



National Museums in Bulgaria: A Story of Identity Politics and Uses of the Past

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Summary

The history of Bulgarian national museums exposes several major realms of the past that received abundant representations and that have been used as sources of identity politics since the end of the nineteenth century. The interest in the archaeological heritage found in Bulgarian territory, the reassertion of medieval state glory through remnants of the Middle Ages, the glorification surrounding the national liberation struggle of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the pride with the rich ethnographic and folklore heritage – were those cornerstones through which the nation portrayed itself as having got deep roots in the past and as bearing a ‘unique’ cultural specificity. The purpose of the current report is to trace – through the functionalization of these main historical realms – the construction and representation of national identity in Bulgarian museums from the late nineteenth century through the post-communist period. Based on analysis of the development of three national museums in the Capital (those of history, ethnography, and archaeology) and two museums dedicated to national heroes (in Karlovo and Kozloduy), the report will outline the major points in national identity politics in Bulgaria, its carrying out through museum institutions and its reflection in various museum units across the country. By paying attention to the establishment of museum institutions, the institutional changes, and the main overtones in historical representations during and after the communist period, the report will shed light on the uses of the past in Bulgarian museums and on the general tendencies guiding its representation in the course of a century and a half.

Summary table, Bulgaria

| Name | Inaugurated | Initiated | Actor | Ownership | Type | Values | Temporal reach | Style Location |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|-----------|--|---|---|---|
| National Archaeological Museum | 1905 (as People's Museum) 1906 (established as Archaeological Museum) | 1869 1892-3 (established as People's Museum) | Bulgarian Learned Society, Ministry of Culture and Education, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences | State | National History, Archaeology, Traditional Culture and Art | Territorial representation and universal values | Bulgarian and Balkan History, Pre-History, Antiquity to the Middle Ages | Ottoman religious architecture, former mosque (15 th c.), in the city center, Sofia. |
| National Ethnographic Museum | 1905 (as People's Museum) 1906 (established as Ethnographic Museum) | 1869 1892-3 (established as People's Museum) | Bulgarian Learned Society, Ministry of Culture and Education, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences | State | Traditional Culture and Folk Art | Territorial representation and universal values | Bulgarian and Balkan Territories, Bulgarian population, the early modern period to the contemporary period | Viennese baroque style, originally Ottoman building turned into a royal palace (1879-1940s), in the city center, Sofia. |
| National History Museum | 1984 | 1973 | Ministry of Culture, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences | State | National History, Archaeology, Traditional Culture and Art | Territorial representation and universal values | Bulgarian History, Balkan History, European history, Pre-History to Modern History (including Ottoman rule) | Socialist Architecture (1970s) outside Sofia at the Vitosha mountain. |

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|--|------|--|--|-------|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Vassil Levski</i> National Museum in Karlovo | 1937 | 1933 | Karlovo Municipality, National History Museum in Sofia | State | History related to the national hero Vassil Levski, Family history, Archival documents, Works of art | Territorial representation and universal values | Bulgarian History, History of the Karlovo area (mid-19 th c.) | 19 th c. architecture, at the city centre, Karlovo. |
| Radetzky Steamboat National Museum in Kozloduy | 1982 | 1878 1960s (recon- struction) | Kozloduy Municipality, National History Museum in Sofia | State | History related to the national hero Hristo Botev, Regional History, Archival documents, Monuments | Territorial representation and universal values | Bulgarian History, history of Kozloduy area, late 19 th c. | 19 th c. steamboat, located by the Danube River, Kozloduy. |

Introduction

The national liberation and emergence of the new Bulgarian nation state in 1878, after five centuries of Ottoman rule, gave an impetus to a range of initiatives related to the preservation of the national past and its consolidation around core notions of national identity, historical heritage, and cultural belonging. With the systematic attempts to cast off and overcome the Ottoman legacy, to construe modern national profile and to root the latter in traces referring to ancient, medieval, ethnographic and national revival periods, national museums in Bulgaria provide good grounds for comparison with other museums across the European continent. Furthermore, developments of museum institutions in the twentieth century offer fruitful opportunities to position Bulgarian museums within a wider European context, especially in light of professionalization in the discipline of the interwar period, the shaping of national identities along communist lines after 1944, and the reorientation of museum policies after 1989. The task of the country report on Bulgaria is to elicit the main guidelines of Bulgarian national museums for producing national identities and for involving the past into political, historical and cultural discourses about national specificity and authenticity.

Starting to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the first museum collections in Bulgaria were based in the activities that the so called *chitalishta* (cultural centers, cultural houses) performed in different parts of the country throughout several decades before the national liberation. Although in principle, they did not have a specialized museum focus (but rather educational and general cultural one), many of them preserved material and documentary traces that would later form the basis of museum units. After 1878, the role of *chitalishta* was further enhanced and – together with continuing their significance in maintaining local and regional cultural activities, they laid the basis of a network that would soon gain nationwide dimensions. The synthetic character of these institutions (which served simultaneously as libraries, galleries, museums, and cultural clubs) has largely determined the overall profile of museum institutions in Bulgaria until today. Whereas the origins of cultural practices related to the preservation of national and regional history can indisputably be linked to such cultural institutions of the late national revival (i.e. between the 1830s and 1870s), the roots of museum collections in Bulgaria date back to the roles of archaeological and learned associations in the late nineteenth century, which were instrumental in initiating museum units in several Bulgarian towns and which maintained museum activity before the emergence of a national museum institution. A crucial role of triggering museum work in Bulgaria was played by the *Naroden muzei* (People's Museum) in Sofia (*see below*), initiated by the Bulgarian Learned Society in 1869 (inaugurated in 1892-1893, and opened to the public in 1905) and developed as an institution that would safeguard the historical and cultural heritage of the Bulgarian nation in all its various realms – archaeology, history, ethnography, art, etc. Aside from its overall importance as a separate institution, *Naroden muzei* was instrumental in giving birth to several specialized museum institutions in Sofia and in other towns of the country, and the guiding role that it had in directing museum work in the course of several decades. It was this institution and its branches that shaped museum policies throughout the entire interwar period and that gave the main overtones in representing national identity prior to the establishment of communist rule.

Following the official inauguration of *Naroden muzei*, the next major dividing line in the development of museum work in Bulgaria was in the years immediately after World War II, when the embracement of the new ideological system under Soviet guidance led to an overall transformation in museum work and exhibition policies in Bulgaria. Whereas many of the existing museums were pronounced as ‘people’s’ (*narodni*) – as an indication of their belonging to the people and the nation, already in 1950s the structure of existing museums was changed in light of major ideological and historiographic postulates, resulting in the formation of two major departments of ‘Modern’ and ‘Most Modern’ (meaning here ‘contemporary’) History in them. Parallel to the creation of specialized museums for the socialist movement, the antifascist struggle, and the socialist construction, the halls about the Most Modern Bulgarian history expanded enormously with a special focus on the partisan resistance, which soon occupied a central place in all national and regional museums of the country. In addition to that, in towns such as Sofia and Varna, museums based on Bulgarian-Russian and Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship were established – with the main purpose being to exhibit traces of historical and cultural collections between Bulgarian and Russian people, and to function as cultural centers for the promotion of Russian and Soviet culture. In many towns of the country, museums units based on the Revolutionary Movement were also established – with the purpose being to focus closely on the socialist movement, the interwar period, and the antifascist struggle. The materials put on display were of a diverse nature (photos, objects, letters, weapons, commemorative data, etc.), but their major purpose was the glorification of the socialist movement and the interpretation of the communist party as the sole motor of antifascist resistance in the country. Whilst shaped as separate units in various museum institutions, these Museums of the Revolutionary Movement had both centralized and national representation as well – by the thus-named museum in Sofia, located in the very center of the Capital, within meters from the National Parliament. Aside from museum representations that were related directly to the history and founding narratives of the ideology in power, the communist period was emblematic also with the use that it made of national history and the new level of representation that it supplied to figures and events far preceding communist rule. Following a decade of relative silence on issues related closely to national history (at the expense of the attention to figures of the socialist movement and the Soviet army), in the early 1960s, the regime gradually demonstrated visible attention to the history of the nineteenth century liberation struggle, frequently depicting it as preceding the socialist movement and the antifascist resistance in the first half of the twentieth century. Together with the enhanced reflection of this historical period in existing or newly-founded museums in the Capital (e.g. the National History Museum – *see below*), separate museum units to Bulgarian patriots and liberation fighters of the nineteenth century were created in the towns of their birth or where they had carried out their revolutionary activity. In the 1970s and 1980s, the sensitivity of the ideology to trace connections to previous historical periods (and thus, to position itself as a special period within a panorama of glorious history) found expression in the expanding of representations to Ancient (mostly Thracian) and Medieval history, and in the affirmation of the nation as an ethnic and cultural unity that encompassed the distant past, the communist present, and the ideologically optimistic future.

The modes of representation established in the period of socialism laid a strong impact on the development of national museums after 1989, particularly in the attempts to overcome some of

the legacy from the communist period. Within years after the political changes, the previous representations on the socialist movement, partisan struggle, and the building of socialism were dropped down from museum displays and, in their place, other parts of museum collections were enhanced. Archaeological and ethnographic heritage gained revived significance and new approaches for its organization and promotion were undertaken. Everyday life in towns of the early twentieth century and folklore traditions of different ethnic and religious communities in Bulgaria started to occupy a regular place in both permanent and temporary museum exhibitions. Although most of the museum institutions remained under state authority, some of them switched their dependence from ministries to municipalities, prompting a general turn in the conceptualization of their status and affiliation to state institutions. Despite episodic attempts for representing the recent past in national and regional museums, the communist period generally remained without an engaged reflection in museum exhibitions after 1989. The previous materials on display were directed mainly to archival collections, rarely appearing in focused expositions. Whereas socialist sites of memory were customarily neglected for involvement in museum networks, initiatives to collect oral histories from the periods of communism until after 1989 resulted mainly in enriching museum's storerooms. In contrast, museum units kept on being actively involved in national celebrations and commemorations, e.g. the national liberation, of the end of World War II, the day of national independence, etc. All these kept on maintaining and reproducing images of the nation, in a way that both resonated about practices in the communist period, and prompted attempts to switch into a different, post-socialist and post-'colonial' mode of representation.

National Archaeological Museum

The idea of creating a Bulgarian national museum dates back to the 1840s and its realization was outlined as one of the main tasks of the Bulgarian Learned Society in 1869. The establishment of the museum institution started immediately after the national liberation of 1878. After the creation of the Narodna biblioteka (People's library) in 1878, a museum collection was set up and it soon developed into a separate department. The expanding of the collection was possible mainly through donations and the activities of schoolteachers in the country, who sent the museum everything that bore value as part of the history of Bulgarian lands. The inauguration of the museum unit as a separate institution (named as *Naroden muzei* – "People's" / "National" Museum) took place in 1892 and was later affirmed by the Decree of King Ferdinand on January 1, 1893. Acquiring the building of the Buyuk mosque for presenting its expositions, the museum organized its collections in three main groups: Ancient Times, Numismatic, and Ethnographic ones. The museum was officially opened for general public in 1905, with the honorable participation of King Ferdinand, ministers, and prominent intellectuals.

The legislative acts issued soon after its creation regulating the collection of antiquities, their sending to the museum and their turning into museum objects played a crucial role in the development of museum work and archaeology as a science, and affirmed the participation of the state in carrying out museum activities. They affirmed also the guiding position of the Ministry of National Education in organizing archaeological excavations and export of antiquities outside the country. Enabling the establishment of the very idea of Bulgarian cultural heritage, the museum continued the Revivalist idea of unification of all lands with a Bulgarian population. The

establishment of the museum was particularly notable in the atmosphere of an overall political and cultural upheaval after the Liberation and the creation of other national institutions for the study of the past and for integrating the Bulgarian people to the cultural traditions of other European nations. Within several years of its creation, the museum was ranked third by its importance in the Balkan Peninsula – after those of Athens and Istanbul. In a way, the museum turned out to be an important institution not only for Bulgarians, but also for the entire Balkan region.

The agenda of gathering all the removable monuments from the territory of the country was carried out with the active collaboration of administrative, military, school and church authorities. Specialized archaeological excavations were undertaken in order to shed light on the history and culture of Bulgaria. The museum was given generous budget subsidies to purchase antiquities and art pieces from individuals and it succeeded to substantially enlarge its funds, particularly those of Numismatics and Ethnography. The latter widened to such an extent that in 1906, together with the archive of the Bulgarian Revival, it was given a separate status and thus laid the beginning of the Ethnographic museum in Sofia (*see below*). With the Law of national education in 1909, the museum was renamed to the National Archaeological Museum, which included departments of Ancient History, the Medieval period, Numismatics, and art. In the 1920s, a separate department of pre-history was formed. The realization of the museum's work was carried out in close collaboration with the Bulgarian archaeological association, which was founded in 1901 and which developed during the 1920s into the Institute of Archaeology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Parallel to the rich material traces from Ancient times, a major realms of collection and investigation since its foundation were the remains dating back to the Middle Ages, as uncovered during excavations in palaces, fortresses, and churches from the First and Second Bulgarian kingdoms. This attention to medieval times helped turning the department into a second major one in the museum during 1920s, as well as contributed to the solving of important issues in history periodization. Despite the difficulties of the interwar period, the donations and purchases of museum objects continued and the museum had a constantly expanding collection in those years. Major attention was paid to museum's educational activities and its opening to the people, to whom it was created to serve and to whom it sought to present, in a visual and legible manner, the cultural layers across different centuries. During the bombing of the capital during World War II, the museum was partly destroyed and part of its documentation and library funds burned down. The building was reconstructed in 1946 and two years later its collections were opened to the public. Substantial restructuring of the museum was undertaken at the time and its Art Department was separated to form the basis of the National Art Gallery. A new institution was formed – the Archaeological Institute with Museum and it was included in the system of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, to be followed in 1952 by a special office at the Committee for Art and Culture (it later evolved into the National Institute of Monuments of Culture), which took the duty of conservation and restoration of the archaeological monuments still uncovered at excavations. Furthermore, the new state policy for establishing a network of local museums in the country (where the main archaeological findings were to be preserved), strongly limited the input to the museum funds of the museum in the capital.

A major step in reshaping the museum after 1944 was adherence to the Soviet model, and to the principles of dialectics and historical materialism, which meant to emphasize the linear and logical historical development of culture and the internal link between phenomena and processes. In terms of exhibition practices, attention was paid to the complex way of exposition and to reconstructions about how each of the museum objects was used and functioned in society. The exhibitions strictly followed the chronological order and the main phases of human society according to Marxist ideology, i.e. the kin community, slavery and the feudal social orders. In the Prehistory Department for example, a hall on the ‘everyday life and culture of the pre-class and early class society in Bulgaria’ presented the material life and culture of wide people masses. In a very didactical manner as well, the exhibition on the Middle Ages (opened in the 1960s) presented the material life and culture of medieval Bulgaria, emphasizing the glory of the Bulgarian nation and turning it into a tool of nationalist propaganda. A new policy was undertaken in the 1970s, which found expression in the dropping of the museum’s permanent exhibition and organization of numerous temporary exhibitions dedicated to the glory of the national past. Key attention was on the abundant Thracian heritage (whose research was at the core of the historiographic paradigm in that period) and the luminous medieval times with powerful Bulgarian kingdoms, which emphasized the prototype they laid for a modern Bulgarian state. It was largely this logic, which determined the creation of a separate National History Museum in 1973 (*see below*), which actually took many of the collections about the history of the Bulgarian state from the Archaeological Museum, leaving the latter exclusively within the specialized realm of archaeological and numismatic heritage, dating mainly from the periods before the creation of the nation state.

Established soon after the national liberation, the present day National Archaeological Museum occupied a very important place in the cultural life of the Bulgarian state. It was a possibility for the newly-founded state to get back its roots, to assert its own cultural identity and to present itself on the international scene. Located in the center of the capital, in close proximity to the largest buildings of political and economic power, its permanent and temporary exhibitions had a representative role for the cultural heritage and national values of Bulgaria. It was a special point of pride for all political regimes, which directly or indirectly influenced some of its expositions or exhibition policies. Giving birth to several of the national museums – those of Ethnography, of National History and of the National Art Gallery, the museum retains until today its authority and profile as a site where some of the most important collections of the cultural heritage of Bulgarian lands have found their accommodation and representation.

National Ethnographic Museum

The National Ethnographic Museum was created as a separate unit in 1906, when the ethnographic collection of the *Naroden muzei* was given autonomous status by the Ministry of Education. Bearing, as its main purpose, the collection and presentation of the ethnographic heritage in Bulgarian lands, it attracted the collaboration of many prominent intellectuals, researchers, and figures in the fields of art and culture. In the 1920s, the museum was among the richest museum institutions in the Balkans. It developed intensive international activity, with travelling exhibitions of Bulgarian traditional costumes, textiles, and crafts to leading European towns in the first part of the twentieth century. In 1949, the museum was linked with the

Institute of Narodouka (Ethnography / Folk Studies), which was established two years earlier and – as an Ethnographic Institute with Museum – functioned already within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In 1954 it was positioned in the former royal palace (together with the National Art Gallery) and had its first big exhibition presented there. The museum collections encompass a wide variety of objects related to home crafts and home interior, agriculture and cattle breeding, carpets, woodcarving, wrought iron, copper processing, jewelry, ritual objects, costumes, embroidery, etc. Together with its permanent exhibition, it has organized numerous temporary exhibitions dedicated to specialized presentations of different realms of traditional arts and crafts. The museum has gotten numerous visits with exhibitions in the former socialist countries as well as in other countries and continents – especially in 1970s and 1980s, on the occasion of the celebrations of the 13 centuries after the establishment of the Bulgarian State in 681. The period after 1989 led to a relative narrowing of the visiting exhibitions abroad, but the interaction with other museum units in the country and particularly those in Sofia continued. A series of new topics found their presentation in museum exhibitions – especially ones related to the traditions and heritage of different ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities in Bulgaria: Bulgarian Muslims (*pomaks*), Roma population, Jews, Armenians, Karakatchans, Aromanians, etc. A separate focus of exhibitions over the last decade has been Bulgarian communities living abroad – in present day Serbia, Macedonia, Banat, Bessarabia, and Turkey. Aside from shedding light on themes that could hardly find representation in museum expositions during the communist period, the impetus to represent Bulgarian communities in different countries of Europe and the world prompted also a new moment in national self-understanding – one touched by resonances of trauma from past historical experience, solidarity with co-nationals residing outside the national state and affirmation of the inextinguishable national identity despite territorial separation.

National History Museum

The National History Museum was created after a decree of the Ministry Council in 1973. Its major purpose was to present the history of Bulgarian lands from prehistory until today and to position it in the context of the general European history. Being one of the largest history museums in the Balkans, it preserves more than 650,000 monuments of culture and a rich archaeological and history archive. Its first exhibition was opened in 1984 on the occasion of the anniversary celebrations of 1300 years after the creation of the Bulgarian State. Initially, the museum was located in the building of the Law Court in Sofia, but since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was moved to the governmental residence of former communist ruler, Todor Zhivkov. The main exhibition of the museum is arranged in five halls: Prehistory, Ancient Thrace, the Bulgarian Middle Ages, Bulgarian lands in the 15th through 19th c., and Third Bulgarian Kingdom (1879–1946). Among the branches of the museum are the Boyana church of 10th - 11th c., the monastery of Zemen (11th c.), the steam boat ‘Radetzky’ near Kozloduy (the one where Hristo Botev and his fellow fighters landed on Bulgarian land in 1876), the church of ‘Forty Holy Martyrs’ in Veliko Tarnovo, etc. The collections of objects from Antiquity, numismatics, and traditional culture form a regular part of this museum. Among them are, for example, those of uniforms and urban fashion, traditional costumes, furniture, religious and applied art, documents and objects from the period of national Revival, photos from late

nineteenth and early twentieth century, periodicals and printed materials, maps, flags, and stamps, etc.

In terms of structure and collections, the National History Museum virtually copied the initial structure of the *Naroden muzei*, and the Archaeological and Ethnographic museum taken together. Not only had it acquired a large amount of their collections for the preparation of its funds, but it also doubled a substantial part of their representations, however, with an emphasized national and even nationalistic line, which was in line with the new emphasis that was laid on national history during the last two decades of communist rule. Since the mid-1980s, this museum turned into a primary focus of museum visits, at the expense of a relative decrease of such in the two aforementioned museums. The national and state-framed reading of history was complemented as well by a sharp disregard to a modification of representation policies after the end of communist rule. The glorification of the nation, the interpretative halo around the peaks in national history at the expense of dramatic lamentation on national failures and tragic moments, not only characterizes the profile of this museum, but also is indicative of the overall conceptualization of national history after 1989. In terms of collections, the expanding of museum funds continued to increase after the end of communist rule, however this was not accompanied by relevant steps to the representation of the recent past, and national history seemed to have stopped with the end of World War II. Thus, whilst in early 1990s the museum acquired the collections of the previous Museum of the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship and the National Museum of the Revolutionary Movement, none of them was utilized as a possibility for at least a temporary exhibition through a post-communist lens. The museum has been, however, among the most active Bulgarian museums in the last two decades – in terms of important exhibitions in Bulgaria and abroad (mostly one dedicated to Thracian culture and Medieval Bulgarian history), publishing activities, and educational programs. It created a series of exhibitions on “Bulgaria in the Balkans and in Europe,” exhibiting a range of unknown materials about the history of Bulgarian people throughout the ages. Among the most interesting travelling exhibitions that were created in recent years has been the one of 2009 – with unique costumes and arms from Bulgarian history films of the 1960s through to the 1980s – mostly ones dedicated to medieval history and the Ottoman rule.

The Museum of Vassil Levski in Karlovo

The museum of the national hero Vassil Levski – one of the main figures of the nineteenth century struggle for national liberation, was created in 1937 in Karlovo, the birthplace of the hero. The idea for the museum’s creation emerged in 1933, when local authorities undertook steps for the reconstruction of Levski’s native house and opening a museum exhibition about the life of the hero. Carried out voluntarily by local citizens and soldiers from the nearby garrison, the reconstruction of the house in its original form was made on the basis of memory accounts of hero’s relatives and neighbors. In 1954, Levski’s native house was integrated into the state museum network and in 1955, a documentary exposition was built near the house. In 1965 a new exhibition building was constructed, and the older one was turned into a movie hall. Between 1968 and 1992 the house-museum was within the auspices of the town’s history museum and it gained the status of a separate museum in 1993. A year later, a project – initiated by the National Institute of Monuments of Culture – restored the area around the museum, widened the museum

complex, renovated some of the old houses and built several new ones. Among the latter was also a memorial chapel ‘All Bulgarian saints.’ In 2000, the museum of Vassil Levski was proclaimed as a state cultural institute of national significance. It is among the most regularly visited museums in Bulgaria, with around 35,000 visitors annually in recent years.

The museum preserves objects, documents and photos related to the hero, to his family and to some of his accomplices. The collection involves also biographical investigations and literary works dedicated to Levski, works of art and documentary materials about social organizations that worked for the preservation of the hero’s memory. The exhibited materials include donations from Levski’s relatives – as is the case of a family album with original photos of Levski, his brother and his mother. Among the exhibited objects, one can see also the regulations of the Bulgarian revolutionary committee, military uniforms that belonged to members of the Bulgarian legion of the mid-nineteenth century, and the flag of the Karlovo revolutionary committee, found by Levski in 1869. The memorial chapel, built as part of the museum complex in 2000, sought to preserve the memory of the national hero and to emphasize the unity of Christian values, human ethics, and national identity. In the chapel, Levski is depicted in a series of figures of the Bulgarian national pantheon, i.e. among the saints of the ‘Temple of Freedom’ as he used to call the sacrifice for national liberation. The main icon portrays canonized Bulgarian saints and martyrs, including kings, men of letters, and enlighteners. The chapel also preserves an invaluable relic from the hero – a lock of his hair – that was given to the museum unit by the National Museum of Military History. The museum is indicative of policies in representing national history in several respects – the outlined attention to Levski and his turning into an object of a national cult towards the end of the interwar period; the national sensitivity of the communist regime in the later 1950s and 1960s that resulted in similar house-museums to nineteenth century revolutionary fighters; and the revived attention to this national figure after 1990s as an ‘antidote’ to the crisis in representing national history after the discarding of the previous system of representation.

National Museum “Radetzky” Steamboat

Existing nowadays as a branch unit of the National History Museum in Sofia, ‘Radetzky’ Steamboat itself holds the status of a national museum after a Decree of the Ministry Council of 1982. The steamboat is related to one of the most glorious moments in the struggle for national liberation from the Ottoman rule – the landing, in which a troop of 200 rebels under the leadership of Hristo Botev made on the banks of the Danube River of Kozloduy, before entering fights with Ottoman forces in 1876. The memorable event of Bulgarian émigrés landing on national soil and sacrificing themselves for the liberation of their people holds a sublime place in Bulgarian history and has been an object of creative representations in numerous literary and artistic works. The exploit that Hristo Botev and his troop committed has been turned into a powerful reference point in Bulgarian national mythology, and has been an object of commemoration already in the first years after the national liberation. The 120-kilometer-long path of the troop before its defeat in the Balkan Mountains comprised a series of memorial sites, and the landing spot at Kozloduy has been the first one in this series. Such commemorative practices were particularly enhanced after the establishment of communist rule in Bulgaria – when Hristo Botev was proclaimed as being among the first promoters of socialist ideas to

Bulgaria and thus – a key figure in the public pantheon that was celebrated in communist times. In 1964-1966 the steamboat, which carried Bulgarian revolutionaries across the Danube, was renovated with the voluntary input of Bulgarian children and since then it became a museum object of national significance. The museum unit that was formed at this spot preserves historical documents and traces related to the history of Hristo Botev's troop, its stepping onto Bulgarian soil and its legendary path inside territory which was then within the Ottoman Empire. Aside from the memorial complex in the vicinity of the steamboat, the museum is involved in the maintenance of the memorial units along the path of Botev's troop and the organization of regular commemorative events in 'the steps of the heroes' that took place in May each year.

Regional History Museums

The main points outlined with these three national museums in present day Bulgaria are found reflected in the developments of regional history museums in the country – many of which were revealed through the naming and status of nationality at different moments of their development. As has already been mentioned – although for many of them, the ideas about setting up museum collections dated back to the period before the national liberation, the steps for realizing such initiatives most frequently took place in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries. In the town of Sliven, for example, already before 1878 local patriots were involved in gathering relics referring to Bulgarian medieval kingdoms, but the actual beginning of the museum work was done with the founding of the Committee of the Moscow Ethnographic Society in Sliven in 1878. The committee set, as its goal, to find out about, and research, the traces of old burial grounds, monasteries, churches, and caves in the town and the area. In 1888, a learned society was created with the purpose of exploring the archaeological, historical and geographical specificity of the Sliven region, and a museum collection resulting from their work was opened in 1913 at the local cultural house. The core of the collection was formed by donations from wealthy members of the community. In the town of Vratsa, a museum collection was created and expanded by a family of traders. In 1894, their collection was submitted to the National Library and the National Museum in Sofia. In Veliko Tarnovo, the first initiatives for opening a museum unit were made in 1871, when an idea arose for 'Nadejda' culture house to set up a museum on the basis of the private collections of antiquities by patriotic people from the town. In 1879, the Archaeological association was founded and became engaged in collecting such traces. The first museum exhibition was made in 1914. In Varna, the beginning of museum activities started with the founding of the archaeological museum by the prominent brothers Karel and Herman Shkorpil in 1887. The first exhibition was opened in 1906 with the building of the Girls' high school, where the archaeological museum is located until today. Its first director was Karel Shkorpil, who remained at this position until his death in 1944.

Most of the first regional museums were created as units directly affiliated with existing schools or cultural centers, and at the active initiatives of outstanding intellectuals and researchers. The regional museum of Kyustendil, for example, had its first collection opened in 1897 – in affiliation with the Pedagogical School in the town. The museum was developed with the active participation and supervision of historians and ethnographers as Acad. Yordan Ivanov, Konstantin Jirechek and Yordan Zahariev. In a similar way, the regional museum of Russe was created in 1904, on the basis of the archaeological collections of Shkorpil Brothers and of the

natural historian V. Kovachev, which were preserved in the Russe men's high school 'Knyaz Boris.' In the town of Silistra, the Teachers' Council at the Pedagogical School took the decision to create a museum in 1898 and, a year later, its status was approved by the Ministry of National Education. After the occupation of Southern Dobrudja by Romania in 1913, the Silistra museum collection was transferred to Bulgaria and its objects were sent to the Sofia Archaeological Museum and Russe Regional Museum.

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a wave of regional history museums in the country, most of them taking impetus from archaeological excavations initiated by local researchers and coordinated with *Naroden muzei* and its branches in the capital. In Stara Zagora, the 1907 idea of founding an archaeological association, which would build a local museum for exhibiting traces of the past, was realized in 1912, with the building of the town's library and museum. The primary focus of attention at the time was the archaeological excavations at the ancient town of Augusta Traiana. The same year, intellectuals and enthusiasts studying the past of the Burgas area created the regional museum of Burgas, which was initially a private institution under the auspices of the "Debelt" archaeological association. In fact, the primary collections of all museums that were established in different parts of the country were archaeological ones, the reasons being the old Ancient and Roman settlements that many of these towns were built on. The excavation of these remains determined the rich exhibits of ceramics, coins, instruments and jewelry from ancient times that form the core of regional museum units even today. Aside from the archaeological focus and the complex character of museum institutions (combining local libraries, archives, and cultural centers), another important trend of those years involved the attention put on ethnographic collections – as stimulated by the respective museum units in the capital, and by the work of local historians and ethnographers.

As with the aforementioned national museums, the most important changes in the development of those in different regions of the country occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, when they changed their status, restructured their exhibitions and reoriented their overall policies on historical representation. The existing museums were nationalized and their property passed under the auspices of regional councils in the respective towns. Thus, some museums were transformed into People's (*narodni*) museums and then – in the mid-1950s – into museums of regional history. Regardless of their naming, they generally sought to present local versions of the national museum units in the capital. The legislative basis of museum activities was changed and the Soviet experience was widely embraced. With regard to organization and structure, the most important transformations in the communist period were the introduction of two separate departments (of "Modern History" and of "Most Modern History"), with emphasis falling on the establishment of the communist rule and the socialist construction. Despite the dissolution of thematic exhibitions after 1989, the subdivision of museum structure has remained until today. Together with opening new regional museums (e.g. the one in Plovdiv) and their branches in smaller towns, the communist period was also characterized with a clearly-expressed tendency to represent, in separate units, the history of nineteenth century liberation struggle, and to secure a special emphasis on ethnographic heritage – as a testimony of the folk, democratic, and grass-root basis of national culture. These two realms (the struggle for national liberation and the ethnographic heritage) would remain as guides in most regional museums after the dissolution of previous ideology-guided presentations of twentieth century history. At the background of an

overall withdrawal from representations of recent history (yet, notably limited only to temporary exhibitions), museum practice around the country was oriented either to nineteenth century history, or to representations of local traditions, customs and crafts, where the national spirit is believed to have found the most genuine expression.

Conclusion

This overview of some of the most important national and regional museums in Bulgaria permits the following observations. The beginning of most museum collections was laid around the middle of the nineteenth century and gained special impetus in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first museum collections were created under the auspices or in direct collaboration with schools and culture houses and were usually initiatives of prominent intellectuals, foreigners, or rich tradesmen, who gathered and donated their personal collections. After the national liberation, when the Bulgarian state identified care about the past as an important vestige of national identity, there developed a nation-wide movement for preserving material traces of distant and recent historical periods. The latter especially enhanced with the creation of *Naroden muzei*, the expanding of its collections, and the formation of the separate units of the Archaeological and Ethnographic Museums, and of the National Gallery of Art. Although the approach to the past followed a general line of interest in any material trace, the valorization was primarily on objects and records of outlined time value and uncontested antiquity, which explains the overall attention to archaeological and medieval heritage. By proving roots back into the past – even in centuries that far preceded the creation of the Bulgarian state, the nation could promote the idea of its own long-term and even ‘timeless’ existence and to assert national and state building as being logical steps in national development after a ‘temporary interruption’ during Ottoman rule. In addition to the distant chronological projection that the ancient and pre-historic past provided for national historical visions, an important factor for its regular presence in the archaeological collections in late nineteenth century was its rich occurrence in Bulgarian lands and relatively good level of preservation, and due to the high value that had surrounded it throughout the centuries. The special value that prehistoric and ancient material objects had for the conceptualization of historical and cultural heritage, and their function as vestiges of national and local pride have conditioned their representative status in most regional history museums until today. The latter was particularly fostered by the development of Thracian studies in the 1970s and 1980s, where plenty of ancient objects acquired their interpretation as Thracian ones – i.e. as having local autochthonous occurrence and pertaining to the cultural heritage of Thracian groups. Referring to one of the three main components (alongside with Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs) of the Bulgarian nation, the idea of Thracians and their heritage not only contributed enormously to the study of ancient history, but also helped reading it retrospectively through ethnically specific and quasi-national terms. Reflected abundantly in museum exhibitions over the last three decades in Bulgaria, the idea keeps on resonating in scholarly discussions on ancient heritage in the Balkan peninsular even today.

No less important was the input of medieval history in the conceptualizations of the Bulgarian nation after 1878. Having been a powerful tool in the processes of reviving national consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the glory of medieval Bulgarian kingdoms played a key role in triggering policies for maintaining historiographic narratives with

material traces from those distant times. Whilst offering an alternative to the centuries of ‘Turkish yoke’ (as the period of Ottoman domination was customarily defined), the Middle Ages provided a firm reference point to the visions of the nation’s historical existence and of its sublime moments in battles and conquering centuries before. In the museum perspective, the finding out about, and preservation of, traces to the medieval period helped enormously in creating museum collections at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the early twentieth centuries, but also in exposing the population of the newly-liberated state with representations of former glory and state might. Albeit somewhat disregarded in the first two decades after 1944, attention to medieval times was renewed again in 1970s and 1980s – accommodated within the ideological master narratives and affirming the luminous times of medieval statehood as prefiguring the glory of the communist state. A similar approach was used in the conceptualization of the national Revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and of the national liberation struggle, which were seen as being inherently linked to the struggles for social liberation and with the antifascist resistance, embraced by the ideology as a core of its historical legitimation.

A third major line that found abundant representations in museum exhibitions – from the first ones to those of nowadays, has been ethnographic and folklore heritage, with the accompanying emphases on cultural specificity, uniqueness and differentiation from ethnic, religious and cultural groups in neighboring nation states, as well as within the country. Both in the first years after the liberation, and throughout the entire twentieth century, the presentation of ethnographic heritage was highly exclusive for communities bearing identity different from ethnic Bulgarian and Orthodox ones, and this critically influenced the conceptualization of traditional culture as a realm of the national past. In the first decades after the liberation, the search for authenticity and regional variety within a unified national cultural tradition not only triggered the collection and museumization of a series of objects pertaining to the everyday life of the Bulgarian population, but also made it an inseparable part of succeeding visions of national identity. Dwelling upon the notion of inherently specific and deeply-rooted cultural traits, the collection of ethnographic objects and samples of traditional culture aimed to present the unique spirit of the people as creator of unique cultural products and to distinguish it from other groups with which it has come in contact. Whereas in the nineteenth century this impetus was guided by the widely popular Herderian ideas across all Europe, in the first half of the twentieth century, it evolved into a characteristic form of ethno-cultural nationalism and into a persistent appeal of discovering of the ‘native’ and its productive potential. Expectedly, the presentation of the culture of the people formed a substantial part in the educational and cultural policies of communist Bulgaria, and was a major focus of exhibitions in all museums around the country. With the establishment of a network of regional museums in the largest Bulgarian towns, the ethnographic heritage not only took a major part in presentations of local history and culture, but often made a direct link and often occupied architectural forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, turning them as hosts of ethnographic collections. The process ran at the time when there was the issue of ‘Revivalist architecture’ (labeled as representing national awakening, but actually consisting mostly of houses that belonged to affluent tradesmen in the last century of the Ottoman empire and thus followed architectural conventions characteristic for the Balkans and the Middle East in general) gradually reached terminological crystallization. Despite the deep contradictions that they posed in terms of class, ethnic, and national criteria, such houses were used to accommodate the

rich collections of ethnographic objects and were pointed out as epitomizing a unified and timeless national spirit. Whilst turning into a cornerstone for the cultural nationalism of the communist state in its two last decades, the conceptualization of traditional culture as a firm reliable marker of Bulgarian-ness played a key role in the functionalization of this ethnographic heritage after 1989, and in its attaining the role of a major discursive realm in historical representations of the past.

As is visible from the report so far – except for the years after their creation, the most transformative stage in the development of museum institutions in Bulgaria was the first decade of communist rule, when almost all existing museums were changed or restructured, and when many new regional institutions appeared around the country. The reorientation of cultural policies in the footsteps of Soviet examples led to a system of legislative acts, which changed the status of many museums, the most important ones in the capital entering the structures of the Academy of Sciences, and being object of direct control along both ideological and scientific lines. The latter was particularly well expressed in the periodization frames that museum structures followed, where the existing departments of archaeology, ethnography, and national liberation struggle, were complemented by exhibitions and units of “Modern History” (created mainly in the 1950s), and those of the ‘Most Modern History’ (established in the 1960s). On a regional basis, the period was characterized also through the establishment of separate units with a historical focus on the different towns and areas of the country and the creation of new museum buildings for the newly formed institutions. The establishment of these new museums was carried out on the basis of state decrees and was implemented by local history teachers, under the guidance of professionals from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Each of the regional museums possessed a similar and almost identical structure to the others – consisting principally of exhibitions on the main periods of Bulgarian history and a network of historical sites under the museum’s auspices. Thus, undertaking responsibility for the sites and objects related to prehistory, antiquity, and medieval periods in their respective regions, regional museums initiated a series of smaller museum units to the national liberation struggle – frequently set up in native houses of prominent figures of the national Revival. The same was done for house-monuments to participants in the antifascist resistance, who had similar museums opened in many locations of the country, and were a destination for organized visits by school and university students in the course of several decades. One should not miss also the specialized museum units and exhibitions on the Bulgarian-Soviet friendship, as well as on the socialist construction, which formed a mandatory part of exhibition policies throughout the entire socialist period. Parallel to such specialized museum forms, a range of photo exhibitions were set in museum corners of cultural houses and local schools, and were surrounded by programs for their regular maintenance and enrichment.

The multiplication of museum units and the overtly pedagogical policies that surrounded them in the communist period provided a horizon of active overcoming and dissolution after the political changes of 1989, when most of the ideologically-framed museum exhibitions were closed and their contents were either dispersed or transferred to museum collections, hardly ever finding they way to visitors’ eyes. Although in some regional museums the departments of ‘Modern’ and ‘Most Modern History’ were joined together after the end of the communist period, permanent exhibitions customarily did not step beyond 1945, and temporary ones tackled

almost only politically neutral topics, such as social or urban history. Thus, with few exceptions, the communist period (as well as the problematic involvement of Bulgarians in World War II) remained without a specialized museum representation after 1989, which gives a very interesting perspective on the construing of the national history framework after the end of communist rule. The relativization of events that directly referred to recent history triggered the general tendency of focusing on urban culture and every day life of early twentieth century (which was termed under the label of 'bourgeois past' during communist times), and of searching for sources of collective identity in the cultural heritage, mostly ethnographic ones. The latter gradually opened to include, in various exhibitions, the traditions of various ethnic and religious groups, insisting thus not only on the multiple historical levels in the cultural history of Bulgarian lands, but on the input of diverse communities and traditions and thus on the overcoming of the historical and cultural nationalism of previous decades. It is this point and the still-pending representation of the past before 1989, which would guide – in my opinion – the new venues of development in Bulgarian national and regional museums in the years to follow.

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