

Dark Tourism as a Niche Form of Cultural Tourism*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present dark tourism as an important, though often controversial, element of contemporary tourism, with particular emphasis on its educational and cultural potential in the context of niche forms of tourism. A methodology drawing on the methodological canon of management sciences was used, enabling conceptual and theoretical research opportunities. This was the basis for a critical analysis of foreign and Polish literature on the subject, including specialist journals and current reports on the phenomenon under study. Descriptive methods, case studies, and observation were used to interpret and analyze the collected material. The article demonstrates that dark tourism, despite its controversial nature, constitutes an important niche form of cultural tourism, which is gaining increasing importance in tourism practice and research. The conclusions from the analyses suggest the need for further research on the ethical dimensions and impact of dark tourism on tourists' historical awareness.

Keywords: dark tourism, cultural tourism, niche form of tourism

Introduction

The choice of topic stems from the changes observed in tourist behavior following the pandemic, where tourists are increasingly seeking authentic, emotional, and educational experiences (Olszewski-Strzyżowski et al., 2022; Reformat et al., 2023). The growing popularity of experiential tourism and the development of virtual forms of sightseeing give dark tourism a new meaning and require reexamination in the context of contemporary cultural and social trends.

This fact is confirmed, among others, by Forero, Mejia & Gómez (2023), who report that in recent years the number of scientific studies on dark tourism has increased significantly. According to the authors, this topic is gaining attention among both researchers and practitioners, especially when it comes to definitions, influences, and subcategories (e.g., Holocaust tourism, disaster sites, etc.). The topicality of the topic is further confirmed by contemporary trends indicating a growing interest in reflective, emotional and educational tourism, which makes dark tourism an increasingly significant phenomenon in the global tourist movement.

In the literature on the subject (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Horeglad & Kasperska, 2020), dark tourism is sometimes perceived as a controversial but significant form of cultural experience, whose popularity is growing alongside globalization, the mediatization of death, and the increasing importance of cultural memory. Although still marginal in statistical terms, this phenomenon attracts the attention of researchers from various fields, ranging from tourism, sociology, and anthropology to memory studies.

The structure of the analyzed concept is formed by a combination of four key elements: history, heritage, tourism and tragedy (Stone, 2006). The elements of the concept of dark tourism highlighted reveal its complex relationship between history, heritage, tourism, and tragedy. Visiting places associated with death, tragedy, armed conflicts,

or natural disasters becomes not only a way to connect with history and collective memory, but also a space for reflection on heritage, ethics, and emotions.

The aim of this article is to present dark tourism as an important, though often controversial, element of contemporary tourism, with particular emphasis on its educational and cultural potential in the context of niche forms of tourism. In the context of the above-mentioned research objective, the main research problem was defined, which is contained in the following research question: How does horror tourism function as a niche form of cultural tourism and what ethical controversies accompany its development?

Through this article, the author wishes to contribute to the discussion on better understanding the essence and conditions for the development of dark tourism, as well as the ethical controversies associated with this form of tourism, and to draw attention to the research challenges related to the issue under analysis.

A theoretical approach to the category of “dark tourism”

In the literature on the subject, the concept of dark tourism is most often associated with the names of two professors, Malcolm Foley and John Lennon from Glasgow Caledonian University, who defined it in the late 1990s as: "a phenomenon involving the presentation of real and appropriately prepared (“commodified”) sites of death and disaster and their ‘consumption’ by visitors" (Lennon & Foley, 1996, p. 198). This definition describes the concept as traveling to places associated with death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre.

Similarly, Tarlow (2005, p. 48) identifies dark tourism, defining it as “visiting places where tragedies or historically noteworthy deaths have occurred and which continue to affect human life.” The author classifies this form as a specific type of tourism, part of the so-called “niche tourism,” which, according to Novelli (2005, p. 9), includes: “tourism, culture, and/or activity-based tourism undertaken by a small number of people in order to experience the most authentic facts and impressions possible through offerings that meet their expectations.”

In his observations, Tarlow (2005, p. 54) also refers to the profile and needs of people using the products of the analyzed form of tourism, stating that there are four basic emotions that characterize their mental state. These are: lack of security, gratitude, humility, and superiority. The authenticity and credibility of tourist attractions are also important in this regard (Stone, Hartmann, Seaton (2018).

In the literature on the subject, the term dark tourism is also used under the term “thanatourism”, meaning tourism related to death and the culture of death (“thanatos” in Greek mythology means the personification of death). British historian and cultural theorist A. V. Seaton (1996) is considered a pioneer in research on this specific aspect of tourism and death culture. His work focused on the analysis of social and cultural phenomena related to the subject of death, including in the context of tourism and places associated with dying, burials, and the memory of the deceased.

According to Seaton (1996, p. 254), the concept of thanatourism should be understood as: “travel to a place wholly or partly motivated by a desire for real or symbolic encounters with death, in particular, but not exclusively, violent death.” The focus on death resulting from this definition means that the term has a much narrower meaning than the concept of dark tourism. The author cited perceives thanatourism as a specific form of cultural heritage tourism (Seaton, 2001). In his opinion, at one end of this form of tourism there are trips motivated solely by a fascination with death itself (regardless of whose death it is), while at the other end there are trips to places associated with death, where the deceased are known and valued by visitors. On this basis, the author distinguishes between forms of thanatourism that reflect different forms of encounters between the tourist and death/the deceased (Hartmann, 2014).

Although it is relatively common to find statements in the literature on the subject that the interest of tourists who visit places associated with death and suffering has increased in recent decades (Dann, 2005; Sharpley, 2009; Stone, 2016; Poornima et al., 2023), some authors show that the connection between travel and death has a long history, rooted in established practices of “thanatopsis” (contemplation of death). This fact is confirmed by many cases of interest in dark tourism that took place even before the end of the 20th century (Casbeard & Booth, 2012, Casella & Fennelly, 2016, Coughlin, 2014, Murphy, 2015, Schäfer, 2016; Suha & Jurak, 2023).

An analysis of selected definitions indicates that niche tourism referred to as “dark tourism” is still insufficiently precise and ambiguously defined and classified, as are the relationships between tourists and places associated with death. This fact is emphasized, among others, by Stone (2016). The identification of the category of dark

tourism (combined with thanatourism) as a form of tourism of particular importance therefore seems problematic, although both forms relate to the same phenomenon. This is evidenced by the scientific work of many researchers (i.a. Causevic, 2008; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Roberts & Stone, 2014; Stone, Hartmann & Seaton, 2018; Miles, 2014; Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Krisjanous, 2016; Lennon & Teare, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017; Assylkhanova et al., 2024, Saha & Husain, 2025), who list significant problems which, in their opinion, confirm the insufficient state of knowledge and research in the above area of analysis. Most researchers support their observations with the following facts:

- a) there is little evidence that interest in death (including morbid curiosity) is an important motive for visiting places and attractions that fall into the category of dark tourism and conversely, some studies clearly show that such interest was of little importance,
- b) the motivations for visiting places of death and suffering are very similar to those for participating in cultural heritage tourism (e.g., learning about and understanding events from the past).
- c) there is low public awareness of dark tourism (Light, 2017; Lewis, Schrier & Xu, 2022).

In conclusion, it should be noted that the category of dark tourism refers to the phenomenon of tourist trips to places associated with tragedies, disasters, or stories of a dark nature. It is a specific form of tourism that arouses interest both because of the fascination with the dark side of human history and the desire to understand and reflect on tragedies.

Methodology

The article focuses on the analysis of a niche form of cultural tourism known as dark tourism. The main research problem is included in the question: *How does dark tourism function as a specific form of niche cultural tourism, and what are the and what ethical controversies are associated with it with the development of this type of tourism?* The subject of the analysis was the forms and locations of tourist attractions related to the functioning of dark tourism. Basic information on the survey conducted is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Basic information on the survey conducted

Specification	Characteristic
Research methodology	- the analysis of trade journals, websites, participant observation, empirical research method (case study)
Sample selection	- targeted selected places or initiatives related to dark tourism
Sample size	- objects and forms that make up the dark tourism offer
Geographical scope	- global scale
Time scope	2020- 2025

Source: own elaboration

The analysis of the literature on the subject, specialized press and the case study method form the fundamental research methodology. The choice of the case study method was justified by three factors:

- 1) The case study method allows for a detailed analysis of selected places or initiatives related to dark tourism, enabling an in-depth exploration of unique characteristics, tourist motivations, and cultural context
- 2) The case study method allows for the examination of identified aspects in their natural environment, which is difficult to achieve using other research methods
- 3) The case study method allows for the combination of various data sources (e.g., documents, observations), which enables a multidimensional interpretation of dark tourism as a niche form of cultural tourism.

For the need for implementation of the paper objectives, it is assumed that studying every single case is worthwhile (Dul & Hak, 2008). The examples analyzed of forms and objects that make up the dark tourism offer are considered representative due to their significant contribution to the development of this form of cultural tourism.

The main results of the analysis allowed for: a) recognizing the essence and specificity of dark tourism as a niche form of tourism and the ethical controversies accompanying it b) presenting selected examples of forms and objects of dark tourism that encourage travelers to participate in this form of cultural tourism.

Types of sites that create dark tourism offers - selected examples

Radzevičius (2022) emphasizes that tourists seeking new experiences have the greatest impact on the development of dark tourism, a niche form of tourism, thereby generating a new type of tourist demand (Magano, Fraiz Brea, and Leite, 2022). These observations are also confirmed by numerous market reports (e.g. *Dark Tourism Market to Hit USD 40.2 Bn by 2033, 2025*) czy *Dark Tourism Market, 2024 -20230*). As a result of this phenomenon (increased demand), various facilities (places) offering specific attractions began to emerge, which differ significantly from most attractions offered by mass tourism.

The aim of this part of the article is to identify the specific nature of dark tourism, considering its educational and cultural potential, which is important in the context of this niche form of cultural tourism. The above-mentioned objective is based on the widely known typology of dark tourism sites developed by one of the most important theorists in this field, the eminent British researcher Philip Stone, whose work has played a key role in shaping dark tourism as a serious trend in academic research in tourism. According to Stone (2010), dark tourism consists of seven categories of so-called “dark places” that are attractions for participants in this form of cultural tourism. On this basis, the following forms of dark tourism were identified: Dark Fun Factories, Dark Exhibitions, Dark Dungeons, Dark Resting Places, Dark Shrines, Dark Conflict Sites and Dark Camps of Genocide. Below, the first of the mentioned forms of dark tourism, Dark Fun Factories, is examined.

Dark Fun Factories

The Dark Fun Factories category consists of places, products, or forms of entertainment that do not exhibit a high degree of authenticity. They seem fun, interesting, or innocent, but they conceal dark, disturbing, or ethically problematic aspects related to death, tragedy, or suffering, presented in a sensational, simplified way, and often without deeper historical or moral context. Examples of these objects are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Examples of Dark Fun Factories

<p>Case. 1 Czarnobyl (Chernobyl Zone, Ukraine)</p> <p>Following the success of the HBO series (2019), “exciting” tours, photo shoots with gas masks, and even merchandise (“radioactive magnets”) began to be offered. <u>Problem:</u> The site of a nuclear disaster and the deaths of thousands of people is being turned into an “Instagram playground.”</p> <p>Case 2. The Auschwitz Museum as a “check-in”</p> <p>Tourists take selfies in front of the gate with the inscription “Arbeit macht frei,” posing for photos, sometime in inappropriate poses. <u>The problem:</u> trivializing a place of genocide and suffering for millions of people. The transition from reflection to “content.”</p> <p>Case 3. Torture museums (various cities in Europe, e.g. Amsterdam, Praga, Rothenburg)</p> <p>Grotesque exhibits, “scary sounds,” often presented in the spirit of “look how people used to be tortured—funny, isn’t it?” <u>Problem:</u> Commercialization of human suffering, lack of historical or educational context.</p> <p>Case 4. The Titanic disaster – museums and exhibitions (e.g., Titanic Belfast, Titanic Experience Orlando)</p> <p>Visitors “board the ship,” have tickets with passenger names, and at the end “check to see if they survived.” <u>Problem:</u> Escaping from real tragedy in favor of “immersive fun.”</p>

The examples of Dark Fun Factories presented here show that they are more about spectacle than reflection, which means that instead of educating, they focus on the effects and emotions of visitors. This is accompanied by the

commercialization of death, which takes the form of a culture of memory consumption in the form of the sale of souvenirs, admission tickets, gadgets, etc. This is often accompanied by inappropriate behavior, such as taking selfies or the gamification of trauma, which manifests itself in visiting these places as if they were a game (e.g., “solve the murderer's mystery” or “feel like a victim”).

Another form of dark tourism that has been identified is Dark Exhibitions.

Dark Exhibitions

This category is represented by sites that offer more authentic dark tourism products. They concern permanent or temporary museum and art exhibitions that present death, suffering, disasters, wars, crimes, or other dark aspects of history and human experience, sometimes in a controversial, moving, or problematic way. Examples of these sites include table 3.

Table 3: Examples of Dark Exhibitions

Case 1, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Phnom Penh (Kambodża)

It is one of the most significant places of dark tourism, i.e., tourism related to death, suffering, and historical memory. It commemorates the former torture camp (S-21) from the time of the Khmer Rouge, where tourists can view an exhibition of tools, photos of victims, evidence of crimes, etc. This site plays an important role in preserving memory, education, and documentation of genocide. The place represents a raw, minimalist space that intensifies the effect of horror and sadness.

Case 2. Topography of terror (Berlin)

An exhibition organized at the former headquarters of the Gestapo and SS, presenting documents, photographs, and maps showing the mechanisms of the terror state. It reflects a stark, documentary message in an authentic crime scene.

Case 3. Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Poland)

The Museum in Oświęcim (founded in 1947) is located on the site of an authentic German Nazi concentration and extermination camp. It is a place where over 1.1 million people, mainly Jews, were killed. In the context of the concept of “dark exhibitions” (i.e., exhibitions related to death, suffering, violence, and tragedy), it is a key example of a museum exhibition of exceptional authenticity, educational depth, and ethical dimension. Its exhibits include children's shoes, suitcases, and hair, which are credible mementos of the victims of Nazism. The historical education, commemoration of the victims, and moral reflection that accompany this place often bring with them ethical dilemmas related to the presentation of trauma.

Case 4. Museum Holocaustu Yad Vashem (Izrael)

The Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem is one of the most significant dark tourism sites in the world. It fits into the concept of this type of tourism as a form of visiting places associated with trauma, death, suffering, and historical memory, while also being a unique example of a place with profound educational, spiritual, and moral significance. Its exhibitions display documents, photographs, and artifacts from ghettos and death camps. Light, sound, and architectural effects are used to evoke the desired reactions.

The examples of dark exhibitions mentioned above highlight the key features of this form of dark tourism. The first of these is the authenticity of the artifacts used, i.e., items that belonged to the victims of the tragedies in question (e.g., shoes, clothes, letters, etc.). Another feature of this form of tourism is the use of witness recordings and archival films, which give it a multimedia character. In turn, the emotion, horror, compassion, or terror accompanying this form testify to the significant emphasis on the emotions of its audience. Minimalism, dark colors, and spotlighting, on the other hand, point to the significant role of the aesthetics of darkness.

The third form of dark tourism analyzed is Dark Dungeons.

Dark Dungeons

This category includes underground sites associated with suffering, punishment, torture, or death (former prisons, dungeons, death cells, underground casemates, torture chambers, crypts), which are open to tourists and constitute specific historical and emotional attractions. These places are often located underground (which enhances the atmosphere of horror) and are used as venues for dark exhibitions, reenactments of executions, and torture demonstrations. Examples of such places are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Examples of Dark Dungeons

Case 1. The London Dungeon (United Kingdom)

A popular tourist attraction featuring an interactive show with actors, special effects, scenes of executions, torture, and diseases (e.g., the plague). It takes a commercial, entertainment form that trivializes suffering, treating history as a “bogeyman” and appearing to straddle the line between dark tourism and horror entertainment.

Case 2. Museum *House of Terror* in Budapest (Hungary)

The facility is a classic example combining historical memory, education, and a powerful emotional experience concerning people who were held captive, tortured, and killed under Nazi and Communist rule during and after World War II. This place reflects an example of:

- a) authentic places associated with the history of suffering (prisons, torture in a real building), which intensify emotions.
- b) a multimedia and immersive exhibition that seeks to show not only the facts, but also the atmosphere of fear, surveillance, and violence.
- c) a function of remembrance – not only an exhibition, but a place of remembrance, an appeal: “so that it never happens again.”

The examples presented heightening emotions by linking authentic places with a given story of suffering (prisons, torture in a real building, etc.). This is aided by a multimedia and immersive exhibition that seeks to show not only the facts, but also the atmosphere of fear, surveillance, and violence. The function of memory plays a key role, making this not only an interesting exhibition, but also a place of appeal: “so that it never happens again.” Next, the form of Dark Resting Places was analyzed.

Dark Resting Places

The objects that make up this group of niche tourist products are placed in the “dark” or “light” spectrum of analysis, depending on the motives for visiting them. The analyzed form of dark tourism is one of the more reflective and symbolic forms of cultural tourism. It refers to places of eternal rest, where visitors encounter death, memory, and history, often in a personal or contemplative way. Therefore, the objects representing it mainly refer to cemeteries, which are part of cultural heritage. They are focused on history, protection, commemoration, paying tribute to the deceased, etc. (see table 5).

Table 5: Examples of Dark Resting Places

Case 1. Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris

The Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris is a place full of historical and cultural value, and at the same time, it is an example of a place that attracts people interested in the subject of death in its various aspects. In the context of dark tourism, Père-Lachaise is often seen as an important educational and cultural site, showing how societies deal with the memory of the dead and how personal and collective history intertwines with public space.

The cemetery is the resting place of famous artists, writers, musicians, and other prominent figures, such as Jim Morrison, Édith Piaf, Oscar Wilde, and Marcel Proust. For many tourists, it is a form of paying tribute

and learning about their lives, which is part of the fascination with the deaths of famous people. Some of the people buried there or events associated with the cemetery have dramatic or tragic contexts, which attract people interested in the darker aspects of history. The graves and chapels at Père-Lachaise are often richly decorated, and their symbolism and history can arouse curiosity among visitors, especially those interested in the culture of death. For some visitors, it is a place to reflect on life and death, which fits into the broader context of dark tourism, which also includes the emotional and spiritual aspects of this type of tourism.

Case 2. Cemetery in Pripyat (Ukraine)

The town of Pripyat, located near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, was evacuated in 1986 after the reactor disaster, making it a symbol of the nuclear catastrophe and an abandoned exclusion zone. The cemetery in Pripyat is one of the less official and less described places in the zone. It contains several types of graves, often associated with technical personnel, power plant employees, or other people connected with the functioning of the city and the exclusion zone. Due to the nature of the zone, access to such places is restricted and, in some cases, requires special permits and guides.

In the context of tourism related to visiting places associated with tragic events, the cemetery in Pripyat is of interest due to its symbolism and historical significance. Visitors to such places often want to understand the scale of the disaster, its consequences, and its impact on people. However, due to the risk of radiation, access to the cemetery and other parts of the zone is restricted, and visiting requires caution and respect for the memory of the victims and history.

The cemetery in Pripyat as a dark tourism attraction reflects both a fascination with tragic events and the need to respect the places and people associated with them. It is an example of a place that combines historical, catastrophic, and educational elements, while reminding us of the serious technological and social consequences. The next form of Dark tourism analyzed is Dark Shrines.

Dark Shrines

This category includes objects located remarkably close to the place of death, which are created shortly after death, as an expression of respect for the deceased and an act of remembrance. They were not created specifically for tourism, which is why they have little tourist infrastructure - table 6.

Table 6: Examples of Dark Shrines

Case. Temporary memorial sites

- 1) Temporary altars in Japan – created by local communities at the sites of the 2011 tsunami tragedy, where flowers, photos, and offerings were placed to honor the dead and express grief.
- 2) Rue de la Fontaine au Roi in Paris, where, shortly after the terrorist attack in 2015, spontaneous altars with candles, flowers, and cards were set up as an expression of solidarity and remembrance.
- 3) In Poland, after the plane crash near Smolensk in 2010, memorial sites with flowers and candles were created in many cities.
- 4) Following Prince's death in Minneapolis in 2016, fans created a temporary mural and altars at his home and Paisley Park studio.
- 5) Following the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City, the streets around Ground Zero became sites of temporary tributes.
- 6) Following the 2017 terrorist attack in London, people placed candles, flowers and cards on London Bridge.

The examples of temporary memorial sites presented here emerge spontaneously in response to tragic events. Dark shrines constitute a form of social response to trauma, enabling a communal experience of mourning, expression of compassion, and symbolic restoration of order after a disaster. Despite their ephemeral nature, they play a significant role in collective memory processes and in building local solidarity. In the course of further analysis, the form of Dark Conflict Sites was identified.

Dark Conflict Sites

This form is an important and controversial aspect of dark tourism. It encourages visitors to visit fascinating and moving places associated with historical conflicts and wars, which means that visiting such places requires a great deal of sensitivity and responsibility. It plays a key role in education, remembrance, and reflection on tragic historical events. Examples of well-known places representing Dark Conflict Sites are presented below table 7.

Table 7: Example of Dark Conflict Sites

Case 1. Hiroshima

In 6 August 1945, the US dropped the first atomic bomb in history (“Little Boy”) on Hiroshima, resulting in the city being almost completely destroyed and approximately 140,000 people killed by the explosion or its aftermath. The attack caused unprecedented suffering among the civilian population, including burns, radiation sickness, and long-term trauma. As a result, Hiroshima is one of the most iconic examples of a “dark conflict site” – a place associated with the tragic consequences of armed conflict that has become a focus of tourist, historical, and moral reflection. In the context of dark tourism, Hiroshima is a unique case that combines the history of war and mass suffering with a message of peace and hope.

Case 2. Battle of Grunwald

The Battle of Grunwald (1410) is an important historical event of great significance for Poland, Lithuania, and the region of Central and Eastern Europe. However, as a dark tourism site, Grunwald is an unusual and “symbolic” example of dark tourism. Nevertheless, the battlefield of Grunwald and its contemporary functions (museum, reenactments, monument) fit into the broader understanding of “dark conflict sites,” i.e., places associated with past conflicts, battles, and death.

Case 3. Normandia (D-Day)

The battlefields of Normandy, especially the landing beaches of D-Day (June 6, 1944), are classic examples of dark conflict sites. They mark the landing site of Allied forces in Normandy during World War II, which was initially a strategic location for military operations and later became a place of remembrance and historical tourism. Today, it is a place of great historical, memorial, and symbolic significance, attracting hundreds of thousands of tourists, historians, veterans, and families of the fallen every year.

The examples of Dark Conflict Sites presented here encourage deep reflection on the past, teaching respect for war victims and understanding of the consequences of conflict. This form of dark tourism is primarily aimed at history enthusiasts, educators, school groups, and anyone who wants to learn about the dark side of the past in a responsible and respectful way.

The last of the analyzed forms of dark tourism are the Dark Camps of Genocide.

Dark Camps of Genocide

The sites representing the described form of dark tourism include places of genocide, crime, mass death, execution, and persecution of specific ethnic, religious, or social groups, which are located at the actual site of death, providing the most powerful emotional experience. They are characterized by a high degree of political ideology associated with them, as well as a high degree of authenticity. table 8.

Table 8: Examples of Dark Camps of Genocide

<p>Case 1. Concentration camps and extermination camps in Nazi Germany</p> <p>a) Auschwitz-Birkenau (Poland) – the largest and most well-known extermination camp, where mass murders of Jews, Roma, Poles, and other groups were conducted.</p> <p>b) Treblinka (Poland) – an extermination camp where approximately 800,000 people were murdered within a few months of 1942–1943.</p> <p>c) Sobibór (Poland) - one of the camps of the German "Aktion Reinhardt" program. Most prisoners were immediately killed in the gas chambers.</p> <p>Case 2. Camps in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide</p> <p>During the genocide of the Tutsi ethnic group and moderate Hutu group, which lasted for about 100 days, mass murders took place in areas around various camps and public places throughout Rwanda.</p> <p>Case 3. Camps in Yugoslavia during the wars of the 1990s:</p> <p>a) The Omarska concentration camp – a place of mass executions and persecution of the Muslim and Croatian populations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.</p> <p>b) The Trnopolje camp – a place of persecution and mass executions.</p>

The examples presented in Dark Camps of Genocide show that places representing this format are a tragic and painful part of history, where mass crimes and genocide took place. Their existence reminds us of the darkest periods of human activity, when hatred, prejudice, and dehumanization led to the suffering and death of innocent people. Analysis of these examples highlights the need for remembrance, education, and action to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

In summary, the presented typology of sites that are potential attractions for dark tourism participants reveals their considerable diversity in terms of authenticity and the associated degree of “darkness” as an element of attractiveness. These categories include several types of places, from historical and religious relics, through places associated with tragedies, to objects of taboo or violence, which makes them unique and interesting for those seeking knowledge about lesser-known and often controversial aspects of cultural tourism. For many tourists, visiting them becomes a multidimensional experience, which on the one hand teaches and raises awareness of terrible events from the past, and on the other hand, through reflections on death and suffering, can have a significant impact on their future lives, evoking strong emotions. The unique characteristics of the niche form of dark tourism make it an extremely interesting subject for research and reflection.

Although the analysis conducted is primarily conceptual, it integrates examples drawn from secondary sources, observations, and recent literature.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to show that dark tourism is an important, albeit often controversial, element of contemporary tourism, with an emphasis on its educational and cultural potential in the context of niche forms of tourism. The author's analysis shows that dark tourism raises many ethical controversies because it touches on topics of suffering, death, and tragedy, which for many people are very personal and painful.

Many researchers have drawn attention to this aspect. These include Magano, Fraiz-Brea & Leite (2022), who, when discussing motivation (i.e., curiosity, the need to learn and understand) and the emotional/psychological effects of participating in dark tourism, identify areas strongly related to ethics, including rumination of sadness,

self-hatred, hostility, and psychological vulnerability. In turn, Jurėnienė & Radzevičius (2022) analyze the ethical challenges of dark tourism from the perspective of sustainable cultural/heritage development, including relations with the local community, heritage protection, management, and conflicts of interest.

The ethical controversies surrounding dark tourism are also described by Mytaftsi (2022), who raises provocative questions about the morality of portraying tragedy, the ethics of consuming death, and the balance between memory and tourist appeal.

Polish authors also draw attention to the ethical issues related to dark tourism. These include Horeglad & Kasperska (2020), who, in their comprehensive characterization of dark tourism, also raise controversial issues such as exploitation, shock, and ethics in tourism offerings. Another representative of this group of researchers is Banaszkiwicz (2015), who points to key ethical issues related to dark tourism, such as the experiences and perceptions of tourists from diverse cultures, collective memory, and the ethics of historical communication/presentation of difficult heritage. Stasiak (2015), on the other hand, analyzes controversial tourism in general, including tanatourism, and points to its most important moral, cultural, aesthetic, and economic aspects of controversy, social acceptance, limits of sensitivity, and commercialization.

The analysis of the literature review enabled the identification of key ethical controversies related to the form of dark tourism, which are presented below - table 9.

Table 9: Key ethical controversies related to form *dark tourism*

Type of ethical controversy	Behaviors and phenomena of controversy
Commercialization of suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - involves transforming sites of tragedy into tourist attractions - selling tickets, souvenirs, and organizing guided tours can be seen as profiting from human misery - for example, there has been criticism of activities around the exclusion zone in Chernobyl, where there have even been offers of “extreme” tours with overnight stays
Lack of Respect for victims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tourists often behave inappropriately at memorial sites (e.g., taking selfies in front of crematoria, posing for photos at sites of mass murders, treating these places like typical tourist attractions). <p>Such behavior can hurt the families of victims and communities that still live with trauma.</p>
Blurring the line between education and entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One of the goals of dark tourism may be historical education and reflection on the past. However, some places and tour operators focus more on sensationalism than on deepening knowledge, which can lead to simplification, distortion, or trivialization of tragic events.
Revitalization without the involvement of local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in some cases, sites associated with tragedies are “prepared” for tourism purposes without consulting local communities or the descendants of victims, which can lead to conflicts of interest and a feeling that their history has been appropriated or exploited against their will.
Tourism as trauma for tourists, not victims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some researchers point to a phenomenon whereby visitors focus more on their own emotions and experiences than on understanding the suffering of the victims. As a result, dark tourism can become a form of psychological “fulfillment” rather than authentic commemoration.
The ethics of depicting violence and death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Museums, exhibitions, and guides face a difficult task: how to tell the story of the tragedy, how much to show, what can be described, and what is better left without images? Exhibitions that are too graphic may shock or be poorly received, while those that are too “mild” do not convey the gravity of the situation.

Source: own study

The discussion on the phenomenon of dark tourism reveals its complexity and multidimensionality as a form of niche tourism. Although traveling to places associated with tragedy, death, and suffering raises ethical

controversies, their growing importance in the cultural, social, and educational context cannot be ignored. Dark tourism, when properly managed and embedded in a reflective approach, has the potential to shape historical awareness, build empathy, and promote intercultural dialogue. In an era of commercialization and widespread access to information, it is crucial to maintain a balance between authenticity and the needs of the tourism market. Thus, this phenomenon deserves further in-depth analysis and responsible inclusion in cultural tourism development.

The analyses and considerations carried out indicate that dark tourism is a form of niche tourism based on cultural (cognitive) tourism. Its specific nature means that both positive and negative aspects of the development of the phenomenon it concerns can be observed. The positive features include: the opportunity for education and upbringing, the formation of human personality, the stimulation of cultural and social awareness, and the shaping of patriotic attitudes and national consciousness. On the other hand, the highly controversial nature of this form of tourism in terms of ethical and moral standards causes some social groups to have a negative attitude towards it. The main negative feature of dark tourism is the use of death, disasters, and tragedies for entertainment purposes, which is rightly considered inappropriate.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the analyzed form of tourism is a response to the changing needs of modern tourists, who are looking for alternative ways to spend their free time, with the main goal being to provide completely new impressions and experiences. There are no geographical limitations to its development. Its ubiquity means that this form of tourism is currently spreading throughout the world, as places associated with death or a specific tragedy (disaster, etc.) can be found in every country. This fact confirms the considerable potential for the development of this form of tourism, but it should be emphasized that it contributes to inevitable commercialization, which transforms human tragedies into a business that generates specific income.

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