidence to ‘anecdotes and legends’ (Tour guide interview 4, 8 July 2019) when talking about the 17th century Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnitskiy, whose legacy has been interpreted as a liberator of Ukraine from Poland as well as the man who ‘reunited’ Russians and Ukrainians but also as a brutal warlord, whose men murdered thousands of Poles and Jews (Sysyn 1998).

If guides are challenged on their sources, one way to retain their authority is questioning the quality of their challenger’s sources. Especially easy to denounce is information taken from TV or the internet. As one tour guide reports: ‘It happened that they started saying “you are fooling us”’. She responded by emphasising the credibility of her sources: ‘I am not going to argue with you guys. I rely on scientific literature and you probably on TV’ (Tour guide interview 8, 11 July 2019). Credibility can also be added to a tour guide’s narrative if they scrutinise their own sources. Some tour guides do this by adding for instance that the medieval Kyiv chronicles are not to be fully trusted but are often the only available source.

In many instances the most authoritative way of using evidence is presenting testimony, either the tour guide’s own or someone the tour guide has personally spoken to. One tour guide reported, if she had guests who claim the Maidan protests were an American sting operation, she could tell them:

‘I stood here through the nights, I know how it was (…) I haven’t seen a single American. But here my greying hair, that’s because my children, my son in law, my nephews they were on Maidan. These nights, when we were so worried and didn’t know what was going to happen and will these children come home again … well that is honest.’ (Tour guide interview 12, 22 July 2019)

For the events on Maidan, that dragged on from November 2013 to February 2014, almost everyone in Kyiv is to some degree a witness. Underlining personal involvement makes testimony richer and more credible, usually compelling the audience to accept that the tour guide has better evidence than they.
The third variable that allows tour guides to adapt their narratives is by setting priorities what they interpret as relevant aspects of the past and what is of secondary relevance. Stressing why a tour guide sees one interpretation of the past as particularly relevant can add authority to the narrative, especially when for one narrative there are several competing versions. A good way to deal with competing narratives is to point out existing controversies before giving primacy to one version of the narrative.\(^2\) If there are several competing versions of a narrative, the fact that there is controversy is relevant, even if not each version is perceived as equally justifiable, and even if the guide ultimately gives primacy to one. One tour guide elaborated on several ways to deal with the controversial memory of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi. One such way can be to point out the controversy around his legacy; he is admired by Ukrainian historiography for his skilful military leadership whereas in Poland or Israel he is mainly remembered for his violent campaigns against Poles and Jews (Tour guide interview 4, 8 July 2019).

Khmelnitskiy can also serve as an example for a conflict avoidance strategy that involves a reversal of priorities and bringing an aspect of secondary relevance to the foreground: To represent difficult historical personalities or events, tour guides sometimes prefer speaking about the symbol that commemorates them rather than about the personality or the event itself. The imposing monument for Khmelnytskyi, built in 1888, stands in the middle of Kyiv’s central St Sophia square. For sightseeing tours through the historic centre of Kyiv it is hard to avoid. The history of the statue itself provides for humorous anecdotes that involve his horse’s private parts and the prudery of late 19th century Kievans. Two of three guided tours that passed the statue told this anecdote rather than speaking about the historical figure or the controversies around him. The third tour guide spoke about how a photograph of the statue came to adorn the package of a famous brand of chocolate. Shifting the focus from controversial historical figures to the less relevant symbols that commemorate them can therefore be a successful strategy for speaking about figures or events without engaging in the controversy.

Another way to avoid conflict around controversial topics is to deny that it bears any relevance for the present context. One tour guide reported, that if the war in eastern Ukraine was brought up during a tour, he tells Russians:

'What is happening there is politics. I can talk about it for a long time, it doesn’t matter. That’s them. These are people from a different world. We can’t see them. And as always, it’s the people who suffer.' (Tour guide interview 6, 9 July 2019)

Declaring the ongoing war as irrelevant to the encounter between tourists and guides frees the way to move the narrative to less controversial topics.

The manner of presenting a tour guide narrative is the last variable that allows space for manoeuvre to avoid potential conflicts. For guided tours in museums and memorials, an orderly narrative structure, and for the more difficult topics, a matter-of-fact tone and clarity are important (Quinn and Ryan 2016). Avoiding ambiguity in such situations ensures that the version of history conveyed is the one currently sanctioned by the respective institution. For commercial tour guides in a situation where the past has become highly politicised, it is sometimes the conscious violation of these principles that can spare a guide an argument. One tour guide explained how he deals with questions about the standard of living in Ukraine:

'With Russian-speakers, I am very cautious, I try to not do it at all, I avoid answering. That is, you speak in general phrases, you speak about the country but try not to tell too much about your personal views: You don’t know what’s in the head of a Russian or a Belarusian after all.' (Tour guide interview 4, 8 July 2019)

Being deliberately vague or wordy can be a suitable strategy in navigating delicate topics. It does not allow the listener to pin down any of the guide’s ideas, making it hard to engage guides in a conflict.

Guides also often use irony to counter difficult questions, thereby dropping the sincerity usually attached to a historic narrative. One tour guide reported that many times the first question asked by
Russian tourists was whether one was allowed to speak Russian in Kyiv. This question, he said, was best answered ironically:

'I start this by joking that we have to whisper, that I now switch on the radio and there one speaks loudly in Ukrainian and another one quietly whispers in Russian, if you go to the theatre, you will hear the actors whispering to you from the stage in perfect Russian.' (Tour guide interview 15, 25 July 2019).

The guide then recommends his guests to watch less TV and see for themselves. With this shift in manner from sincere to ironic and back to sincere, the guide in a humorous way, shows his guests that their question does not merit a serious answer.

Discussion

The work of commercial tour guides is different from other guides who work with tourists who choose to hear about a contested past. They must satisfy a broader range of customer demands. Their narratives are built around the cityscape, where the filtering of history is much harder than in a museum or contained memorial sites. In this context tour guides develop great sensitivity for what is controversial and what is consensus and based on their experience have developed a range of adaptive strategies that allow them to successfully operate in this contested terrain.

The article examines in detail the communicative strategies that tour guides use in their work. We show how Russian-language guides selectively silence contested aspects of the past, for example by regulating the quantity of information they convey and by keeping their narrative consciously vague. Alongside avoiding (explicit) talk about particular topics, tour guides however also use a range of other strategies that help them to carefully navigate contested pasts and sidestep conflicts over their interpretation. For example, tour guides use different forms of evidence to position themselves as experts and make their narrative authoritative. Other strategies include to distance the past from the present to de-emotionalise discussions about the past, to acknowledge the diversity of historical narratives or by using irony to add lightness to issues otherwise considered difficult. These strategies are particularly important in a context where audiences are likely to hold diverse views. While in some cases the language choice and advertising strategies of guided tours will attract relatively homogeneous groups of tourists, in other contexts this is not a given. For example, in guided tours offered to Israeli tourists through a formerly Palestinian neighbourhood in Jerusalem (Brin and Noy 2010) the omission of Palestinian perspectives is less likely to be challenged by tourists than a favouring of Republican perspectives in an English language tour in Belfast or a nationalist view on Ukrainian history in a Russian language tours in Kyiv attended by Russian-speakers of different backgrounds.

More generally, we see commercial city tours with a general orientation such as the ones we examined in Kyiv, as being shaped first and foremost by a pragmatic approach to the communication of contested pasts. Their memory work, if and how tour guides talk about controversial topics, is driven by conflict avoidance and the desire to create pleasurable and enlightening experiences, and is not primarily interested in conveying a particular reading of controversial pasts. Cosmopolitan and, more recently, agonistic remembering have been examined as central modes for remembering difficult pasts, indicative of a reflexive, post-national orientation (Cento Bull and Hansen 2016). At the same time, scholars, particularly those studying the ongoing memory conflicts in the post-Soviet region (Fedor, Lewis, and Zhurzenko 2017) but also some forms of conflict tourism (McDowell 2008) and memories of the far right have shown the prevalence or even rise of partisan and antagonistic ways of remembering. The work of commercial tour guides in Kyiv does not fit neatly into either of these modes of engaging with the past; it can be reflexive, post-national and dialogic but not always so, with the avoidance of confrontation as its central driving force. While tour guiding practices and styles differ between contexts and often between individual guides, we see this as a key characteristic of commercialised memory work directed at a general audience. If
we want to grasp the full spectrum of remembering difficult pasts in the heritage industry, this pragmatics of memory deserves greater scholarly attention.

Notes

1. At the time of research, the question of who shot the Maidan protesters had not been conclusively clarified in a court (Briefing Note on Accountability for Killings and Violent Deaths During the Maidan Protests 2019).
2. This principle is one of three elements of the 'Beutelsbach Consensus' that formulates the basics of civic education in German schools since the late 1970s (Wehling 2016).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Loughborough University Data Repository at DOI: 10.17028/rd.lboro.12180579.

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