



Article

The Potential for Dark Tourism in Kazakhstan: An Overview of the Former Concentration Camps

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Abstract: The concept of dark tourism has attracted considerable attention in recent years. The studies in this field examine the convergence of tourism and morbidity. The research problem lies in understanding the complex dynamics between the preservation of historical sites associated with Kazakhstan's former gulags and their role in the emerging dark tourism sector. This paper explores the tourist significance of the former gulags in Kazakhstan through the analysis of interviews, legislation texts and policy documents, and data on visitor numbers. Our aim is to illuminate the historical importance for tourism, educational value, and stakeholders associated with the preservation and promotion of these destinations. The analysis revealed the various and sometimes conflicting interests and concerns of the stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, government institutions, and the private sector. The analysis of statistical data provided valuable information on visitor demographics, preferences, and trends in the Karlag and Alzhir museums. These data highlighted the role of educational institutions and demonstrated the adaptability of museums in difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. During the formation of future policies, effective collaboration with stakeholders, responsible tourism practices, capacity building, and sustainable marketing strategies are essential to the ethical and sustainable management of dark tourist sites. Thus, stakeholders can ensure that dark tourism continues to evolve in a way that respects historical integrity and benefits local communities, while contributing to the broader goals of education and commemoration.

Keywords: gulag; Kazakhstan; labor camps; touristic significance; stakeholder analysis; semi-structured interviews; visitation patterns; policy programs; legislation; commemoration



Academic Editor: Lewis Ting
On Cheung

Received: 23 November 2024

Revised: 19 December 2024

Accepted: 9 January 2025

Published: 15 January 2025

Citation: Assylkhanova, A., Mussina, K., Nagy, G., Nassanbekova, S., Kenzhin, Z., & Boros, L. (2025). The Potential for Dark Tourism in Kazakhstan: An Overview of the Former Concentration Camps. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 6(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6010009>

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1. Introduction

The transition from mass tourism to niche tourism, on the one hand, creates new opportunities for localities, while on the other hand, it poses significant challenges for decision makers. During the formation of future policies, effective collaboration with stakeholders, responsible tourism practices, capacity building, and sustainable marketing strategies are essential for the ethical and sustainable management of black tourist sites (Fauzi, 2023). The developing area of related research investigates the motives and behaviors of people who travel to places where tragedy, terrorism, catastrophe, violence, and death are common

occurrences (Stone, 2006) or the connections between dark tourism and identity, as well as education and remembrance (Isaac, 2022). Various other terms are also used to define the travel to places of fear, atrocity, violence or tragedy, such as thanatourism, negative sightseeing or atrocity tourism (Light, 2017; Seaton, 1996; Sharma & Martini, 2024). A wide range of visitor motives can be identified in dark tourism: starting from curiosity, mourning or remembrance, personal/family-related, cultural, economic, and social factors are among the most important motives (Isaac & Çakmak, 2016). Dark tourism contributes to the manifestation or strengthening of identities, engagement with nostalgia, and exposure to emotional (e.g., mourning, thrill, fear, fright) elements of the destination (Iliev, 2021; Stone, 2012; Fabros et al., 2023; Martini & Buda, 2020).

Dark tourism has no universal definition; geographers, historians, and tourism experts interpret the concept of dark tourism in various ways according to the subject of the study. However, the studies in this field usually define dark tourism as an activity that involves visiting places associated with war, crime, genocide, tragedies, and suffering (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Fabros et al., 2023; Sun & Lv, 2021). Various types of sites can become attractions of dark tourism: museums, battlefields, monuments, places of natural disasters, concentration and forced labor camps, places destroyed or damaged in wartime, prisons, places commemorating genocide, places of death (e.g., death of famous people, sites of terrorism), locations with high volume of suicides, etc. (Fauzi, 2023; Stone, 2006; Light, 2017; Seaton, 1996). According to (Wang et al., 2021), the main attraction is the perceived relationship between the visitor's life and death. In the last three decades, dark tourism has been studied relatively actively and started to gain interest among the wider public and decision makers as well. According to Allied Market Research, the global dark tourism market size reached approximately USD 30 billion in 2022 and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 3% from 2023 to 2032 (Dinesh, 2023). These figures highlight that understanding the notion and development of dark tourism has become crucial as a growing number of tourists express interest in visiting locations of macabre or historical importance (Stone, 2006; Fonseca et al., 2016), while the educational benefits and the identity strengthening role of dark tourism is recognized by decision makers (Wyatt et al., 2021). Dark tourism provides the opportunity for various (sometimes forgotten or misinterpreted) events of history to be revised and transferred to the public (Isaac, 2022). However, according to several critiques (e.g., Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Sturken, 2008; Stone & Grebenar, 2022; Lennon & Foley, 2000), dark tourism is a form of commodification of death and suffering. Thus, when developing destinations and tourism products, a balance should be found between economic interests and remembrance and respect.

Various classifications of dark tourism destinations have been created in recent decades. The most common types of touristic objects belong to the following groupings: Holocaust tourism, genocide tourism, postcolonial and slavery dark tourism, war zones, communist dark tourism, etc. (Light, 2017). The intensity of "darkness" of destinations can be defined on a wide spectrum, and their interpretation varies among different stakeholder groups or visitors from different backgrounds (Fauzi, 2023; Stone, 2006). In terms of subjective assessment, the least explored aspect within the realm of dark tourism refers to the communist past and the heritage associated with its "dark" aspects. During the substitution of human values during the years of Stalinism, spiritual degradation and moral decay took place, which turned into a tragedy for the national identity of people. The distortion of politics inevitably led to the distortion of history (Kuusi, 2008). The dark aspects of the communist era left us with the sites of former concentration camps called gulags. However, the role and possibilities of gulags in dark tourism are under-researched topics. Gulags, being a great 'empire' within the Soviet Union, consisted of 53 camps and 425 forced labor

camps—including 170 industrial, 83 agricultural, and 172 ‘counterparties’ (working on construction sites and farms)—united by regional republican departments of ITK (OITK), and 50 colonies for minors (Udovenko, 2020).

The history of the emergence of these sites, the economy of forced labor, the structure of the government, categories of prisoners and the daily life of prisoners, the situation of women and young people, the relationship between prisoners and domestic workers, criminal and political aspects, security, escorts, information services, recruiting informers, punishment systems and ‘incentives’ (Udovenko, 2020), the work of hospitals and first aid posts, various forms of death, murder, and the simple procedure for burying prisoners—all of this is reflected in the history of the gulag.

Kazakhstan, during the Soviet era, witnessed the establishment of several concentration gulags, where political dissidents and minority groups were held in harsh conditions. The gulags served as places of suffering and persecution, leaving a lasting impact on the collective memory of the nation. Documenting and preserving these sites contribute to the historical understanding of totalitarian regimes and human rights abuses (Coyle, 2021), serving not just as factors contributing to national identity but providing more general insights into dark tourism and its beneficial effects as well.

The former concentration camps in Kazakhstan are tangible reminders of a dark chapter in human history. These sites have significant historical value and provide opportunities for educational and reflective experiences through tourism. At the same time, the possibilities and problems of tourism in relation to these places is an under-researched topic—thus, effective policy formation is quite a challenging task due to the lack of appropriate information.

To address this gap within the existing body of research, this paper aims to explore the tourist significance of former concentration camps in Kazakhstan. It aims to shed light on the historical and tourist importance, educational value, and stakeholder perspectives associated with the preservation and promotion of these sites for tourism. By examining potential benefits and challenges, this study contributes to understanding how dark tourism can be responsibly managed in sensitive historical locations. This article will briefly describe the history of the Karlag (Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp) and Alzhir (Akmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland) concentration camps, define their touristic significance as commemorative museums and dark tourism destinations, and review the statistical data of visitors by clusters from 2018 and 2022.

2. Materials and Methods

This study examines dark tourism in Kazakhstan, focusing on the Karlag and Alzhir sites due to their historical significance as former Soviet gulags. These locations were chosen for their preserved museums, which foster discussions on historical memory and human resilience. Kazakhstan’s unique role in Soviet history makes it an ideal setting for exploring dark tourism. The methodology integrates stakeholder analysis, visitation trend evaluation, and policy content analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

2.1. Study Areas

Karlag and Alzhir concentration camps present compelling opportunities for researchers to investigate the historical and sociological dimensions of the Soviet era in Kazakhstan. These camps, which serve as significant remnants of a dark historical period, provide unique avenues for examining the experiences of prisoners, the societal implications of totalitarian regimes, the long-lasting impacts on local communities, and significance of existing museums on the places of former camps as a tool for commemoration and co-

creation of knowledge. Scholars can delve into these topics by analyzing archival materials, conducting oral history interviews, and employing various methodological approaches. Through such research, valuable insights can be gained. Researchers must consider ethical aspects with care, including honoring the memory of victims and respecting the dignity of survivors and their families (Udoenko, 2020). By exploring Karlag and Alzhir as study fields (Figure 1), we contribute to a deeper understanding of the past, shed light on human resilience, and facilitate discussions about the importance of preserving historical memory for a more compassionate and knowledgeable society.

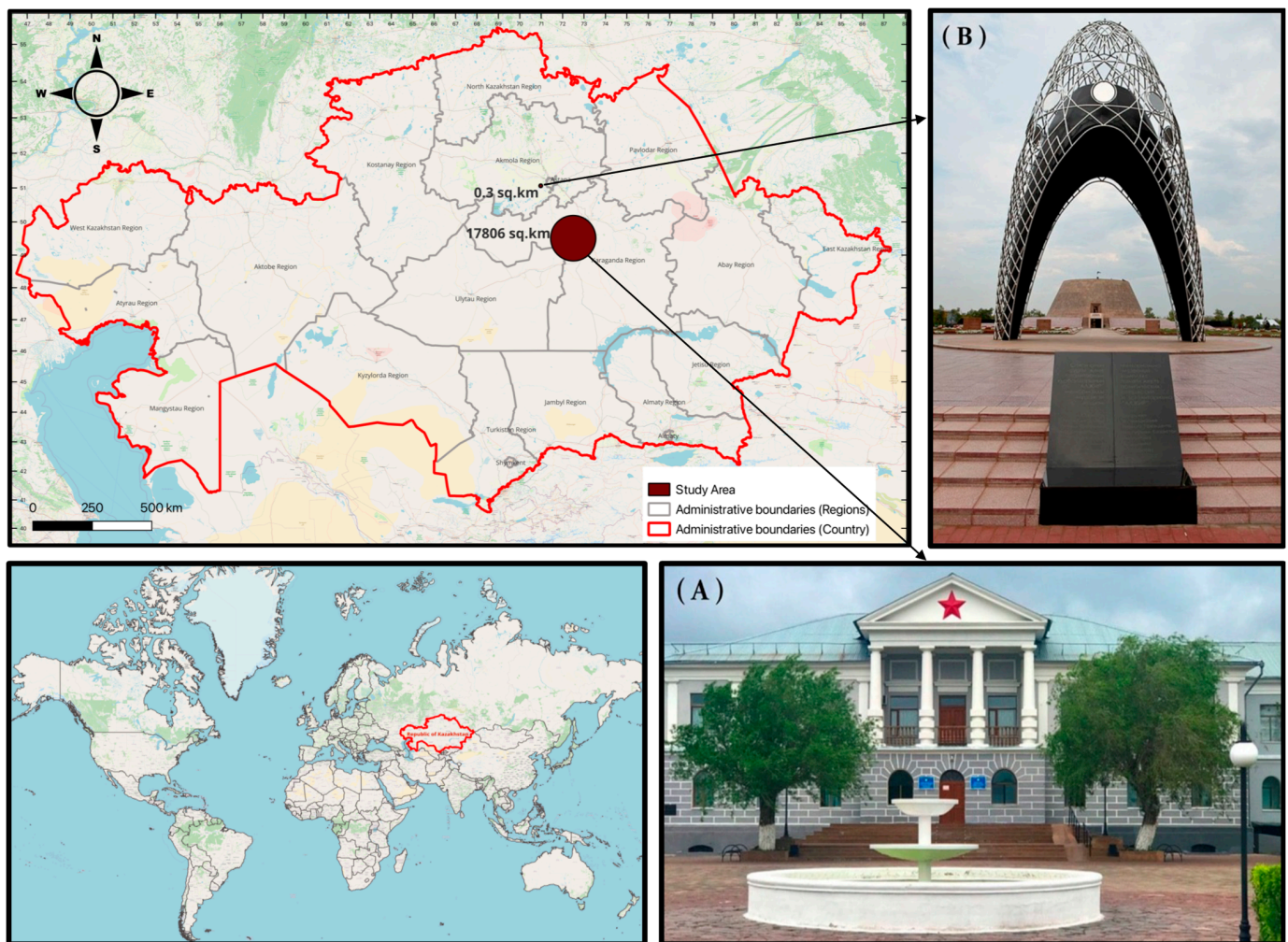


Figure 1. Map of Kazakhstan with indicated study areas: (A) Museum of the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions of Dolinka Village and (B) Aqmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland Museum.

2.1.1. Karlag

Karagandy is a separate forced labor camp, which occupies a vast territory in Kazakhstan and has several branches along the north and central territories of the country. The Karagandy forced labor camp was a branch of the gulag, which was almost an independent department in the vast territory of Kazakhstan. The prisoners of gulags were distributed all over the Soviet Union. The history of Karlag is inextricably linked with the era of Stalinism (1930–1959), one of the most difficult periods in history (Zhanaikhan et al., 2014).

Thus, the history of Karlag is inseparable from the history of the gulag. The Karagandy forced labor camp was organized in 1930 (Kalysh & Toleubay, 2023). In May 1930, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR adopted a resolution on the organization of the

Kazakh corrective labor camp (KazITLAG). The document states: “*Considering the political, economic, agrarian and cultural significance created by the special purpose camps of the OGPU in Kazakhstan in the forced labor camp in the Karkaraly district of a large combined state farm*” (Abdrakhmanova, 2020). So, Karlag was formed on 19 December 1931, and the center of the camp is in the rural area called Dolinka, 45 km from the city of Karaganda. Karlag was allocated 120,000 acres of arable land and 41,000 acres of hayfields (Abylhozhin et al., 1989).

The length of the Karlag territory from north to south is 300 km and from east to west is 200 km. In addition, outside of this territory there were two departments: Aqmola, 350 km from the center of the camp, and the Balkhash department, 650 km from the center of the camp as it was so huge.

The camp was created in the village of Dolinka in the territory of the Kazakh villages located here, the inhabitants of which were forcibly removed. The contingent of prisoners was diverse: in addition to political prisoners, clergymen, the repressed, and members of their families, there were also those who were arrested either on domestic charges or for criminal offences. There were also those who were imprisoned in the camp for minor crimes and suffered due to the denunciations of their ill-wishers. During the war years, prisoners of war were also detained, and after the war, former prisoners of fascist concentration camps were ‘tested’ here (Auman, 1989).

One of the main goals of the Karlag organization was the production of food for the rapidly developing coal and metallurgical industry of central Kazakhstan consisting of the Karaganda coal basin, Zhezkazgan, and Balkhash copper smelters (Abdrakhmanova, 2020).

2.1.2. Alzhir

In 1938, the first camp for women in the USSR was created on the basis of the 26th settlement for special settlers of the Aqmola region (Tiberghien & Lennon, 2022), which was called Akmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland. Alzhir gulag occupied an area of 30 hectares (Shaimukhanov & Shaimukhanova, 1997).

Unlike most of the Karlag camp departments, Alzhir was surrounded by several rows of barbed wire; guard towers were installed. In the territory of the camp, there was a lake overgrown with reeds. The reeds served to heat the barracks in winter and to construct them in summer (Tiberghien & Lennon, 2022).

The conditions of detention did not differ from those of the general conditions in Karlag. The special camp department regime that existed for the first year and a half imposed additional restrictions on prisoners. In particular, it was forbidden to receive parcels, there was a ban on working in one’s specialty. However, most women with jobs ‘needed’ by the camp ended up working in their specialty. Humanitarian specialists (musicians, poets, teachers, etc.), who received the category ‘healthy’ at the medical commission (Shaimukhanov & Shaimukhanova, 1997) worked in agricultural fields and as auxiliary workers at a construction site. The sick and/or hospitalized, the elderly, and children worked in the embroidery and clothing factories.

Some women in Alzhir had small children who were in a separate barrack called the ‘mother’s house’ under the supervision of a nanny (one of the prisoners). Mothers could be with their children after work hours. When children reached the age of 3, they were taken to orphanages. There were pregnant women among the prisoners. During the years of Alzhir’s existence, 1507 children were born in its territory. At the beginning of 1950, the Alzhir camp was liquidated, but until rehabilitation in 1958, the convicts did not have the right to return to their former place of residence (Shaimukhanov & Shaimukhanova, 1997).

2.2. Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of dark tourism in Kazakhstan, we conducted a stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder analysis is a critical tool for understanding the diverse perspectives and interests of stakeholders in the dark tourism industry. Traditional stakeholder analysis methodologies often rely on conducting interviews, but in the context of dark tourism, this approach can be challenging due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Thus, our methodology integrates semi-structured interviews with the stakeholder groups, literature analysis, and observation techniques to gather more comprehensive stakeholder information. The stakeholder groups were identified based on commonly used classifications within tourism research (Cornell et al., 2019). The interview partners were selected to represent a stakeholder group. These groups included tourism operators, government representatives, local communities, and visitors. A total of twelve stakeholders were interviewed to represent the aforementioned groups. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, extra care was taken to explain the research with full transparency and ensure the anonymity of the participants. The interview topics included stakeholders' perspectives on dark tourism development in Kazakhstan, challenges and opportunities within the sector, their satisfaction level, motives of visitors, and emotional capacity. The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and August 2023, in-person with local residents and tourists and online with tour agencies. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes with a transcription of informed consent.

Besides the interviews, policy programs and legislation texts were also analyzed. Since we were not able to survey all of the stakeholder groups, the interviews with representatives of the Ministry responsible for the issues related to dark tourism were not conducted. The content analysis of these materials aimed to reveal the purposes of policy planning related to dark tourism and gaps between policy design and implementation.

The methodology for this study also involved a statistical analysis of visitation patterns in a dark tourism museum over a 5-year period, from 2018 to 2022. The objective was to examine trends and patterns in visitor numbers, identify any significant fluctuations, and gain insights into the factors that influence visitor numbers. The primary sources of data were the official records of the dark tourist museums. These records contained information on the number of visitors to the museum monthly from 2018 to 2022. The data included domestic and international visitors and covered different seasons and months within each year.

In conclusion, the study's methodology employed a multi-faceted approach to capture the complexity of dark tourism development in Kazakhstan. By combining semi-structured interviews, the content analysis of policy documents, and statistical examination of visitation trends, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives, policy frameworks, and visitor dynamics. These methods addressed the sensitive nature of the topic, while ensuring a balanced representation of key stakeholder groups and reliable data collection. This approach not only shed light on the challenges and opportunities within Kazakhstan's dark tourism industry but also established a foundation for informed recommendations and future research in the field.

3. Results

Dark tourism has emerged as a compelling niche within the travel industry, attracting individuals seeking to explore destinations marked by historical tragedies and human suffering. Kazakhstan, with its historical legacy as a former Soviet territory and host to several gulag sites, stands out as a potential hub for this form of tourism. This text delves into the dynamics of dark tourism in Kazakhstan, identifying key stakeholders.

Through tourists' accounts of visits to Karlag and Alzhir, two prominent gulag camp sites, the analysis highlights the motivations, experiences, and sociocultural implications of engaging with such somber historical landmarks.

3.1. *The Touristic Significance of Gulags*

The Stalinist totalitarian system has accumulated a lot of experience in mass criminal experiments on people: the conduct of violent collectivization, the elimination of elites, suppression of popular resistance, the organization of artificial famine, genocide against freedom-loving people, the physical extermination of intellectuals and much more (Lennon & Tiberghien, 2022).

Currently, the administrative building of the former gulag houses the Museum of the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions of Dolinka Village (or the Karlag Museum). The idea of the museum was created by order of the President of Kazakhstan in 2001 (Karaganda Regional Museum of Victims of Political Repression, 2017). Actually, Karlag Museum was opened to the public in 2002 (Kazakhstanis remember the history of Karlag, 2020). The main purpose of the creation of the museum was to study and preserve the historical monuments of Karlag and to perpetuate the memory of the victims of Soviet totalitarianism.

In the building of the former administration of the Karlag, the atmosphere in which the prisoners lived and their executioners "worked" was recreated. The expositions of that time have been restored in the museum—barracks, an infirmary, a camp club and even a zindan (underground prison) where obstinate prisoners were thrown (Lennon & Tiberghien, 2022). The layouts of the rooms complement the figures of the characters of those gloomy events.

Not far from the village Dolinka, 30 km from Karaganda, there is a memorial complex "Mom's Cemetery", where children and their mothers, prisoners of Karlag, were buried. The burial sites are located a few kilometers from the building of the former gulag administration. Not far from it was a maternity hospital. So far, there are no exact data on the number of children born in the gulag during the 28 years of its existence. There are no data on the number of deaths that occurred there. However, the official burials of women and children give an idea of a very substantial figure. For example, only one of the many documents says that in the period September–October 1938, 98 children died. It is unknown how many of them were buried secretly (Kazakhstanis remember the history of Karlag, 2020).

On 31 May 2007, the Aqmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland Museum, an important commemorative site, was inaugurated. Its opening was a significant step towards preserving the remembrance of the women who suffered unjust imprisonment in the Aqmola Camp (Akhmetov, 2021). Initially established in 1938, this gulag was part of a network of gulag labor camps in the Soviet Union, mainly housing wives of individuals labelled 'traitors to the motherland'. These individuals faced accusations of political offences or opposition to the Soviet regime.

The museum's structure provides visitors with a comprehensive understanding of the history and experiences of the camp's inmates. It consists of several exhibition halls, each focusing on different aspects of the women's lives within the camp. The displays include photographs, documents, personal belongings and testimony, which shed light on the hardships endured by prisoners. Visitors can also explore the reconstructed camp barracks, gaining a tangible sense of the conditions under which the women lived.

In addition, the museum serves as a center for research and educational activities. It hosts seminars, conferences, and lectures aimed at promoting awareness and understanding of the camp's history and the broader context of political repression in the Soviet Union. By preserving the memory of the victims and highlighting the importance of human rights,

the Alzhir Museum plays a crucial role in preserving historical truth and fostering a society that values justice and compassion.

The museums situated at Karlag and Alzhir, located on the grounds of a former concentration camp, have significant touristic value within the realm of dark tourism. Their historical significance and educational offerings attract visitors seeking a deeper understanding of the tragic events that occurred during the Soviet era. The museums serve as a testament to the human experience, focusing on the immense suffering endured by political prisoners and the violations of human rights that took place within its confines. As dark tourism sites, they provide a platform for commemoration, honoring the memory of the victims, and offering visitors an opportunity to reflect on the consequences of totalitarian regimes. Museum exhibits, including authentic artefacts, photographs, and personal testimony, provide a vivid depiction of the conditions of the camps, creating a powerful and thought-provoking experience. Furthermore, Karlag and Alzhir contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by preserving and sharing the historical narrative of this dark period. By engaging with the museum's exhibits and narratives, visitors not only gain historical knowledge, but also develop empathy, fostering a greater appreciation for human rights, social justice, and the importance of preventing similar atrocities in the future.

3.2. Visitor Numbers

Statistical data from visitors to Karlag and Alzhir were obtained directly from the museums. According to the museum's policy limitations, Karlag could share tourist data by clusters (with monthly details) of visitors for three years, from 2019 to 2021. Furthermore, the number of excursions held was included in the data. Aqmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland Museum gave access to visitor statistics for the last five years, from 2018 to 2022. It was crucial to look at the total annual visitor numbers for this research in at least three time series so that a general pattern of visitors, seasonal differences, and target audience could be identified for each dark tourism destination.

The statistical analysis of the annual number of visitors to the Museum of the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions of Dolinka Village (Figure 2) revealed significant insights into visitor demographics and preferences. The data were classified into distinct groups, including adults, students, schoolchildren, foreigners, children under school age, retired individuals, and disabled/veterans, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of visitor composition. By examining the visitor numbers within each group, valuable trends and patterns emerged, shedding light on the museum's appeal and its ability to attract diverse audiences. The following section presents the findings of the statistical analysis, providing a detailed overview of the visitor distribution and highlighting notable observations within each group.

Naturally, a large proportion of visitors were adults. As they often possess greater financial resources and have more flexibility in their schedules. The second category of visitors, among which Museum of Karlag is popular, are school pupils. This is because the secondary schools of Kazakhstan organize free tours for schoolchildren to learn about historical heritage, with the intention of commemorating the victims and events of the former end of the gulag. The third group of visitors by the rate of percentage during the three years were students of higher educational institutions of the country. Variable museums, including destinations of dark tourism, are intensively promoted by lecturers and university administration at universities in Kazakhstan. A small share of Karlag visitors were foreign tourists, veterans, and pensioners. This may be related to underdeveloped infrastructure factors, since the road from large cities to the village of Dolinka, where Karlag Museum is located, is not well developed for these categories of tourists, which we cannot

say regarding the data of 2021. In 2021, disabled individuals and veterans visited Karlag at a higher rate compared to 2019 and 2020.

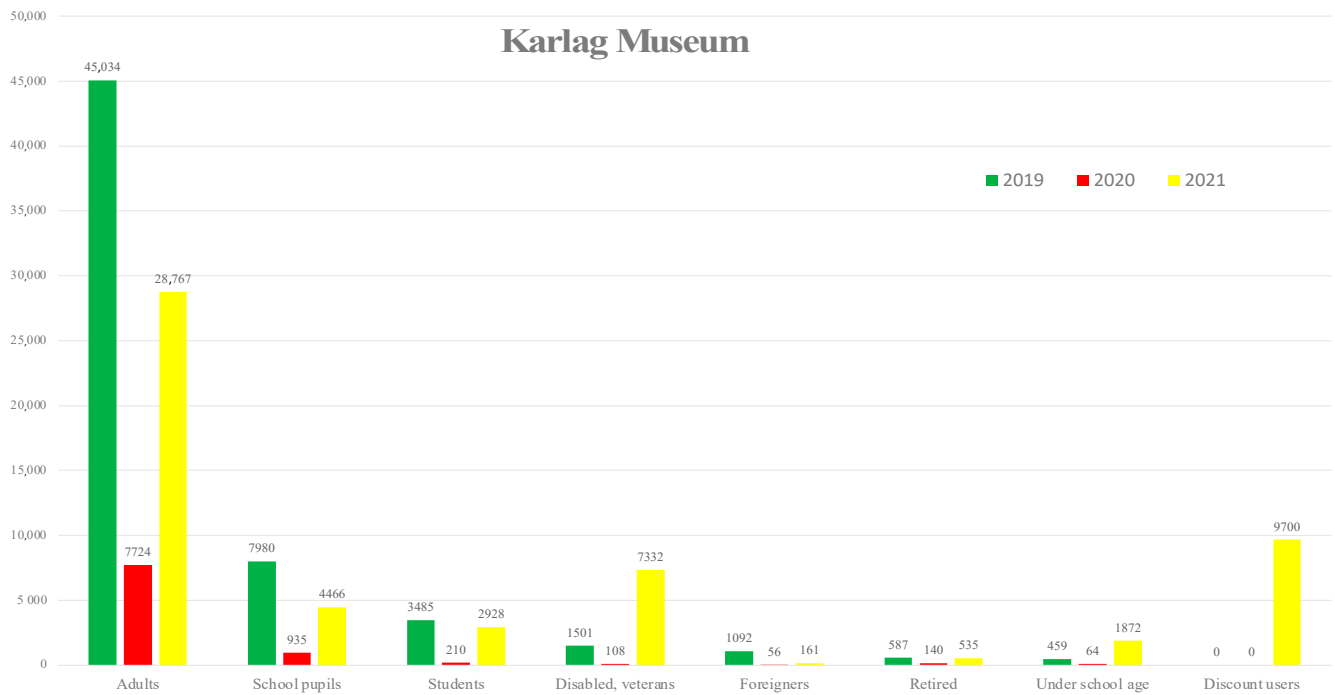


Figure 2. Groups of visitors to the Karlag Museum between 2019 and 2021.

Figure 3 illustrates the same data as those shown in the previous figure, but with monthly detailed statistics on the number of tourists that visited the museum for the memory of victims of political repressions in Dolinka village.

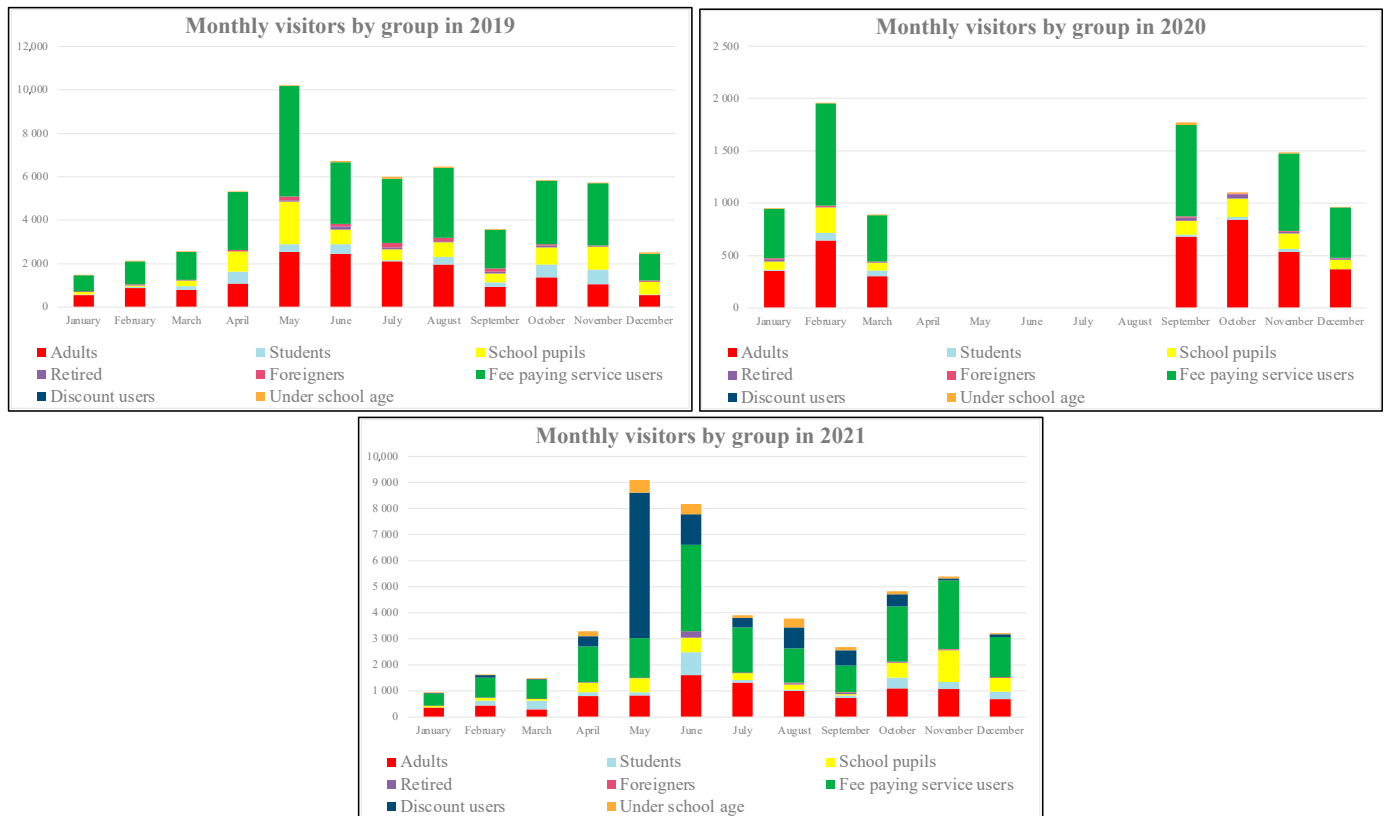


Figure 3. Monthly visitor number by groups in Karlag Museum between 2019 and 2021.

If we compare three years in a row in terms of high and low seasonality among tourists, the period from April to June is the peak season for the museum and for school trips as well; 2020 is the exception in this case. According to the graph showing monthly visitation of the museum, in 2020, there were no tourists at all from April to August. This can be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread all over the world, and each country took measures against it at a governmental level. Kazakhstan had strict quarantine regulations from the end of March until the middle of August in 2020. The positive aspect is that after we overcame the pandemic, the number of tourists in high season to the museum was even higher than the time before the global pandemic.

Providing excursions in dark tourism site museums is important for several reasons. Firstly, these excursions offer educational opportunities, allowing visitors to learn about significant historical events and their impact on society. By engaging with exhibits and narratives, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the past and the consequences of human actions. Moreover, excursions in dark tourism site museums facilitate dialogue and discussion around difficult topics. They encourage visitors to reflect on the complexities of historical events, fostering empathy, tolerance, and critical thinking. These interactions can lead to a greater appreciation for human rights, social justice, and the importance of preventing similar tragedies in the future.

One of our study sites, Karlag Museum, organize individual and group excursions for additional charge on request (Figure 4). The bar chart below demonstrates the rate of the excursions held in Karlag between 2019 and 2021. As we already mentioned, visitor numbers to the museum were much lower than in the previous or upcoming years due to quarantine measures.

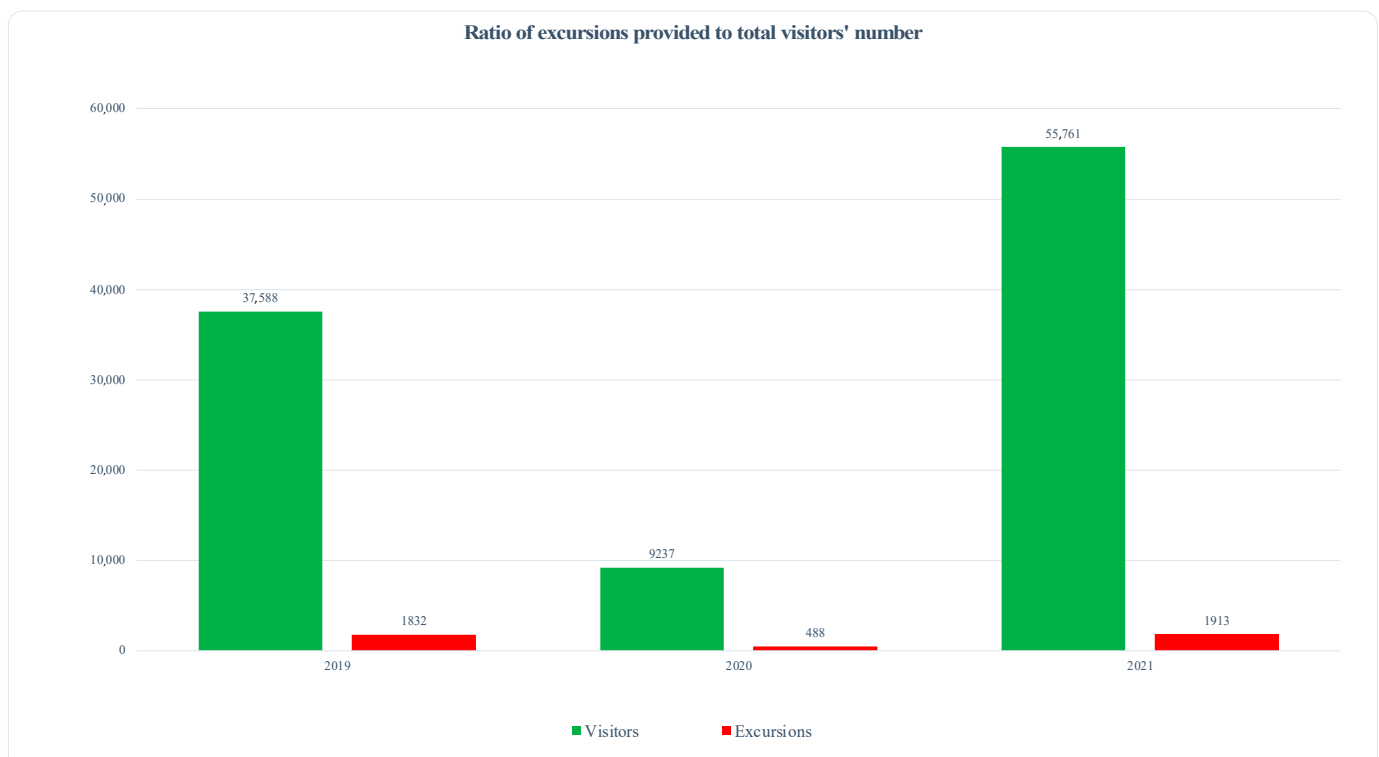


Figure 4. Ratio of excursions provided to total visitor numbers in Karlag for 2019–2021.

The number of organized excursions depends on the total number of visitors and visitor groups share from the total number of tourists. Consequently, various external factors, such as political stability, socio-economic conditions, global pandemics, or crises, exert an influence on the overall quantity of visitors. The frequency of excursions arranged by the

museum itself exhibits year-to-year variability. Specifically, in 2019 and 2020, excursions were more prevalent compared to 2021, reflecting the visiting preferences of specific groups during those periods. Notably, in 2021, a higher proportion of individuals, particularly veterans and retirees, were observed, resulting in reduced demand for museum-organized excursions among these groups, whereas larger numbers of schoolchildren, students, and adults tend to increase demand for excursions. Based on the acquired data, the average excursion frequency at Karlag Museum from 2019 to 2021 is approximately 1 excursion per 23 visitors.

In considering external factors like the pandemic and infrastructure development, it is evident that the visitation and excursion patterns are not solely based on the historical significance of the museums but also on external events and logistical constraints. These external influences should be carefully considered in future studies to understand how they affect the behavior of visitors and excursions in dark tourism sites.

In the following sections, we present an overview of the statistical data pertaining to the visitation of Alzhir Museum (Figure 5). These statistics offer valuable insights into the patterns and trends that characterize visitor engagement with this dark tourism destination. By analyzing these numbers, we can gain perspectives into the developing interest in exploring the history of the gulag system, appreciate the educational value provided by the museum, and recognize its role in fostering remembrance and facilitating a deeper understanding of the past.

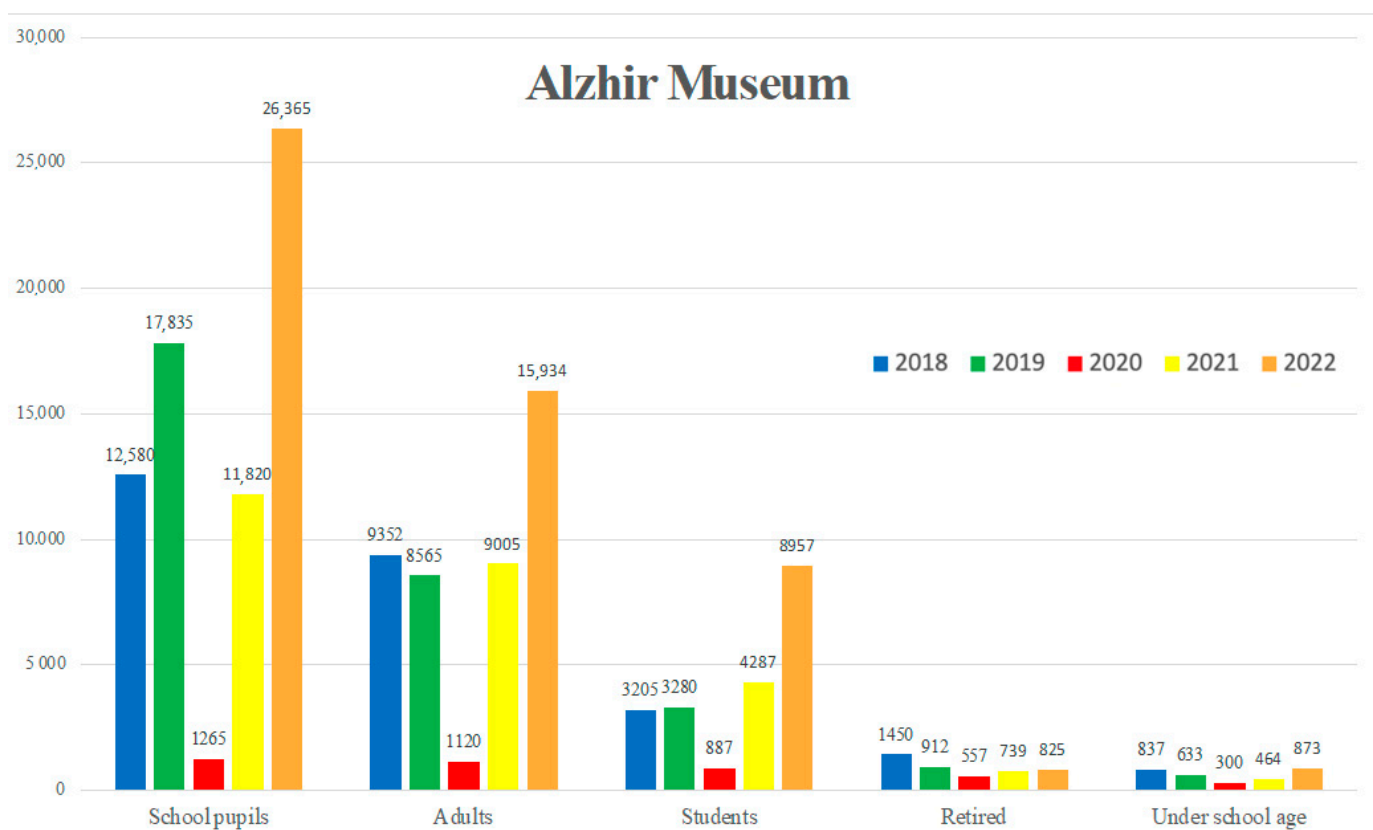


Figure 5. Visitors by groups to Alzhir Museum (2018–2022).

The data obtained regarding the visitors categorized by groups at the Alzhir Museum exhibits similarities to the statistics observed at Karlag Museum. However, it is noteworthy that Alzhir Museum has a narrower range of visitor groups, including adults, students, school pupils, retired individuals, and under-school-age children. Closer examination of the presented charts reveals the museum’s popularity among schoolchildren, which

can be attributed to the promotion of this historical site within educational institutions. Furthermore, a significant portion of the charts is occupied by students from higher educational institutions, indicating a commendable practice of commemoration and cooperative education among students. Adult ticket holders constitute approximately one third of the total pie charts over the span of five years. Interestingly, despite the quarantine period from April to August in 2020, the number of visitors remained consistent with previous years. This can be attributed to the museum's innovative and competitive nature, as it offered a virtual tour of the premises on its website. This exemplifies the museum's embrace of digitalization and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Alzhir Museum's ability to adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic, especially with the virtual tours, serves as a model for other dark tourism sites. This shift towards digital tourism during crises ensures that educational and commemorative purposes are not interrupted. It would be valuable to investigate how digital innovation can continue playing a role in dark tourism even after the pandemic.

In summary, the statistical analysis of the visitors to dark tourism sites, specifically Karlag Museum and Alzhir Museum, reveals important observations into visitor trends and preferences. Both museums attract a diverse range of visitor groups. The data indicate that educational institutions play a crucial role in promoting these historical sites, as schoolchildren and students from higher educational institutions form a significant portion of visitor demographics. The museums' efforts to engage with these groups through commemoration and cooperative education are commendable. Additionally, adult visitors make up a substantial proportion of the overall visitors, highlighting the broader interest in exploring the dark history associated with concentration camps. The analysis also highlights the resilience and adaptability of these museums, as demonstrated by the virtual tours offered during the quarantine period in 2020. The added significance of infrastructure development and socio-political factors is crucial to understanding the visitor dynamics, offering a more comprehensive picture of dark tourism trends in Kazakhstan. Overall, the statistical analysis provides valuable insights into visitor engagement and underlines the importance of these museums' history in preserving, promoting remembrance, and fostering educational experiences for a diverse range of visitors.

3.3. Stakeholder Analysis

As we presented in the Introduction, dark tourism has gained significant attention in recent years, as tourists seek destinations associated with historical tragedies and human suffering (Yousaf & Kim, 2023). Kazakhstan, with its historical significance as a former Soviet territory and host to several gulag camp sites, has become a notable potential dark tourism destination. In the following section, we identify key stakeholders involved in dark tourism in Kazakhstan and their interests in the industry. Stakeholders in dark tourism can be broadly classified into four categories: tourists, local communities, government, and the private sector (Cornell et al., 2019).

Tourists are often considered as the most important stakeholders in dark tourism. These individuals are interested in visiting sites associated with death, disaster, and tragedy, often out of curiosity or a desire to understand the historical significance of these locations. As the visitors' responses to interviews show, the motivations that drive tourists to engage in dark tourism at the gulag camp sites, specifically at the former dark sites of Karlag and Alzhir, are multifaceted. Verbatim accounts from tourists during interviews highlighted these key motivations:

"I came here because I wanted to understand what my grandparents experienced during those years". (Tourist from Russia, Alzhir site)

“It is not a museum; it is a piece of our history which teach us to not repeat mistakes of the past”. (Tourist, Alzhir site)

“Visiting Karlag was shocking, but I needed to see it with my own eyes. I felt it was my responsibility to learn about this tragedy and share it with other people”. (Tourist, Karlag site)

“Honestly, I was curious. I had heard about gulag camps from school teacher at History class, but seeing the museum made it real and very emotional. Excitement became valuable experience”. (Tourist, Karlag site)

According to the interviews, the tourists of both Karlag and Alzhir are motivated by a desire for historical knowledge, the commemoration of victims, personal introspection, and simply curiosity. The search for authenticity and a sense of connection with the past are also significant factors in attracting tourists to these sites.

The tourist experiences within the Karlag and Alzhir camps vary, influenced by the individual’s background, cultural perspective, and emotional capacity. Some tourists approached the sites with reverence and respect, while others may exhibit voyeuristic tendencies or engage in inappropriate behavior:

“Seeing some people taking selfies near the barracks felt disrespectful. There must be stricter guidelines on behavior here”. (Tourist, Alzhir site)

“For us, it was overwhelming. Walking through those rooms and seeing the pictures of victims. I left feeling emotionally drained”. (Tourist, Karlag site)

The emotional impact of visiting dark camp sites can range from somber reflection to shock and discomfort, highlighting the complex and deeply personal nature of these experiences.

The presence of tourists in dark destinations can generate both positive and negative sociocultural impacts. On the positive side, dark tourism can raise awareness of historical injustices, stimulate economic development in surrounding areas, and foster intercultural dialogue. Conversely, overcrowding, commodification, and the potential for misinterpretation may lead to the trivialization or exploitation of the tragic past, causing harm to the site’s integrity and local communities (Brougham & Butler, 1981).

Local communities form another important stakeholder group in dark tourism. Communities near dark tourism sites can benefit from the industry in the form of increased tourism revenue and job opportunities. However, local communities can also be negatively impacted by dark tourism, particularly if the industry leads to overcrowding or damage to cultural or historical sites, which is not applicable in our case study, as the analyzed dark sites operate as museums today:

“The visitors bring business to our small cafes and shops, but sometimes it feels like they are intruding on something very private and painful” (Local resident, near Karlag museum)

Although the economic benefits of dark tourism are evident, its potential impacts on local communities are sometimes poorly understood. The two key groups of local communities are the residents and community leaders. Semi-structured interviews with each of the groups resulted in the expression of their feeling of living close to dark tourist destinations. Locals expressed mixed feelings towards dark tourism. Although some recognized the economic benefits, others expressed concerns about privacy, increased traffic, and the potential exploitation of sensitive historical sites. They had stronger emotional connection to sites compared to outsiders. However, community leaders emphasized the importance of preserving the historical significance of gulag sites while simultaneously promoting responsible tourism practices:

“This museum is not just tourist spot. It is memorial. We need to ensure visitors understand that and treat them with respect”. (Community leader, Alzhir museum)

The government is also a key stakeholder in dark tourism. The government has the power to regulate the industry and ensure that it adheres to ethical and sustainable practices. In addition, the government can work to promote dark tourist sites as a means of increasing tourism revenue in the country. Alzhir is regulated by the ‘Directorate of the United Museums of Astana City’. Karlag Museum is governed by Karagandy akimat, the department of museums of the Karagandy region museums.

Stakeholder analysis identified various government stakeholders associated with dark tourism gulag sites in Kazakhstan. These stakeholders included the following:

- (1) Tourism Departments: Government departments responsible for overseeing and regulating the tourism industry, including the development of policies and guidelines for dark tourism sites, the Tourism Industry Committee of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- (2) Local authorities: Regional and local government bodies responsible for the management and development of gulag sites within their jurisdiction; Akimat of Dolinka village and Akmol city.

Unfortunately, an interview could not be conducted with the representatives of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. However, the online content of government programs and legislation was reviewed in order to reveal the points of view of decision makers. Tourism departments show a strong interest in harnessing the economic potential of dark tourism, while ensuring the sustainability and authenticity of the visitor experience.

According to the official website of the Kazakhstan Ministry of Tourism and Sports, for material and technical equipment to cover expenses associated with the preservation, accounting, acquisition, and restoration of cultural property, state museums are allocated annually within the framework of the budget program 033 ‘Improving the competitiveness of the cultural and art sphere, preserving, studying, and popularising the Kazakh cultural heritage and increasing the efficiency of implementation archiving’, and subsidies are allocated.

Finally, the private sector is another important stakeholder cluster. The private sector includes tour operators, hoteliers, tour agencies, and other businesses involved in the tourism industry. These businesses have a vested interest in the success of dark tourism in Kazakhstan, as it can lead to increased revenue and profits.

The stakeholder analysis revealed diverse interests and concerns among the identified private sector stakeholders.

- (a) Tour operators: The tour operator (KAZTOUR) expressed a keen interest in capitalizing on the growing demand for dark tourism experiences. During the interviews, they emphasized the need to create immersive and educational tour itineraries while maintaining sensitivity to the historical context and respecting the memory of the victims:

“We believe dark tourism in Kazakhstan has immense potential, but it must be approached carefully. Our goal is to offer tours that educate visitors about the tragic history while ensuring that we honor the victims’ memory”. (Representative, KAZTOUR)

Tour operators were concerned about striking a balance between profitability and responsible tourism practices.

- (b) Travel agencies: The Astana city travel agencies (Tripster, Advantour, Arman-tour, Skyway travel) aimed to provide seamless travel experiences to visitors interested in dark tourism concentration camp sites. Information is obtained from the websites of travel agencies (<https://www.advantour.com> (accessed on 21 July 2023); <https://www.skyway.kz> (accessed on 23 July 2023); Instagram page@armantour). They

expressed concerns about site accessibility, transportation logistics, and ensuring visitor safety and satisfaction as follows:

“One of the main challenges we face is improving transportation to this remote site. Visitors often complain about the difficulty of reaching Karlag”. (Armantour agent)

Travel agencies recognized the importance of working with local communities and adhering to ethical tourism principles.

Based on stakeholder analysis, several implications and recommendations for the management of dark tourism concentration camp sites in Kazakhstan emerged.

Stakeholders in the tourism industry, including government authorities, local communities, private sector entities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), should prioritize collaboration and open communication channels. Regular dialogue and information exchange among stakeholders can foster a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with dark tourism. In addition, effective collaboration between tourism departments, cultural heritage agencies, and local authorities is essential for the sustainable management of former concentration camp sites. This collaboration should involve regular communication, joint decision-making processes, and the integration of diverse perspectives.

- (a) Stakeholders should prioritize the preservation and accurate interpretation of dark tourism sites. Cultural heritage agencies, tourism operators, and NGOs must collaborate to ensure the appropriate presentation of historical information, avoiding sensationalism or the trivialization of tragedies associated with sites. Interpretive signage, guided tours, and educational programs must be developed with the input of historians, experts, and local communities to provide visitors with a comprehensive understanding of the historical significance of the sites.
- (b) Stakeholders should invest in capacity building and training programs for professionals in the tourism industry involved in dark tourism. This includes tour guides, travel agents, accommodation providers, and souvenir vendors. Training should focus on promoting cultural sensitivity, providing accurate historical narratives, and promoting responsible behavior among tourism professionals. By improving the knowledge and skills of stakeholders, the tourism industry can provide high-quality experiences while ensuring the protection of cultural heritage and the well-being of visitors and local communities.
- (c) Regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the impacts of dark tourism development. Stakeholders should collaborate to collect data on visitor numbers, socioeconomic effects, environmental impacts, and community well-being. This information can inform evidence-based decision making and facilitate adaptive management strategies to address negative consequences and improve positive outcomes.
- (d) Stakeholders should adopt sustainable marketing and promotion strategies for dark tourism sites. Marketing materials should be informative, respectful, and sensitive to the historical context of the sites. Collaboration with tourism boards, travel agencies, and online platforms can help ensure responsible promotion that attracts conscientious visitors interested in learning and engaging with the history and culture of the destination. To attract younger generations, Tik Tok and Instagram can be media platforms for the promotion of dark destinations.

Each of these groups has its own interests in the industry and must work together to ensure that dark tourism is developed in an ethical and sustainable manner. With proper planning and regulation, dark tourism in Kazakhstan has the potential to increase the dark tourism sphere of the country while also preserving its cultural and historical heritage.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this article was to describe the background of dark tourism related to the former forced labor camps in Kazakhstan. The stakeholder analysis, coupled with statistical data analysis and an examination of the tourist significance of dark tourism sites such as the Karlag and Alzhir museums in Kazakhstan, offers insights into the multifaceted nature of this form of tourism. Globally, dark tourism has emerged as a new niche within the tourism industry, drawing tourists who seek to engage with historical tragedies and gain a deeper understanding of human suffering. According to Stone (2006), dark tourism sites have different levels or intensity of darkness. The analyzed destinations are at the more intense side of the spectrum, which involves commemoration, death, and suffering.

When compared to similar dark tourism destinations globally, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland or the gulag camps in Russia, Karlag and Alzhir share a similar emphasis on education, historical memory, and visitor introspection. For instance, Auschwitz-Birkenau, as highlighted in Stone (2006), operates with a strong commemorative intent, ensuring that the narrative remains free from excessive commercialization while focusing on education and human rights advocacy. Similarly, Kazakhstan's dark tourism sites resist commodification and prioritize historical accuracy, which aligns with the observation that educational functions are the most emphasized element of dark tourism in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, the mixed feelings of local communities observed in Kazakhstan resonate with findings from studies on the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (Stone & Grebenar, 2022). Local stakeholders there also express ambivalence, torn between preserving historical integrity and capitalizing on tourism for economic development. In both cases, stakeholder collaboration emerges as a critical factor for ethical site management, ensuring that tourism practices are respectful and sustainable.

While Karlag and Alzhir emphasize education and commemoration, dark tourism globally faces ethical challenges, particularly the risk of commodification and "kitschification" (Stone & Grebenar, 2022). Additionally, there is a risk of selective historical narratives, where victimization is highlighted without addressing broader complexities, as seen in critiques of Holocaust museums. Such challenges underscore the need for Kazakhstan's dark tourism sites to ensure ethical management that preserves historical integrity, includes local voices, and avoids shifting toward tourism-first priorities.

The stakeholder analysis revealed the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests and concerns of stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, government agencies, and the private sector. Tourists are driven by a variety of motivations, from historical curiosity to personal introspection, while local communities express mixed feelings regarding the impact of dark tourism on their lives and heritage. Government agencies play a crucial role in regulating industry and promoting responsible tourism practices, while the private sector sees opportunities for economic growth and visitor engagement.

The statistical data analysis provided information on the demographics, preferences, and trends of visitors at Karlag and Alzhir. It highlighted the role of educational institutions in promoting these historical sites and showed the adaptability of museums, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights that the educational function can be considered as the most emphasized element of dark tourism in Kazakhstan. The importance of dark tourism sites such as the Karlag and Alzhir lies in their ability to preserve historical memory, promote the awareness of past atrocities, and foster empathy and understanding among visitors. These museums serve as platforms for commemoration, education, and reflection, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of human rights values.

Moving forward, effective stakeholder collaboration, responsible tourism practices, capacity building, and sustainable marketing strategies are essential for managing dark

tourism sites ethically and sustainably. By working together, stakeholders can ensure that dark tourism in Kazakhstan and beyond continues to evolve in a manner that respects historical integrity, benefits local communities, and provides meaningful experiences for visitors, while contributing to the larger goals of education and remembrance. Thus, kitschification and commodification (Stone & Grebenar, 2022) will not affect the Kazakh dark tourist attractions.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations and considerations associated with this study. First, the analysis was based solely on visitation data, without considering factors such as visitor demographics, motivations, or satisfaction levels. Future research could explore these aspects to gain a more comprehensive understanding of visitors. Furthermore, external factors such as global events, economic conditions, or changes in marketing strategies were not explicitly included in the analysis. Although they may have influenced visitor behavior, this study focused primarily on examining visitation patterns themselves. Thus, future research should focus on addressing these shortcomings. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies is also necessary: analyzing the possibilities of dark tourism in relation to labor camps in other former post-communist countries can provide further valuable insights. Studies with a more nuanced classification of stakeholder groups could also provide useful information on this topic.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.A.; Methodology, A.A. and L.B.; Formal analysis, A.A., G.N. and L.B.; Investigation, K.M. and S.N.; Data curation, A.A. and G.N.; Original draft preparation, A.A. and K.M.; Review and editing, L.B., G.N. and K.M.; Visualization, A.A. and Z.K.; Supervision, L.B. and G.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Project no TKP2021-NVA-09 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the TKP2021-NVA funding scheme.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the Act LXXVI of 2014 on Scientific Research, Development and Innovation (<https://nkfih.gov.hu/palyazoknak/dokumentumtar/hatosagi-engedelyek>).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent for participation was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Acknowledgments: We extend our gratitude to art designer Toktarova Aigerim Mariyamkyzy from the municipal state-owned enterprise 'Museum of the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions of Dolinka Village', and to Samorokova Elena Sergeevna, a specialist in the research department at the 'Aqmola Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland Museum', for their valuable statistical and historical data that were essential for our analysis.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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