

FORGET-ME(-NOT): VISITORS AND MUSEUM PRESENTATIONS ABOUT COMMUNISM BEFORE 1989

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Abstract: This essay opens up the question about museum presentations during the communist rule in Bulgaria that were arranged to materially prove the official state ideology. Their collections should validate the governing party's pretences for historical continuity. Two museum institutions shall be discussed: “The Museum of Working Class Revolution”¹ and the “Museum of Constructing Socialism”². Both of them are analyzed as a propaganda machine for the dissemination of the party messages from the point of view of visitors' perceptions of the recent communist past... Such museum presentations, normally part of the regional history museums or having a national status, were born with the regime and lived out some years after its end in 1989 when they were sentenced to “death” or closed behind the repositories' walls.

Two decades after 1989, Bulgaria still doesn't have a separate museum space for presenting its recent past. In contrast, pre-1989 museum presentations about communism registered extraordinary numbers of visitors that later in the 1990s suddenly disappeared. Are people still interested in supporting official museums' narratives about communism? This article offers an anthropological analysis of the former visitors' motivation and memories about the communist presentations 20 years after their close. The research here has tried to provoke memory. It also attempted to find the reasons why people would consciously forget.

Keywords: museum, state propaganda, visitors, memory, communism.

INTRODUCTION

The museum glass case has a kind of symbolic power to guarantee the remembrance and guard the visible. Meanwhile it secures stories so that they acquire an aura of permanence. The act of setting images behind a glass window unavoidably imbues them with official values.

Throughout its history, the Museum has undergone numerous reformations and deformations. Although it has been strongly bound to the development of society, science and humanities, its affiliation to governmental policies about nation building and culture could barely be overcome. The

¹ Музей на работническото революционно движение (in Bulgarian).

² Музей на социалистическото строителство (in Bulgarian).

Museum used to serve loyally to nationalism and later on the totalitarian state needed it as an additional space for its propaganda. The official state ideology was supposed to be materially proved and visually presented by the exhibition. The collections should validate the governing party's pretences for historical continuity. A perfect example of such museums deformed into propaganda machines is the communist "museum of workers' revolutionary movement" (MWRM) complemented by its appendix – the "museum of socialist construction" (MSC)³. Such museum presentations, normally part of the regional history museums or having a national status, were born with the regime and lived out some years after its end in 1989 when they were sentenced to "death" or closed behind the repositories' walls.

The so-called propaganda museums define their mission simply as translation or re-articulation of the only Party's ideological message using comprehensible popular presentation methods and language. Back in the 1940s, the ruling Communist Party didn't find the existing museums in Bulgaria adequate for supporting its ambitions. But it also didn't possess a proper model for transforming them into effective propaganda tools. The easiest way seemed to be designing a new museum system by applying evolutionary order to the presentations in compliance with the Marx-Leninist soviet model. The general museum narrative was roughly divided into huge historic periods: before and after the dawn of the Communist Party in Bulgaria. The task for constructing and articulating the official description of the Party's history was assigned to two new institutions named as follows: 1. "Workers' Revolutionary Movement" and 2. "Socialist construction". The latter should be considered as an equally substantial appendix of the former. Both museum presentations serve as examples for the totalitarian museum's public policies and thus are being considered subject to the current research analysis.

I would argue that since the birth of the Museum in general there had been no such attempt to address contemporaneity in museum presentations. The general associative thinking usually defines *the Museum* through the concept of and attitude to the Past⁴. "Socialist construction" departments and museums in Bulgaria used to refer to political and economic actions in the recent past or immediately happening *here and now*, integrating itself into the Party's ideas about the future. The opening of such museum departments and exhibitions supposedly changed the essence of the museum institution without depriving it from its didactic functions.

³ The abbreviations will be used throughout the text to comfort the reader. "Museum of workers' revolutionary movement" (MWRM) is a literary translation of the Bulgarian "музей на работническото революционно движение". The other name could be translated as "the museum for constructing socialism" ("музей на социалистическото строителство"), but I prefer to accent upon the meaning by calling it "the museum of socialist construction" (MSP).

⁴ T. BENNETT, "The Political Rationality of the Museum", in *Continuum: the Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, 1990, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 35–55.

The current article attempts to analyze the effectiveness of pre-1989 propaganda museums' public policies. It also poses questions regarding today's hot topic: the necessity of official museum narratives about the communist past. Are people interested in supporting the construction of official museum presentations about communism? Do they like to remember and how do they recall pre-1989 museums' propaganda stories? The article offers an anthropological analysis of the former visitors' motivation and memories about the communist presentations twenty years after their closing. The research tried to provoke remembering among the interviewees. It also intended to find out the reasons why people would consciously forget.

In 1948 the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party's (BCP) Central Committee issued a decree for opening a permanent national Museum for Revolutionary Movement. Looking back from the present there reveals an unpredictable and significant institutional history: museums which had been active for forty years lost their right to build up exhibitions in the early 1990s and "buried" their treasures deep into the dusty repositories. Later in the years following 2000 there have been several vague attempts to present the recent past dated from September 9th 1944 to November 10th 1989.

Dependent on the age of the speaker, in everyday conversations one uses various temporal definitions of the period. Men who lived consciously throughout the period call it either "after September 9th" or "before November 10th". The generation born later in the 1980s that doesn't have real life experience of the period refers to it by year: "after 1994" and more frequently "before 1989". The difference in time definitions possibly marks opposing attitudes towards the recent past: on one hand, a holistic, more generalized approach by the younger population and on the other, a more detailed one by the elderly people.

Nevertheless, both segments of the society tend to neglect the present-day lack of museum presentations of communism in Bulgaria. Their motivation could hardly overcome the uneven political development in the democratic years. On the other hand, shared memories about visits in pre-1989 communist museums could also point out problems in the presentation methods.

To understand visitor's opinions nowadays, one needs to be aware of the process of constructing an exhibition about communism as it was done before 1989. It is perfectly described in curators', decision makers' and museum directors' interviews carried out as part of a broader research financially supported by The Research Institute of the Recent Past.

Two problems come out of this empirical data. At first almost no museum professional admits his/ her participation and inclusion in the decision making process during the communist years. That is probably why the memories of the recent past are pushed aside or even deleted. They are definitely not subject to public discussions.

Twenty years after closing the exhibitions about communism most of the museum professionals from the researched departments have already retired, others are transferred to other museum departments. Posing questions

about curators' professional experience and problems during the research at first surprised the respondents but later on evokes rethinking and sharing of memories. In this essay I want to prove that the museums and departments researched here were consciously turned into subject to forgetting⁵. This attitude reflects the desire to deny curators' experience and the status of the materials as heritage. More than only causing neglect of museums this attitude is one of the reasons for leading Bulgarian museums into their deepest crisis ever. Twenty years after 1989 the relations between museums and society in Bulgaria could be described safely as worn out.

The article deals with the concept of the museum as a propaganda tool and with the aspects of its mission. It also reveals the means by which the narrative about the Past is constructed. The museum mission was encoded into the names of the departments and exhibitions: they focused exclusively on *workers' revolutionary movement* history and the present-day *socialist construction*. How was the narrative about the Past constructed in the *revolutionary movement* museums and how was the communist progress advertised and visualized in the *socialist construction* departments? By what means was the "correct" message assembled and articulated? These questions relate to the everyday work of a regular curator and to the ethics of collecting as well as the interpretation of objects.

The policies of the studied institutions were a simple reflection of the official Party's state policies. They didn't diverge; they were subject to strict control and were targeted at the broadest possible audience. For the purpose of understanding the particular museum policies it is necessary to locate its position in the museum system as well as communication ethics and mechanisms between different levels of this system's hierarchy.

The second significant research problem relates to the perception of the public activities' message. What were the forms of communication with the different audiences? The institutions at the focus of this research have always been famous for their popularity, measured in numbers totally incomparable to the best results of post-communist museums. The research focuses on questions about the museum experience as well as about re-formatting the visitor's concept about museums in general. Is it possible for the message to get to the individual visitor? Did the propaganda manage to format individual perceptions about Past and Present? How did the personal experience integrate a museum visit like this? How is the museum visit evaluated twenty years after these exhibitions closed? What is the impact of this visit upon the personal ideas about museums in general?

The empirical research used anthropological methods to gather first-hand information and opinions from museum curators and potential museum

⁵ See N. VUKOV, "The 'Unmemorable' and the 'Unforgettable': Museum Visualizations in Post-1989 Bulgaria", In P. APOR, O. SARRKISOVA, *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007, pp. 305–332; P. GEARY, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millenium*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

visitors in the past. The research relied on the interviews as the most significant data in terms of refiguring the memories. The regulations and reported public policies' results were found in publications in the official journal of the field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY PROBLEMS

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as well as professional autobiographies recorded face-to-face with curators and authors of pre-1989 exhibitions about communism. Their stories were referred to as a source of information about the process of construction of presentations and the decision-making in terms of exhibition concepts. The researched museums' archives also provided valuable data for exhibition content and decision making. Last, but not least, the data was supported strongly by publications in the official journal of the communist period titled "Museums and cultural monuments". They were carefully and consciously analysed in comparison with other documents to avoid any misleading notion of the texts.

The interviews with pre-1989 museum visitors had two peculiar features. First, the temporal distance between the time of interviewing and the visit itself which is at least 20 years. It makes the recall of actions not at all easy though the interview was voluntary and not structured. The second difficulty was the fact that a number of interviewees did not find the subject at all attractive to discuss so that their interviews provide only a negative image of the institution without a clear explanation of the attitude. The only condition for an interview was for the person to be above 35-years-old. The age was a warranty for a visit as all the schoolchildren used to follow a guided tour around any city or national museum. Another requirement was a diversity of professions and social belonging as well as contemporary political affiliation for the respondents. The hypothesis presupposed that the last 20 years shaped the memories about the museum experience more than the visit itself. The researcher was expected to check if external conditions could influence the perceptions of the museum visit.

As the research project generalised about the museums of communism in Bulgaria, I chose some case studies for a deep contextual as well as content analysis of the documentation and the interviews. These were selected in terms of their position in the museum system back in the period between 1944 and 1989. The studied museums with national status are two: the National Museum of Workers' Revolution (NMWR) in Sofia and the Museum of socialist construction (MSC) in Dimitrovgrad. The other case-studies numbered some regional and city museums with a kind of peculiar content or history. These are the museums in Bourgas, Rousse, Plovdiv, Kiustendil. They are located in cities far from the capital and provide a sort of balance between the idealized national institutions and the periphery in terms of political strategies, decision-making and control.

TOTALITARIAN MUSEUM'S NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND MESSAGE

Both researched exhibition narratives were interdependent. Prior to 1989 they described a story of struggle for success told from the current point of view. It was a story with a happy ending directly visible in the *socialist construction* part⁶. Considered as a narrative the museum presentation structure seems very close to the fairy tale structure described by V. Propp⁷. In the latter the protagonist is usually given a mission, attempts to accomplish it, contends with difficulties and at the end he succeeds over the “evil”. The similarities between the two narrative types come from the museum mission to present the successful story of communist revolution followed by communist rule in Bulgaria.

The exhibition story had clear negative and positive characters relying on simple binary oppositions. The contrast between Past and Present (Future) used to make it even easier for the visitor to perceive the propaganda message. Although the so-called Bulgarian “communist revolution” of September 9th, 1944 was set as the narrative’s highest peak, the socialist present and future were supposed to give the most important accent in the exhibition message. The communist ideology is oriented towards the future⁸, so is the museum story to be told.

It could be considered peculiar that the narrative was an open-ended one. The last *socialist construction* part presented only a stage of the construction process. During the visit the exhibition was supposedly perceived through the higher standing contemporary experiences and promises about the future. We could label the museum narrative structure about the communist revolution after the structure of present-day Prague’s Museum of Communism: “dream – reality – nightmare” adding again the “dream” at the end developed by the *socialist construction* section.

The communist ideology reformed not only the exhibition content in Bulgaria. Moreover, the ideology transformed museum perspective. The museum didn’t look back to the Past. Instead, it turned towards the Future. It built up its exhibits upon the mission for spreading out the communist dream. The contrast between past and present was an advertising of the future. I would dare to compare the message of the colonial museums in 19th century Western Europe with the one in Bulgarian totalitarian museums. The visitors had the chance to find out the advantages of present-day economic and social

⁶ R. SHARENKOVA, “Propaganda in the Museum: Past and Present Representations of Communism in Eastern Europe”, in P. ARONSSON, A. NYBLOM (eds.), *Comparing: National Museums, Territories, Nation-Building and Change*, Linköping University Electronic Press, Linköpings Universitet, 2008, pp. 71–81, 73, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/030/005/ecp0830005.pdf>, (accessed 30.07.2010).

⁷ V. PROPP, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Sofia: Zachari Stoyanov Press, 2001.

⁸ See J. C. SCOTT, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

policies as well as the industrial potential of the country. The communist reforms moved the cultural institution closer to the concept of a “temple” than to that of a “forum”⁹. There man could see the relics of the so-called “anti-fascist fights” as well as the first samples of any new industrial production. By visiting them millions of visitors voluntarily or not took the role of pilgrims going to a shrine.

The hierarchical relation between *State (Party)*, *Museum* and *the Public* together with the propaganda message dragged the museum back to the proto-public museums. Both researched exhibitions not only communicated the Party’s message, but also engaged the visitors directly with it. During the visit to the museum, they were made to promise or at least to demonstrate future loyalty to the Party.

I was brought only two times to the National Museum of Revolutionary Movement in Sofia. Both times it was on a utilitarian purpose. First I was accepted as a pioneer¹⁰, the second time I became a “komsomotetz”¹¹. From the door onwards we were stuck directly into a hall, on lines of chairs and a group of people asked us immediately questions. We were supposed to answer by raising a hand¹².

Another hypothesis could probably relate the totalitarian museum with the achievements of the *ecomuseum*. It is only a delusion. Although the relation between totalitarian museum and their communities seems at first equal and the amount of visitors adds more value to the policies’ effects, the tools for achieving such visitor numbers condemn the results. The museum needed mediators to get to its target audiences. The role was assigned to Party functioners at the factories, agricultural complexes as well as at schools. The pressure methods normally used by the totalitarian state apply in the case as well. They transform the museum visit into action not so voluntary and thus, definitely not a subject of remembering¹³.

The unpredictable drop of visitor numbers in the 1990s and 2000s is the best proof of the fake connection between museum and audiences. Once the mediators are gone, the people move from “visitors” to “museum non-goers” category. The trend is not the worst heritage from the communist period. Actually people’s attitude and perception of the museum in general was shaped before 1989 and ruins almost all possible solutions to the lack of visitors problem. The change of the attitude is a long lasting negative effect

⁹ See K. HUDSON, *Museums of Influence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

¹⁰ *Pioneers* were the members of the Communist youth organization for 10 to 15-year-old students.

¹¹ *Komsomoletz* was the member of the next Communist youth organization for 15 to 19-year-old students and workers.

¹² ROSEN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD, humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

¹³ See VUKOV, *op. cit.*; S. KUECHLER, A. FORTY (eds.), *The Art of Forgetting: Materializing Culture*, Oxford: Berg, 1999.

of communism. According to it the museum institution is supposed to be permanently bound to the government's policies. The institution is perceived as dusty space stuck into the past and indifferent to the present-day changes in the society.

Additionally, the propaganda policy of the totalitarian museum referred to the public as somewhat "inferior". The control over the production of museum exhibitions and texts goes further beyond: it presupposes that the curator has no professional qualities and should always be guided, pressed or even disqualified. All these features, described above, set a dividing line between the museum development East and West of the "Iron Curtain". The Bulgarian curators just followed the instructions and thus created the "correct" message. On the other hand, the visitors were subject to double guidance and pressure: first from the social organizations and second, from the museum guides during the visit. Higher than them in the museum communities' hierarchy we find the contributors that supports the propaganda with objects, personal stories and presence.

"OBSESSING" THE MASSES: THE MUSEUM PUBLIC ACTIVITIES' EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of museum public policy in general depends on visitors' perceptions. The fact of remembering the visit represents already a positive mark of effectiveness. In her essay about museums as communities¹⁴, Constance Perin presents the circle of communication in the cultural institutions. The perception of the message depends not only on the way the curators invent it, but also on the mood and ideas of the visitor. Evaluating the effectiveness is not an easy task for the researcher, because the museum was simply one of all Party agents promoting the new ideology. The people were subject to agitation everywhere and all the time – from the cradle to the grave. The research methodology attempts to demonstrate museum's ability to leave permanent traces in visitors' minds. The shape of one's memory and ideas about the museum institution is highly significant for the future plans for museum presentations about the recent past.

According to publications in the professional journal from the researched period the target audiences of the communist museums were defined in hierarchy as follows: schoolchildren, workers, villagers (peasants). They were initially linked to political groups at their work/study places led by a party secretary who organized the cultural activities.

The difference between ethnographic, archeological or history museums on one hand and the ones presenting communism on the other, lay in the specific relation between the three angles of communication: 1. resource community,

¹⁴ C. PERIN, "The Communicative Circle: Museums as Communities", in *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, I. KARP, Ch. M. KREAMER, LAVINE S., (eds.), Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, pp. 182–220.

2. the museum professionals and 3. the consumers of museum products. The first included the memory keepers – from them the museum used to derive all necessary information and materials. These were usually veterans from the Second World War, political prisoners, anti-fascist fighters (partisans), and heroes of socialist labour, participants in labour brigades etc. Visitors and guests usually represent the consumers group. NMWR represented the best example of the *museum as media* and moved closer to the ecomuseum by integrating the museum informants actively in mediating the museum message. The stories vividly presented by participants in particular historical events communicate the museum message easier. Incorporating personal stories into the grand narrative helps visitors associate themselves with the communist heroes.

Discovering my favourite guns inside the museum showcase definitely transfers my sympathies to its owner, anti-fascist and fighter for social justice. I worshiped a Soviet hero (because there was no Bulgarian equivalent of him) whose sniper gun was literally cut in lines by which he had counted every single killed enemy.¹⁵

Similar mechanisms of oral story telling inside the museum carried out by the “hero” him/herself, seemed to have had stronger influence than the guided tours around the exhibition. Thus the propaganda mission pretends to get accomplished.

The interviewed curators who used to work for the researched institutions insisted on the perfection of their professional achievements. One might get confused while searching for the reasons for the will to forget that the interviewed visitors presented. The researched museums had the privilege of presenting the recent past together with the present. In addition to this they had the financial and human resource power to apply the newest methodologies that were used by the West European anthropology museums at that time. The communist institutions built an artificial link between the source community and the visitors. Despite all the features mentioned above, there was a deep-rooted difference between the communist museums and their equivalent on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It was the missing equality between the three members of the communication chain in the case of the totalitarian institution.

It is true that some diffusion between the three communicating groups was possible but not carried out. In terms of *socialist construction* the workers group served simultaneously as public and source of information. The resistance representatives supplied only information and did not feel themselves as consumers of museum products. Nevertheless, they would be frequently seen as guests on special occasions at the museum venue. They played the role of devotees and keepers of information. The anti-fascist fighters and workers from labour brigades were given the power to approve or criticize museum

¹⁵ Information based on Ivan Elenkov's unpublished autobiographical notes, *Socialism inside me. The life of Ivan Elenkov during socialism.*

curators' initiatives. They referred to both groups: the resource and the consumer ones. On the other hand there were the schoolchildren, who played only the role of consumers, the most important target audience. They could not merge with the resource community. The result was a hierarchy of target audiences, which was not diffusible.

There is also another specific feature of the audience description: the civil servants and intellectuals as well as the people engaged in the trade sphere were not subject of the museum propaganda. The target audience was defined through the lack of interest for voluntary visit to the museums. The fact that workers, schoolchildren and peasants are mentioned in the published museum reports¹⁶ as most important target implies the notion of susceptibility of the groups to manipulation.

The target audiences described above are frequently present in the interviews. Moreover, they used to record themselves in the museum guest books. As the MWRM director¹⁷ wrote in his report (Tanev 1976), the effectiveness of a museum could directly be measured in industrial workers' professional success. There is concrete example supporting the method:

After their meeting with Zoya Arabadgieva on August 3rd, 1974 the workers of the "Hadgi Dimiter-Sofia" factory write [*in the guestbook – R. S.*]: "We shall continue the mission of these men, who fought for our freedom by overdoing our current plans contributing to the successful construction of socialism in Bulgaria."¹⁸

Both the museum visit and the industrial factory's plans were compulsory for the workers who wrote the note. Nevertheless, the cited note from the guestbook proves specifics of the museum mission. It was supposed to transform the worker into a devotee, the note sounds as a signed symbolic agreement between the Party and its sympathisans.

The guestbooks usually represent an unreliable document of visitors attitudes not to mention the museum non-goers who don't have access to the book at all. On the other hand, the interviewees' stories describe the visit to one of the researched museums as an event not worth remembering. The curators also draw attention to the fact: "*They leave the museum, it's boring for*

¹⁶ T. TANEV, "The place and role of the NWRM in terms of the socio-political and patriotic education of the people and the youth", in *Yearbook of the NWRM in Bulgaria*, 1976, vol. 8, Sofia: Partizdat, pp. 9–19; E. GEORGIEVA, "Participation of active anti-capitalist and anti-fascist fighters, heroes of socialist labour and medal-keepers in NMWR's massive political activities of the NMWR", in *Yearbook of the NMWR in Bulgaria*, 1976, vol. 8, Sofia: Partizdat, pp. 77–85; T. BUROVA, "Mutual work of the MWRM with the older party activists", in *Yearbook of the MWRM in Bulgaria*, 1974, vol. 6, Sofia: Partizdat, pp. 185–194.

¹⁷ TANEV, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Quoted in GEORGIEVA, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

them, because they are being brought to the museum, that's it."¹⁹ The same is being reported by the visitors:

Of course it was boring back then. What could a photo of a single face tell to me? Simply nothing. Of course, that powerful huge photocollage of Georgy Dimitrov together with Goering where that grandious Georgy Dimitrov stays right to the tiny Goering on the left... From semiotical point of view it's perfect, easy to be remembered. But the others – simply faces, men with mustaches and a cap, they speak nothing to me alone.²⁰

The curator cited above also points out that photographs had local meaning and did not attract the average visitor's attention. The portraits behind the glasscase applied symbolic meaning of prestige and power to the people photographed. Some of the images had an edifying function against the esthetics of the exhibitionary complex.

There was a curtain and just behind it was the glasscase – in front of you when you enter, the glasscase with the slaughtered partisan heads. The Orizare action. The two partisan heads put that way and two gendarmerists with guns straight next to them. There were things definitely appalling. The slaughtered heads on a huge photo the size of the glasscase. Really depressing.²¹

The exhibitions flatly presented on the walls did not impress the visitor. The objects in glasscases actually facilitated the perception of the narrative. They used to tell a story of conspiracy and illegal actions from the period before 1944. The guns are reported to have had the strongest impact on boys: "*I was moved by the Museum of Workers' Revolutionary Movement in Sofia, where the guns were countless put next to other historic simulations (what to say about Geo Milev's glass eye and an oil on canvas with partisan heads stuck on sticks)*"²². The military stories full of conspiracy and heroes translate the struggle into black-and-white motives. The Good and Evil are easily recognizable:

The most impressive part was the one about saboteurs in the times right after September the 9th. There were some belongings to the semi-hero borderman... Vaklinov was his name. I remember his gun. Though I myself don't like much guns. There were bordermen uniforms... sabotage, the word alone, sounded attractive back then.²³

¹⁹ N. STOYANOVA, curator at Regional History Museum, Rousse, interviewed in Rousse, 13.02.2009.

²⁰ KONSTANTIN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

²¹ R. HADJIEVA, curator, Regional History Museum, Bourgas, interviewed in Bourgas, 10.02.2009.

²² Cited according to the Ivan Elenkov's unpublished autobiographical notes. ELENKOV, *op. cit.*

²³ ROSEN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

It is not only men, but women also mention guns in their personal memories²⁴. The reasons are primarily psychological, but it is also the period that shapes people's preferences and inclinations. The moral values seem totally upside down. The gun is a positive object and the border crossing – definitely a negative story. The transformation of moral categories points out problems which people could not have suitably articulated in public back then. The museum served as provocation, but definitely not as a forum for exchanging ideas and comments.

The concept framework of the museum – the Party's history, was pointed out by the interviewees as a sufficient reason to push memories towards forgetting. Considered unimportant and unpleasant, at least they were not to be articulated publicly. The initial introduction of the questionnaire was usually followed by an impulse of surprise and the words: "I don't remember anything". In a while with the help of questions the situation around the museum visit was recalled and memories shared aloud.

Besides the description of the presentation, details of the visit as well as feelings overwhelm the interviewees. The NMWR is assumed to be a place where "*official state ceremonies were carried out. Probably not exactly related to the Party, but it looked ideologically bound*".²⁵ The same interviewee compares his favourite place, the National military history museum, to the NMWR:

The military history museum also functions as a museum of revolutionary movement and as such, it was even more frequently visited than the NWRM. The latter was used for ideological purposes. While the military history museum was... something else. My grandpa and me used to go there together as well as to the zoo at the centre of Sofia...²⁶

The contrast between the two museums depends on the opposition between communist and nationalist ideologies. While the military history exhibition appears positively shaped in the interviewee's mind, the communist revolution exhibition has negative connotation because of the stress that children experienced there. Inside the NMWR the schoolchildren passed rituals for political initiation. The ceremonies were usually accompanied by exams for checking the political knowledge.

The other reason why the communist revolution exhibitions are felt as negative spaces comes from the strict rules for the museum visit. The children didn't have fun at all at the museum and if they tried to make jokes, they got punished by their group leaders. The only positive feelings worth remembering are the fantasies that guns and other objects behind the glass provoked in a child's head.

²⁴ ANNI, (age 35–55), Sofia, translator, interviewed in Leiden, 12.04.2009; MARIA, (age 56–65), Bourgas, administration, interviewed in Bourgas, 08.02.2009.

²⁵ ROSEN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

Of course we were influenced. We watched films where the gendarmerists chased up... We played 'Policemen and Partisans'. We watched the films about the World War II at the cinema and they were predominantly Soviet.²⁷

The fragment offers a link between all different amusements a child could get, and the museum is placed among them. The moving images at the cinema slowly but surely replaced the museum visual narratives.

Not a single interviewee offered any memory about the *socialist construction* exhibits. Although the young people could voluntarily enter the museum, they do not at all feel attracted by the economic power of the regime. While the *revolution* exhibition offered war stories evoking child's fantasies, the other part – *socialist construction*, offered a mirror image of the present-day outside world. It did not have intriguing narrative, showed few objects in glass cases and a monotonous guided tour explaining the Party's progress, the history of local administration, industry and agriculture.

The lack of interest of the local people towards the *Museum of socialist construction* in Dimitrovgrad nowadays is demonstrated not only by the deserted exhibition halls but also by the interviewees sitting in the garden in front of it. The only cultural institution in town that they mentioned was the one dedicated to Penyo Penev, the local poet. It is probably a source of local pride, and a proof that the museum is usually perceived as cultural institution, not as historical monument. The museum of constructing socialism has no prestige in the last twenty years after the fall of the regime. The last decade Dimitrovgrad's citizens voted against the socialists in elections in contrast to the interviewees' narratives who demonstrate their pride of the birth of Dimitrovgrad. The town was founded and built by the labour brigades in the years immediately after 1944. It was named after the Party's leader Dimitrov. As the locals demonstrate knowledge about Dimitrovgrad's history, the museum remains a not very attractive place for them. Besides, the museum staff do not describe the local citizens as museum's target audience. The curators also point out the lack of interest about museum activities. Their efforts are directed towards the tourists.

But what makes this case most interesting is the fact that it is one of the last museums in Bulgaria that preserved the communist history exhibitions. Dimitrovgrad's museum still has those problems that *socialist construction* departments used to have before 1989. The culture around the museum is still the same as the one on show in its glass cases. The town changed as slowly as possible keeping some nostalgic notion of the past in its architecture. The same nostalgia could be felt in its citizens' stories. The *socialist construction* exhibits used to function as "wall newspaper" advertising the present-day progress. They are useless after the manifestation of the electronic media. The

²⁷ KONSTANTIN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

negative connotation added to the recent past accomplishes the people's perception of the museum institution as unattractive space.

The case of Dimitrovgrad's museum seems peculiar because it used to be a kind of alternative version of the NMWR in Sofia. Although it was managed by insufficient number of curators, its halls used to be filled up by groups of tourists. At some point in the 1980s it was assigned a national status, being renamed *Museum of the labour brigades movement* in Bulgaria. In contemporary Bulgaria, where the NMWR has already been wiped out of the city landscape together with its building, the museum in Dimitrovgrad is working full time even without any refurbishing. It is the perfect example what could have happened to the official museums if they were left with no transformation. When the research was carried out, the museum had no visitors for almost three days. At the same time the garden in front was full of people sitting and chatting. Some four out of a dozen of them (aged above 35) didn't even know the fact that the museum is located in the building behind them. The idea that such a museum could be significant nowadays was not foreign to them, but they didn't show any need of the museum activities and didn't imagine their potential assistance in conceptualizing a new museum presentation about the recent past. I argue that the indifference is rooted in negative personal experiences in such museums.

The most typical feature of both researched museums is the visit being either an organized event and/ or group experience. In some cases the route to the museum is more clearly recalled than the walk inside the exhibition halls.

My memories about the courtyard date from my "pioneer" years. We got off a trolleybus, walked together with several classes and then we had to wait in this courtyard. That was the time I was impressed, that this was a pleasant place.²⁸

No matter that the visit was part of a tourist route or of a political event, the group walks to the museum functioned as team building. They didn't help the visitor become more demanding or enlightened than before. The visit did not teach loyalty to the museum. On the opposite, the crush in visitors' numbers was one of the worst effects of the museum development during the totalitarian period.

Intellectuals who returned to these museums several times in a lifetime perceive the visit and museum message as a form of brainwashing. The majority of the interviewees tried to keep themselves out of the exhibition halls. The local citizens stayed away from the local museum. It seems that the museum could not manage to complete the communication ring or even fully involve the visitor in its activities. On the other hand, the visitor to the totalitarian museum remained indifferent and was stuck at the lowest stage of the museum communities' hierarchy.

²⁸ ROSEN, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.

CONCLUSION: SPECIFICS OF THE RECENT PAST HERITAGE IN MUSEUMS

The analysis of the attitude towards pre-1989 museum presentations of communism revealed a variety of problems related to the fate of the museum narrative about communism after the democratic change. The text briefly touches on the question of the post-1989 situation concerning curators' professional skills developed during the communist period. On the other hand, how can curators today define the museum's target audiences in terms of their interest towards the recent communist past? The further uses of the current research practically relate to the communist heritage in museum practice.

The democratic change in Bulgaria resulted in total silence in terms of representations of the recent past in museums. The museums or museum departments dedicated to "*capitalism and workers' revolutionary movement*" and "*constructing socialism*" were closed down officially by local authorities. It conformed perfectly to the general attitude of neglecting the heritage of the recent past. The governments even tried to avoid applying restrictions concerning the participation of communist secret police agents in contemporary state institutions and decision-making processes. As a similar reaction the regional and towns' museums stopped making any presentations about the communist past. The materials from the period were hidden back in repositories for as long as twenty years. They are still not referred to as *heritage*.

The disappearing of the museum presentations about communism is clearly a result of the political transformation and turn towards democracy. The local administration solely or together with museum experts decided to clear out the propaganda exhibitions²⁹. The one party rule was over, so was its presence in the glass cases. The curators explain the 1990s' museum reform as related to the political turn to pluralism. The ex-communist presentations were clearly manipulating in favour of the one political party. Nowadays, the pre-1989 exhibitions are assumed improper for a democratic institution. Simultaneously lots of museums throughout the country suffered personnel reforms:

This was a decision of the local government. 1990 or 1991 was that. M. M., the cultural administrator of the City hall called at my office and said: "Mr. Jankov, a reform needs to be initiated at the museum, we have to reduce the human resource numbers from 39 to 19. Not of financial motives, but because of the [political] change. The departments titled Workers' Revolutionary Movement and Socialist Construction have to be closed" ... And so we started an organized cleaning – to delete texts and everything from the exhibition halls, we emptied the glass cases from material.³⁰

²⁹ It is difficult to say who exactly made the decision – local administrators or the curators, or both together. The answer depends on the interviewee's professional affiliation at the time. Both alternatives exist in the recorded narratives.

³⁰ P. JANKOV, ex-director, Regional History Museum, Bourgas, (Retired), Interviewed in Bourgas, 09.02.2009.

The criteria for the selection of personnel could not be found in documents or heard in curators' interviews. The motives for relieving some of the curators ranged from political affiliation to professional capabilities. The structural reform merged both departments into one under the name "Modern and contemporary history". These were the tactics for saving the materials and not excluding them from the museum collections. Anyway, we could still ask the question: Is the content still suitable for re-socialization?

The answer depends on both curators' and visitors' attitudes and expectations in terms of political change. During the 1980s no interviewee said to have expected the fall of the regime. Later, in the early 1990s the change turned, according to the interviews, into the wrong direction. In these terms, any possible presentation of the recent communist history could go wrong if not in compliance with state cultural policies.

The NMWR was closed and its materials moved to the National History Museum in Sofia. Currently, the narrative at the National history museum's exhibition stops in 1948, four years after the beginning of the communist rule when Bulgaria was declared a republic. Moreover, the building of the NMWR was left to ruins. Some years ago it was demolished and replaced by a new glass business centre building.

The idea to wait for the social consensus to happen independently could be heard from almost every curator interviewed during the research. Some temporary exhibitions in art galleries emerged but such activities happened away from the state sponsored museums. Temporary events do not do much to help solve the problem of the lack of museum presentations about the recent past. The lack of will among curators to interpret the communist past indirectly shapes the potential visitors' attitude towards the historical period.

Compared to other ex-communist states like the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, the situation in Bulgaria seems different. In those cases there are permanent exhibitions built or memorial complexes designed³¹ and started a lively debate on the communist period. Moreover, they refer to the materials and stories as heritage. The museum interpretations outside Bulgaria may have provoked some angry comments from both sides of the political spectrum but they do not choose to stay silent. Totalitarian history affects every segment of the society. So is the interpretation of its heritage.

LIST OF CURATOR AND CULTURAL ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEWEES

1. V. Vulkova, ex-curator at NMWR, museum curator at the National History Museum, interviewed in Sofia, 20.02.2009.

2. E. Sirakova, curator, National History Museum, Sofia, interviewed in Sofia, 9.07.2008.

³¹ VUKOV, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

3. R. Russev, ex-curator at NMWR, ex-director at Directorate of Museums and Galleries at the Ministry of Culture, Sofia, interviewed in Sofia, 6.03.2009.
4. D. Pironkov, ex-administrator at Directorate of Museums and Galleries at the Ministry of Culture, retired, Sofia, interviewed in Sofia, 5.03.2009.
5. N. Stoyanova, curator at Regional History Museum, Rousse, interviewed in Rousse, 13.02.2009.
6. S. Yordanov, ex-director, currently curator at Regional History Museum, Rousse, interviewed in Rousse, 13.02.2009.
7. D. Manolov, ex-curator at Museum of the Interior Ministry, currently curator at Regional History Museum, Pernik, interviewed in Pernik, 18.02.2009.
8. M. Cheshmedgieva, ex-curator Museum at the Glass Factory “Kristal”, Pernik, interviewed in Pernik, 18.02.2009.
9. C. Manova, curator, Regional History Museum, Pernik, interviewed in Pernik, 19.02.2009.
10. V. Georgieva, ex-curator at History Museum Dimitrovgrad, retired, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 23.02.2009.
11. N. Todorova, curator History Museum, Dimitrovgrad, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 23.02.2009.
12. R. Hadgieva, curator, Regional History Museum, Bourgas, interviewed in Bourgas, 10.02.2009.
13. P. Jankov, ex-director, Regional History Museum, Bourgas. Retired, interviewed in Bourgas, 09.02.2009.
14. M. Belcheva, museum Kableshkovo, ex-antifascist fighter, retired, Bourgas, interviewed in Bourgas, 10.02.2009.

LIST OF VISITOR INTERVIEWEES

15. Rosen, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.
16. Konstantin, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Sofia, 06.03.2009.
17. Jordan, (age 35–55), Sofia, lawyer, social sciences, Leiden, interviewed in Leiden, 12.04.2009.
18. Anni, (age 35–55), Sofia, translator, interviewed in Leiden, 12.04.2009.
19. Todor, (age 35–55), Sofia, PhD., engineer, interviewed in Leiden, 12.04.2009.
20. Nonka, (age 56–65), Sofia, museum guard, interviewed in Sofia, 07.03.2009.
21. Irina, (age 56–65), Sofia, museum guard, interviewed in Sofia, 07.03.2009.
22. Elena, (age 56–65), Sofia, museum guard, interviewed in Sofia, 07.03.2009.
23. Nikolai, (age 35–55), Rousse, PhD., humanities and linguistics, interviewed in Rousse, 14.02.2009.

24. Maria, (age 56–65), Bourgas, administration, interviewed in Bourgas, 08.02.2009.

25. Petko, (age 56–65), Bourgas, administration, interviewed in Bourgas, 08.02.2009.

26. Ruska, (age 65+), Bourgas, retired, lawyer, interviewed in Bourgas, 08.02.2009.

27. Tania, (age 35–55), Bourgas, service sphere, interviewed in Bourgas, 09.02.2009.

28. Vera, (age 65+), Bourgas, retired, local political organisations, interviewed in Bourgas, 07.02.2009.

29. Ivan, (age 65+), Dimitrovgrad, retired, industrial worker, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 24.02.2009.

30. Evstati, (age 65+), Dimitrovgrad, retired, industrial worker, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 24.02.2009.

31. Peter, (age 65+), Dimitrovgrad, retired, industrial worker, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 24.02.2009.

32. Neviana, (age 56–65), Dimitrovgrad, civil services sphere, interviewed in Dimitrovgrad, 24.02.2009.

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