

## **Propaganda in the Museum: Past and Present Representations of Communism In Eastern Europe**

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In its lifespan, the national museum as institution has been constantly moving forward in close relation to society, academic disciplines and government politics. The Museum served loyally to nationalism but the totalitarian state transformed it into propaganda tool because the official state ideology needed to be materially proved and visually presented in historical continuity. In this paper I will discuss some possible interpretations of communist ideology in museum environment before and after the fall of the Berlin wall in regard to the social and political context. Subject of research is the construction of the message, its structure, contents and characters.

The text as part of a future research project aims to trace the forms and mechanisms of building the museum representations of communist ideology, the relations between decision-making and concept realization. The research is based on two case studies – the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution in Sofia and the Museum of Communism in Prague. They are subject to comparative study, regarding the content, context and authorship of their public presentations.

The study of the narrative structures of both museum exhibitions registers similarities and identifies a possible pattern for their construction. The potential factors influencing the presentation concept and planning could be traced first in curators' background and political standpoints, in the thematic focus of the museum, in the institutional funding resource and in the social and political climate of the region.

## Introduction

In its history, the National museum has undergone numerable reformations and deformations. Although it has been strongly bound to the development of society and science and humanities, its close relationship with governmental institutions was hardly overcome. The Museum served loyally to nationalism but the totalitarian state needed it as additional space for 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 de-formed into propaganda machines is the communist 'museum of working class revolution'. Its mission was complemented by the one of the 'museum of building socialism'. Both variations of communist museums were designed to support the official ideology as distributors of totalitarian power and control. They were born with the regime and lived out some years after its end when they were sentenced to death or closed behind the repositories' walls.

Some years ago, when the fall of the Berlin wall seemed far away enough, several newly designed museums took up to show and explain the communist period and lifestyle. They are not *of* the communist ideology but *about* it. Regarding the present status of the communist regime, these museums stand up to unmask it. They pretend to show the "true" face of the regime. Fortunately, their point of view is already free to be presented in public. The museums *about communism* took the place of the others, those *of communism* that had already passed away. The question here is not if these two forms of museological interpretation of communism could coexist now when the social and political context is open enough to bare any opinion. In the following text I would try to find out the possible interpretations of communist ideology in museum environment in regard to the social and political context. Subject of research is the construction of the message, its contents and characters as well as its authors.

This paper as part of a future research project aims to trace the forms and mechanisms of building the museum representations of communist ideology, the relations between decision-making and concept realization. The paper is based on two case studies. The Bulgarian ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution is selected as representative for the official museological point of view during the communist regime. The other – the Museum of Communism in Prague stays for one of the alternatives of communist representations in contemporary museum environment in the East European countries. Both of the cases are subject to comparative study, regarding the content, context and authorship of their public presentations. Their status as interpreting a particular *national* version of the communist regimes in separate historical time-cuts, their recognized central position in the discourse about communism makes them comparable for the purpose of this research. The Museum of Communism in Prague does not hold a "national" status and exists on completely private sponsorship. It is the only museological attempt thoroughly devoted to review the recent history of the country. Likewise, the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution in Sofia was the only possible, officially recognized museological presentation of the recent Bulgarian past and contemporaneity before 1989.

## Historical Notes

Some years after joining the communist Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria initiated its own National Museum of Working Class Revolution in 1948. Its first permanent exhibition was opened two years later. Being the most important museum in the country, it was privileged to have enough money, space and human resources for collection management, exhibition or whatever museum activity. The central management of the Communist Party facilitated and controlled all its initiatives especially assembling the presentations. Its position was secure till the heavy economic, social and political crisis of the 1980s. By the end of the decade came its

decline and in the early 1990 it was already politically inconvenient. As such, the museum's fate was subject to uneasy discussions organized by the Ministry of Culture that ended with renaming the institution into "National Museum of Political Parties and Movements". It was finally closed down three years later, in 1993, its collections being distributed between the Central State Archive and the National History Museum. Currently, the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution has no participation in any museum exhibition. It exists only in the repositories out of public view. The Museum of Working Class Revolution's official interpretation of the recent past was abandoned as manipulating.

Some years later the political context in Central and Eastern Europe began to induce again museum presentations on the communist past. Opened at the end of 2001, the Museum of Communism in Prague is a private initiative of an American businessman living in the Czech Republic. It was designed to fill a huge gap in the social needs for such information and interpretation the official museum institutions did not offer. The Museum of Communism was viewed as good tourist attraction supplying the foreign tourists with inaccessible before ideological "goods"<sup>1</sup>. The museum is available online as well<sup>2</sup>.

## Narrative Structures

The Museum of Communism's exhibition in Prague is purposefully divided in three sections outlining the interpretation. "The film-maker and exhibition curator, Jan Kaplan, who escaped his homeland and fled to London during the Prague Spring of 1968, describes the museum as "a tragedy in three acts"<sup>3</sup>. It starts with the *Dream*, then goes through socialist *Reality* and ends up with the *Nightmare*. At first one could imagine that the narrative slightly moves downward with the highest point at the beginning and the lowest – at the end. But it is in fact a curve that finishes again high up, like with the *Dream* at the beginning. The visitor leaves with the impression of a tale with happy end. The (first) *Dream* is supposed to be the official deceit composed by the Communists and spread westward by Soviet "agents". The formation of the local Communist Party and the first years of its rule are exhibited on flat display on the walls telling the story in text and photographs. This is the introduction to the *Dream*.

The *Dream* is shown as unlimited opportunities verbalized in slogans or posters. There stay the rockets and the astronaut gear symbolizing the Czech participation in common communist attempts to reach the Space and go beyond the boundaries of the past. There one finds the smith shop as a symbol of "forging" the communist future. Next, the school room is surely the place where the dreams were learned by heart and deeply rooted in children's minds.

The *Reality* is exhibited by a common guestroom, the sports, the empty local NARMAG shop shelves and counter, where the goods stay hidden behind and distributed selectively through the informal social networks. There are the two valid state currencies, the "socialist realism" in art and the propaganda materials, as well as the state boundaries' defence.

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1 "Nobody had talked about doing a museum of communism and nobody had done it. The idea came to us one evening and it was like "Eureka!" - it hasn't been done, let's do it. And it became an obsession and a passion and I had to do it." This is a citation of the owner's words on a radio Praha reportage from 27 December 2001. (<http://www.radio.cz/en/article/12239>, 10.01.2008)

2 Museum of Communism, <http://www.muzeumkomunismu.cz/>, 10.01.2008. I visited the exhibition in Prague on June 21st, 2007.

3 Kate Connolly, "Red revival", Guardian Unlimited, March 6, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4369153,00.html>, 10.01.2008.

Figure 1. The Dream (Museum of Communism, Prague, 15 June 2007).



Figure 2. The Reality (Museum of Communism, Prague, 15 June 2007).



The most impressive part of the exhibition is expected to be the restoration of an interrogation room with its constantly ringing black phone and single chair for the arrested. The *Nightmare* starts somewhere around the hard-to-cross state borders and the censored art and culminates in the real skirmish between ordinary people and the repressors from the ruling party in the famous Prague Spring'68. The fight continues while the macro-social situation facilitates the dissidents' activities inside. In the final 1989 clashes "Good" defeats "Evil". The democrats seize the power from the communists.

**Figure 3.** The Nightmare (Museum of Communism, Prague, 15 June 2007).



The description of the exhibition narrative enlightens a kind of fairy tale model, as the one described by Vladimir Propp (1995). Here it is quite simplified – having three distinct phases, hardships and heroes. If we look at the exhibition plot of the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution in Bulgaria, we could clearly outline the same features: different levels of hardships, heroes, dreams and happy end.

The exhibition of the Museum of Working Class Revolution started with the same introduction: the assembling of the party in Bulgaria, the help from the Soviet Union, appointment of the main characters in the story. In other words, it described the birth and the content of the ideology in texts and human faces, giving the *Dream* that was going to be followed to its realization. Second, the *Reality* was presented in the attempts of the appointed heroes to get into power and rule the country. Following the revolutionary ideas of Lenin, they got into real fighting with the official authorities, naming it “fight against fascism in Bulgaria”. Perhaps this part was intended to impress like a real *Nightmare*. It was long enough and covered most of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The culminations here were two – a September 1923 uprising and the so called “communist revolution” from September the 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the start of the communist regime in Bulgaria with the help of the Soviet army occupation. Like the contemporary Museum of Communism in Prague, the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution in Sofia completed its story with a happy-end. But unlike it, the Bulgarian exhibition continued to show the dimensions of the communist dream to come true. The Museum in Prague leaves the story open, but the ex-Museum in Sofia continued its narration about the present. The last part of the story was important for the official state propaganda although there were separate museums specializing in the so called “building communism”. Incidentally or not, the last-phase *Dream* (dated after the communist defeat from 1944) in the Bulgarian exhibition included the participation in Soviet Space programs, showing the same kind of exhibits.

With the Czech exhibition pattern in mind at first I was surprised how similar it is to the plot of the Bulgarian one. No matter the latter was older and no longer valid interpretation of the communist past, it was either constructed as a fairy tale. The questions here to be asked are: Why the contemporary authors of the Museum of Communism exhibition chose the same format for their story? Could it be just a mere coincidence or what factors could influence the narrative construction? These problems are open for further research.

But as the Bulgarian exhibition of Revolution had no fixed names of the narrative phases, it could also be viewed in a reverse order. The hardship of the early communists in Bulgaria could be labelled *Nightmare*, which is linked to the introduction and represents the central problem of the exhibition (the revolutionary movement). After the 1944 defeat of the Bulgarian Communist Party the exhibition used to tell about its present-day reformations or the *Reality* in Bulgaria back then. After that the communist *Dream* for a brighter future remained not exhibited but expected and felt as a conclusion of the story. Such a reverse order corresponds in a different way with the interpretation of the Museum of Communism in Prague. Being a typical totalitarian museum, the Museum of Working Class Revolution in Bulgaria used to offer the communist, biased reading of the past before the communist regime. The Museum of Communism in Prague aims at exposing the communist regime from the democratic point of view. It is a kind of continuation of the story, explaining the next period that the Bulgarian narrative leaves with no comment.

Both museums’ exhibition stories seek and extract arguments for its recent history interpretation in the so called nightmares of the past. They provide the valid state authorities with power derived from the past hardships. These are argumentation constructions for revenge upon the past. But first we need to identify the plot authors and the story characters to make any further conclusions.

## Exhibition Authors and Plot Characters

All we know for sure about the curators working for the Museum of Working Class Revolution in Bulgaria is their devotion to the Party. The selection criterion for curators used to be clearly set on political loyalty. They worked following the instructions issued by the Central committee of the Party, using the valid political methods and the Party's financial support to accomplish the Museum mission. The characters of the story compiled by the curators were also Party members or even Party leaders. Identification between the narrative's heroes and the authors is supposed and required by the Party control. The story of the Museum of Working Class Revolution was highly personalized using individual success to measure political success. The other use of the personalization of the story was to construct models to be followed by the individual visitor thus enabling the psychological success of the propaganda.

The Museum of Communism works in a slightly different way. As a private initiative rising in a democratic country some ten years after the fall of the regime it could be considered a totally free institution to express its political position. It surely does so, but the interpretation points to some essential features of its authors. They are said to be famous Czech historians, museum workers and a documentary maker, Jan Kaplan, who has contributed not only to the collecting and exhibiting of the materials but by giving his own point of view in a film. The curators as locals are supposed to have some previous experience in Czech museums. One could assume they have even visited the local equivalent of the researched Bulgarian Museum of Working Class Revolution. The biographical approach could well contribute to the analysis but these facts are quite obscure and are subject to future research.

An essential guideline for the curators' political inclinations is the documentary that could be watched any time during the exhibition's open hours. It represent roughly and literally the fight between the official authorities and the common Czechs, featuring the communist secret agents. The film aims at distinguishing the characters in the fight by even circulating in red figures and blaming the agents guilty for the skirmishes. The museum visitor could assume that the authors prove themselves and the common people not guilty and identify themselves with the "Good" side of the story. It is possibly the real story of the communist regime but the exhibition narrative gets somehow confused between the official regime's participation in the story and the one of the 'common people' (if we pretend there is such a category). The visitor would then ask – whose story is the dissidents' movement and are they "good" or "bad"? The so called 'common people' stay aside the history scene and do not participate in the action. They are presented as victims. The victimized heroes of the Museum of Communism in Prague very much resemble the passive characters in the other story, this of the Museum of Working Class Revolution in Bulgaria. The 'common people' there were set as inheritors and consumers of the bright communist future; they were not the heroes of the museum's story plot. So are its authors. Both the Czech and the Bulgarian curators pretend to stay aside and be objective but are biased in regard to their own contemporaneity. And their subjective point of view influences the interpretation.

## Propaganda in or of the Museum

The structure and the mechanisms of constructing the museological interpretation of communism were set as central problems of this paper. By definition the Museum of Working Class Revolution in Sofia was supposed to support and validate the Communist Party pretences for historical continuity and stable power. It used to be called by its authors "the most important propaganda institute" in the country.

**Figure 4.** “Propaganda” out of the Museum of Communism, Prague (15 June 2007)



Propaganda is defined (Nelson 1996; Jowett and O'Donnell 2006) as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through controlled transmission of messages.

Now having in mind the comparison exercise above and the definition of propaganda, could the Museum of Communism in Prague function as ideological propaganda machine in the contemporary social and political context? Is it just an expression of the present-day freedom of mind? Or, are the techniques for constructing the narrative enough evidence to define the interpretation as propaganda? The press materials uploaded on the website of the Museum support such categorization of the museum as they complement the Museum mission, stated on the main page<sup>4</sup>. Again likewise the situation with the Museum of Working Class Revolution, the opening of the Prague's Museum was said "to highlight the divisions in

4 Museum of Communism, <http://www.muzeumkomunismu.cz/>, 10.01.2008, see "About the Museum".

a society which is still struggling to come to terms with its past”<sup>5</sup>. At that time, 2001-2002, the Communist party was the third strongest bloc in the Czech parliament, and according to a survey 50% of Czechs hanker for the past. In the described social context, what is the museum reaction to their voices?

The situation in communist Bulgaria before 1989 was totally different while the Museum of Working Class Revolution was among the most important political institutions. Described by restricting human rights and censorship, the political context could not allow the coexistence of alternative points of view. On the opposite, today the museums in Central and Eastern Europe are assumed as free expressions of social opinion with zero political pressure imposed. I would argue the history museums still not act as such and hardly offer presentations not complied with the official or the modern political situation.

## Target Groups

The main target audience of the ex-National Museum of Working Class Revolution stated in its Guidebook was the young people. There were some older groups as well – the working class, the factory brigades, the political organizations summarized by ‘the people’ as a whole. One could easily define the groups as loyal to and dependent on the official political ideology that only need to reinforce their perceptions. The term ‘propaganda’ in the ex-communist countries today also refers to false information meant to reinforce the mindsets of people who already believe as the propagandist wishes.

The Museum of Communism addresses the young, representing the newborn generation after the fall of the regime, as well as the foreign tourists coming to Prague as having liberal values. The latter are said to be regularly seen in the exhibition rooms. Choosing an easy-to-convince audience allows the museums to be satisfied with the results (in visitors’ numbers).

Probably the necessity of interpretations of the recent past in Eastern Europe is underestimated by the locals. Their attitude towards the communist regime is closer to neglecting it than to evaluating it through ideological and material representations. The political fashion points out as right the denying approach to the communist past. The social environment still lacks alternative interpretations not because there is no need for them, but because museums are not used to stating a different opinion. They prefer to stay silent.

## Conclusion: Perspectives

The narrative strategies in both case studies help us identify the gaps and problems of the few contemporary museum representations of communism. There are lots of other alternatives available that supplement the museum “puzzle” in Eastern Europe. Only some of them are the collections of the ex-Party Museums that are deposited in other museums’ repositories. In the case of the Bulgarian one the collections are still existent but abandoned from public view. A curator of the National History Museum, responsible for them, said: “I do not see a possible future way of exhibiting them”<sup>6</sup>. She explained it with the policy of the museum to end its permanent exhibition with the rise of the Bulgarian Republic in 1948<sup>7</sup>. In her words, paraphrasing a well-known Bulgarian historian, Nikolay Genchev, “an event does not become a historical one until there are still eyewitnesses alive. The maximum validation period is set at around 100 years”. It is supposed to guarantee an objective exhibiting of the event.

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5 Kate Connolly, “Red revival”, *Guardian Unlimited*, March 6, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4369153,00.html> , 10.01.2008.

6 E. S., currently curator at the Collections Department of the National History Museum, Sofia. Interview taken by R. Sharenkova, 12 December 2007, Sofia.

7 The last part of the permanent exhibition is labelled “The Third Bulgarian Kingdom” and chronologically dates from 1879 till 1948.

Strangely enough, the same National History Museum in Sofia exhibits some contemporary items dated in the late 1990s and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>8</sup>.

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant hosts the ex-collections of the History Museum of the Communist Party and the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement because it inherited the building. Some of the exhibits are arranged in the basement presenting the collectivisation and nationalisation of the land properties. The collection is also declared by curators almost useless.

The Museum for German history offered a year ago its visitors an interpretation<sup>9</sup> on the communist regime in GDR. It has an alternative in the existing in Berlin Museum of GDR. The Museum of German History chose to exhibit the political development in the country as opposing to the popular culture story in the DDR Museum. Struggling for almost the same target groups, they staked on somewhat polarized approaches. The need for interpretations of the recent past in Eastern Europe is still in high demand which could serve as a strong motivation for museum change.

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8 Such are the wedding dress of the daughter of the Bulgarian ex-King and at that time Prime minister, the pen used by the Prime minister to sign the documents for the Bulgarian joining the NATO, etc.

9 By the time of the conference, the museum has already arranged a permanent display about the communist period.

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