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**THE STATE AND POTENTIAL OF DARK
TOURISM IN HUNGARY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
DEMAND AND SUPPLY SIDES**

Theses of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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1. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CHOICE OF THE TOPIC

My choice of topic was motivated by my interest in the field of dark tourism, as well as by the fact that while an increasing number of researchers are examining the topic globally, there are fewer studies connected to Hungary. Dark tourism itself is a complex phenomenon, closely intertwined with several branches of tourism and encompassing multiple subcategories, whose precise delineation remains a challenge to this day. Among the various definitions, one of the broadest and most frequently used is that of Stone (2006, p. 146), according to which it is “*travel to sites associated with death, suffering, and the seemingly macabre.*” The wide range of attractions related to dark tourism – including festivals or thematic experiences – justifies a deeper examination of the phenomenon in Hungary. There is a need for a comprehensive analysis that helps clarify the role of dark tourism within the tourism system. The main characteristics of the phenomenon are illustrated in Figure 1.

The relevance of the topic is further reinforced by the fact that dark tourism has become a global phenomenon characterized by growing demand. Visitors around the world show interest in sites connected to tragedies, disasters, and historical conflicts, which not only provide opportunities for learning but also encourage deeper reflection, empathy, and a more immersive experience of history. Due to its dynamic development and economic significance, it is justified to

examine the factors influencing both the demand and supply sides, as well as its role in modern, experience-oriented tourism.

In Hungary, no such comprehensive analysis of dark tourism has yet been conducted; rather, studies have focused on presenting the phenomenon, examining specific subfields (e.g., disaster tourism), or analyzing particular sites (e.g., the House of Terror) (Hegyi, 2009; Palancsa, 2012; Remenyik & Dávid, 2020; Michalkó, 2020; Mészáros, 2023), or they address it within discussions of historical memorial sites, cultural tourism, and heritage tourism locations (Pusztai, 2017; Irimiás, 2018; Sulyok & Lőrincz, 2020).

Nevertheless, the topic is becoming increasingly popular in the media: alongside social media posts, photographs, and videos, a growing number of newspaper articles (e.g., the magazine *The Guide to Dark Tourism* by Ringier Axel Springer Hungary) and educational presentations (e.g., *Reliving History: Why Are People Attracted to Dark Tourism?* – an interview with Ákos Nagy in the podcast *Óperencia*) are appearing on the subject. Therefore, it is important to address this phenomenon. Examining the topic within the framework of a doctoral dissertation can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon, increase its social acceptance, and help uncover its tourism and economic potential.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the above, I have formulated four research objectives, which I examine through six research questions and five hypotheses during my study. The research objectives are the following: (1) to explore the concept, spectrum, social acceptance, and significance of dark tourism; (2) to present the demand and supply sides of dark tourism, as well as the experiences and reactions triggered by different types of sites; (3) to analyze the impacts of dark tourism on domestic tourism, including its potential, social perception, and role in heritage interpretation; (4) to interpret the role of dark tourism in Hungary's tourism marketing strategy and how it can contribute to the development, awareness, and visitor numbers of such sites.

RQ1: How can dark tourism be distinguished from other types of tourism, and why is this distinction significant from a marketing communication perspective?

The first research question specifically examines the phenomenon and concept of “dark tourism” to determine how it can be delineated and whether such delineation is meaningful. This is grounded in secondary research and supported by the results of expert in-depth interviews.

RQ2: What types of dark tourism supply elements can be found in Hungary?

The second research question focuses specifically on domestic dark tourism attractions, aiming to identify whether such sites exist in Hungary and, if so, how they can be categorized and what common characteristics they share. To this end, I rely on existing Hungarian literature and compile a table summarizing the most significant domestic sites based on my own analysis.

RQ3: What types of marketing communication are used by existing dark heritage attractions in Hungary, and which of these tools most effective in reaching potential visitors?

This question places marketing communication at the center, examining the opportunities available for domestic dark tourism attractions to reach visitors and the tools they employ. The answer is based on online content analysis of the sites, complemented by in-depth interviews with site managers, and further validated through on-site visitor surveys.

RQ4: How open are domestic supply-side actors to dark tourism, and how do they interpret and position it?

H1a: The examined actors are familiar with the concept of dark tourism; however, they are not always aware that their own sites fall into this category.

H1b: Site managers tend to evaluate the possibility of presenting their sites as dark tourism negatively due to the ethical dilemmas surrounding the concept.

The fourth research question focuses on Hungarian supply-side actors, particularly five historical and national memorial sites in Transdanubia included in my study, examining their attitudes toward dark tourism and their willingness to build upon this phenomenon. The answers are provided by in-depth interviews conducted with them.

RQ5: What emotional and motivational factors characterize visitors to dark tourism sites on the demand side?

H2a: Most visitors experience rather positive but ambivalent emotions and therefore do not interpret their experiences as explicitly negative.

H2b: Learning opportunities and historical interest constitute stronger motivations than mere curiosity or the search for excitement, with no significant differences based on gender.

H2c: Learning opportunities and an interest in history are stronger motivators than curiosity or the search for excitement, with no significant differences based on age in this regard.

The fifth research question and its hypotheses focus on Hungarian sites, aiming to identify why tourists visit dark tourism attractions and what emotions and experiences they encounter. The answers are derived from on-site questionnaire surveys.

RQ6: What role can dark tourism play in the future of Hungary's tourism sector?

The final research question addresses the future of dark tourism, exploring its opportunities within the Hungarian context. The answer is provided through in-depth interviews with tourism professionals.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

During the research, I applied multiple primary methods to examine the phenomenon of dark tourism in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was considered justified, as it allowed for both the exploration of attitudes and issues related to the topic and the numerical analysis and comparison of results. The joint application of different methods thus

contributed to answering the previously outlined research questions in a comprehensive way.

In-depth interviews conducted with university lecturers teaching tourism and tourism experts served as a qualitative method to explore the conceptual interpretation, perception, and future of dark tourism, and enabled the comparison of attitudes, opinions, and experiences among tourism professionals.

For the examination of dark tourism, I selected five national and historical memorial sites. The selection was based on the following criteria: (1) dark national or historical memorial site; (2) significant tourist attraction; (3) availability of tourism infrastructure; (4) diversity in attraction types; (5) location in Transdanubia.

Based on these criteria, the following sites were selected:

- a) the Komárom Fortress System – specifically Monostor Fortress;
- b) the Mohács National Memorial Site;
- c) the Pákozd Military Memorial Park;
- d) the Széchenyi Mausoleum in Nagycenk;
- e) and the Zrínyi Castle in Szigetvár.

Using the method of on-site observation, I examined Hungary's national and historical memorial sites that can be classified as dark tourism destinations, focusing on their modes of presentation, their dark tourism characteristics, and visitor behavior based on direct experience. This was made possible through structured participant

observation. Their categorization within dark tourism was carried out using the typologies of Seaton (1996) and Stone (2006).

Seaton (1996) distinguishes five main categories based on travel motivations: (1) travel to witness public displays of death (e.g., disaster sites, public executions); (2) travel to sites of mass or individual deaths after the events have occurred (e.g., concentration camps, murder sites); (3) travel to memorial sites (e.g., cemeteries, monuments); (4) travel to sites displaying evidence or symbolic representations of death (e.g., museums, exhibitions); (5) travel to reenactments of death (e.g., religious festivals, historical battle reenactments).

In contrast, Stone (2006) categorizes attraction types from the supply side: (1) dark entertainment sites created specifically for tourist amusement (e.g., horror theme parks, haunted houses); (2) dark exhibitions conveying “dark” thematic information (e.g., anatomical exhibitions, battle displays); (3) dark dungeons, where visitors can learn about the development of justice systems, crime, and punishment (e.g., justice museums, prisons); (4) dark resting places associated with significant individuals or of historical and cultural importance (e.g., cemeteries, tombs); (5) dark shrines and memorials erected for tragic events (e.g., pilgrimage sites related to deaths and disasters); (6) dark conflict sites where violent events occurred (e.g., battlefields, locations of political or ideological conflicts); (7) and dark sites of

genocide where mass killings took place (e.g., death camps or sites of human rights abuses).

The online marketing communication activities of these sites were analyzed through qualitative content analysis within the framework of the PESO model, which enabled a structured comparison of different communication channels. In addition, I examined what types of content are shared on various online platforms and how these sites communicate with their visitors.

The aim of the in-depth interviews conducted with the managers of the selected sites was to explore the functioning, decision-making processes, and dilemmas of the supply side. The use of semi-structured interviews and hermeneutic analysis made it possible to understand how the professionals involved interpret the role of these sites in domestic tourism, how they relate to dark tourism, and what challenges they face in maintaining and communicating these sites.

Finally, I conducted a quantitative survey among visitors using questionnaires. This made it possible to analyze visitors' motivations, experiences, and attitudes numerically. On-site data collection ensured that responses were based on real visitor experiences, while the application of statistical methods enabled the identification of relationships and the statistical testing of hypotheses.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. New and novel results of the research

In my doctoral dissertation, I examined the phenomenon of dark tourism with a focus on Hungary, particularly Western Transdanubia. The research topic can be considered novel, as no previous study in Hungary has comprehensively examined multiple sites while covering both the demand and supply sides of dark tourism; it can also be regarded as innovative at the international level.

New findings of the research:

- a) A key new contribution of the research is that it examines the attitudes of tourism educators, memorial site managers, and visitors. Although the results are consistent with international trends, they still offer novel insights in the Hungarian context.
- b) It demonstrated that dark tourism has clear tourism potential, as these sites are already integral parts of Hungary's cultural tourism. Although the term "dark tourism" is often avoided, awareness of the topic is increasing due to the spread of documentaries, online articles, and social media.

- c) Based on in-depth expert interviews, dark tourism was defined as a specialized form of tourism that is unsettling, morbid, and thrilling, while presenting topics that are difficult to process, such as death, tragedy, loss, human cruelty, and the uncomfortable mission of confronting the past. Participants seek emotional fulfillment, and their experience depends largely on their own individual value systems.

Novel findings of the study:

- a) Dark tourism emphasizes national historical and memorial significance, as Hungary's history is rich in events that have played a defining role in shaping national identity and collective memory. Visiting such sites provides an opportunity to better understand the past and its ongoing impact on the present.
- b) The educational role of dark tourism is particularly important, as it creates an opportunity for visitors to learn about history, death, human mortality, and the negative consequences of actions within a new framework. One of its key strengths lies in its ability to convey emotions and present tragedies in a personal way, making the loss of victims feel closer and more relatable.

- c) Visitors to dark tourism sites have a variety of motivations for visiting these locations; among these, the desire to learn, an interest in history, and emotional engagement play a decisive role, while the interest in death that is taken more negatively, does not appear among the primary motivations.
- d) From a marketing communication perspective, the topic is particularly significant; the term is often sensitive and controversial, but when used appropriately, it can be leveraged just like any other message. The term itself is descriptive; it is up to the individual to decide what connotations to associate with it. Care must be taken to ensure that its commemorative function is not diminished but rather strengthened, while also focusing on engaging younger generations.

4.2. Key findings and results of the research

Dark tourism in Hungary is still a relatively little-known but increasingly emerging phenomenon, referring to visits to sites associated with historical traumas. Its essence lies not merely in the presentation of tragic events, but in the emotional and cognitive processes connected to them. A distinctive feature of such sites is that, while they may be emotionally burdensome, they tend to provide visitors with a long-term positive and thought-provoking experience.

Visitors' motivations are complex: people do not primarily visit these sites because of death or tragedy itself, but rather for the unique, experience-based encounter they offer. For this reason, most visitors cannot be considered explicitly "dark tourists."

In Hungary, dark tourism appears primarily as a specific interpretative framework. Although the domestic supply is highly diverse, consisting of various types of sites representing different forms of historical trauma (Table 1), ranging from war memorials to religious or local tragedies; their interpretation as dark tourism currently stems mainly from academic perspectives. These sites represent different degrees of "darkness" and are often linked to national memory, while in some cases more experience-oriented, even entertainment-based approaches also emerge.

However, the supply side is not uniform: communication practices, resources, and strategic focus vary significantly between sites. In many cases, limited financial and human resources hinder conscious marketing activities, contributing to the fact that visitors often do not encounter these messages.

Table 1. – Dark tourism categories of the examined sites

Source: own compilation based on the analysis of dark tourism categories

Site	Seaton's category	Stone's category
Monostor Fortress	Travel to sites displaying evidence or symbolic representations of death; travel to reenactments of death	Dark exhibition; dark conflict site
Mohács National Memorial Site	Travel to sites of mass or individual deaths; travel to memorial sites; travel to sites displaying evidence or symbolic representations of death; travel to reenactments of death	Dark exhibition; dark resting place; dark conflict site
Military Memorial Park (Pákozd)	Travel to memorial sites; travel to sites displaying evidence or symbolic representations of death; travel to reenactments of death	Dark exhibition; dark conflict site
Széchenyi Mausoleum	Travel to memorial sites	Dark resting place
Zrínyi Castle (Szigetvár)	Travel to sites of mass or individual deaths; travel to memorial sites; travel to sites displaying evidence or symbolic representations of death; travel to reenactments of death	Dark exhibition; dark conflict site

International trends and the growing level of interest suggest that, with appropriately targeted communication, dark tourism could become relevant beyond its current academic categorization. Possible approaches include solutions that present the phenomenon without compromising the identity of the sites – for example, the creation of thematic online platforms that facilitate orientation and help reach

international audiences. In contemporary tourism trends, increasing importance is given to experience-based interpretation supported by digital tools, which helps visitors gain a deeper understanding of the past and fosters empathy. The presentation of authentic, personal stories is of key importance, as visitors seek not only information but also deeper, more human-centered experiences that can strengthen empathy and social responsibility.

At present, dark tourism in Hungary is under-positioned, yet it holds significant development potential. In the future, it is likely to strengthen as a value-based component complementing cultural tourism, and with appropriate development and conscious communication, it may play a more prominent role in both domestic and international tourism.

4.3. Possibilities for further research

The research has provided insight into the supply and demand characteristics of dark tourism in Hungary; however, due to the complexity of the topic and methodological limitations, it was not possible to explore it in its entirety. There remain several areas that require further empirical investigation. One potential direction for future research is the territorial expansion of the study, including the comprehensive mapping, systematization, and typological classification of the country's full range of dark tourism offerings. It

would be worthwhile to analyze smaller, lesser-known attractions as well, which – despite their lower visibility – may play an important role in local tourism and may respond more flexibly to development opportunities.

Another possible research direction is a more in-depth quantitative analysis of visitor attitudes based on a larger sample. Although the present study has already identified certain motivational and emotional patterns, a more representative data collection would allow for their generalization and for a better understanding of how domestic trends compare to or differ from international experiences.

In addition, a more detailed examination of marketing communication is of particular importance, especially regarding digital channels and user-generated content. The online space is exerting an increasingly strong influence on tourism decision-making and the formation of prior expectations; therefore, exploring how these factors shape perceptions of dark tourism sites could be of key significance.

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