

<https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.1-06>

IRSTI 04.71.31

ISSN 2519-2442, KAZAKHSTAN

Book Review

TOURISM AS MEMORY-MAKING: RUSSIAN TOURISM IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

Gulnar NADIROVA ¹

¹ Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 050004 Almaty, Kazakhstan
gulnad@mail.ru

ORCID: 0000-0002-7837-2598

Received: 23.01.2026

Accepted: 28.01.2026

For citation: Nadirova, G. (2026). [Review of *Tourism as memory-making: Russian tourism in the shadow of empire*]. *Eurasian Research Journal*, 8(1), 109-111. <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.1-06>

Tourism is often treated as a marginal social practice, associated primarily with leisure, consumption, and entertainment. In *Tourism as Memory-Making: Russian Tourism in the Shadow of Empire*, Alena Pfoser convincingly challenges this assumption by demonstrating that tourism constitutes a powerful social arena in which historical meanings are produced, negotiated, and stabilized. Rather than approaching memory as an institutional or state-driven project, the Pfoser foregrounds everyday touristic encounters as sites where imperial and Soviet pasts are rendered meaningful through narration, spatial movement, and interaction.

The book's central contribution lies in its reconceptualization of tourism as a process of memory-making, rather than as the passive consumption of heritage. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tallinn, Kyiv, and Almaty, Pfoser examines Russian-language guided tours as social performances that link urban space, historical narration, and affect. These cities are not treated merely as comparative cases, but as distinct memory landscapes in which shared Soviet references intersect with locally specific trajectories of urban transformation.

Following an introductory chapter that outlines the theoretical foundations of tourism as a memory practice, Pfoser situates her study within memory studies, anthropology, and critical tourism research. She argues that tourism is particularly suited for the study of memory because it combines narration, movement, repetition, and audience interaction. Importantly, memory is not approached as a fixed narrative transmitted from guide to tourist; rather, it emerges situationally through dialogue, humor, selective emphasis, and strategic silence.

In the early empirical chapters, Pfoser develops her methodological approach through close attention to guided tours as ethnographic sites. Based on participant observation, repeated tour attendance, and interviews with guides and tou-

rists, she demonstrates how tours operate as structured yet flexible frameworks for storytelling. One of the book's notable insights here is that guides do not simply reproduce canonical historical accounts. Instead, they actively tailor narratives to perceived audience expectations, often blending historical facts with anecdotes, personal memories, and mundane details. This finding challenges simplified assumptions about "official" versus "alternative" memory and highlights the role of situational pragmatics in memory production.

In the subsequent analysis of urban space, Pfoser shows how cities function as layered memory environments. Streets, buildings, monuments, and even absences become narrative anchors through which broader historical processes are rendered tangible. A particularly compelling contribution of this section is the demonstration that meaning does not reside inherently in places themselves but is activated through movement and narration. As tourists walk, stop, and look, guides connect spatial cues to temporal layers, enabling visitors to experience the past as embedded in the present urban fabric.

Later chapters deepen the analysis by focusing on tour guides as mediators of memory. Pfoser does not portray guides as ideological actors or authoritative historians, but as professionals navigating multiple constraints: commercial expectations, audience engagement, and their own interpretive repertoires. One of the book's most insightful findings is how guides manage ambiguity. Rather than resolving contested histories, they often leave interpretive space open, allowing tourists to draw their own conclusions. Silence, understatement, and humor emerge as key narrative strategies, especially when addressing sensitive or emotionally charged topics.

The discussion of nostalgia and familiarity is another strong contribution. Pfoser demonstrates that nostalgia in tourism is not necessarily a longing for political systems or imperial dominance. Instead, it often operates through everyday references, shared foods, childhood experiences, or recognizable urban aesthetics that evoke a sense of comfort and recognition. This nuanced treatment of nostalgia avoids reductive interpretations and instead frames it as a flexible emotional resource that can coexist with critical reflection or ironic distance.

In the later chapters, the book turns to the production of difference within touristic encounters. Pfoser shows that tours frequently construct contrasts between "then" and "now," as well as between different urban trajectories, but these contrasts are rarely absolute. Instead, they are negotiated through comparison, analogy, and selective framing. One particularly interesting observation is that comparison often occurs within tours themselves. Guides invite tourists to relate what they see to other cities they know, thereby situating local narratives within broader post-Soviet experiential frameworks.

It is important to note that *Tourism as Memory-Making* does not rely on quantitative tourism statistics or visitor numbers. This is a deliberate methodological choice: Pfoser prioritizes depth of interaction over breadth of coverage. While this allows for rich ethnographic insight, it also shapes the scope of the book's claims, focusing on meaning-making processes rather than representativeness or scale.

While the book offers a sophisticated and original contribution, several limitations deserve critical attention. First, the strong focus on guided tourism inevi-

tably sidelines other forms of touristic engagement, such as independent travel, digital mediation, or informal exploration. Although Pfoser acknowledges this limitation, the reader is left wondering how memory-making processes might differ outside the structured setting of guided tours.

Second, the comparative balance among the case studies is uneven. Some cities receive more sustained analytical attention than others, which occasionally complicates cross-case comparison. While this imbalance reflects the realities of ethnographic fieldwork, a more explicit discussion of how these differences shape the book's conclusions would strengthen the comparative dimension.

Third, the temporal framing of the study raises questions about change over time. The analysis captures tourism practices at a particular historical moment, but tourism is a dynamic field shaped by shifting geopolitical contexts, technological change, and generational turnover. Greater reflection on the durability of observed patterns would enhance the book's broader applicability.

Finally, while the conceptual framework of tourism as memory-making is persuasive, it occasionally risks overstretching tourism's explanatory power. Not all memory work occurs through tourism, and the book might benefit from clearer boundaries regarding what tourism can and cannot reveal about post-imperial memory more generally.

Despite these limitations, *Tourism as Memory-Making* is a carefully researched, conceptually innovative and empirically rich study that makes a strong case for taking tourism seriously as a social practice of memory. By focusing on narration, spatial movement, and interaction, Pfoser demonstrates how historical meanings are produced in everyday encounters rather than solely in institutions or texts. The book will be of particular interest to scholars of Eurasian studies, memory studies, anthropology, and tourism research, as well as to readers concerned with how the past is lived and experienced in contemporary urban contexts. Its greatest strength lies in showing that memory is not merely remembered but actively made step by step, story by story, and tour by tour.