Shades of Red, Shades of Grey
The Role of Cultural Context in Shaping Museums of Communism

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Abstract

In the post-communist era, Eastern-European museums face three key issues in their attempts to interpret the history of daily life under communism: feelings of nostalgia, representing both individual and collective histories, and ‘purposeful forgetting’. As socialism was experienced differently in each regional context, a single country or museum does not give a full comparative analysis to examine these issues. This work focuses on comparing three institutions across Eastern-Europe: the Museum of Communism in Prague, the GDR Museum in Berlin, and the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest. Two central questions guided the approach of this work: how have these museums, and the countries they represent, portrayed, memorialized – or rejected – socialism in Eastern Europe? More specifically, what issues have these museums faced in preserving a controversial and raw past and how do their approaches connect or diverge? Though all are faced with complex interpretive issues, each museum is unique in its approach.

Keywords

nostalgia, communism, museums, memory, culture

Museums, as cultural institutions, are at the forefront of redefining post-communist national identity. Seeking to re-establish themselves as credible sources of culture, intellectual debate, and critical analysis of the past, their interpretation of this crucial moment in each nation’s history is reflective of cultural sentiments. The experience of socialism denies a singular interpretation, and as a result, museums of communism struggle against the publics’ need to remember and their desire to forget. The interpretation methods of Eastern-European post-communist museums are primarily influenced by the cultural and national context under which they experienced both communism and its aftermath, contexts that often reflect the national consciousness rather than an accurate depiction of the complexities of communist history. In the post-communist era, Eastern-European museums face three key issues in their attempts to interpret the history of daily life under communism: feelings of nostalgia, presenting both individual and collective histories, and something I have chosen to call ‘purposeful forgetting’.

As socialism was experienced differently in each regional context, a single country or museum does not allow for enough comparative analysis to fully examine these issues alone. This work will focus on comparing three institutions across Eastern Europe: the Museum of Communism in Prague, the German Democratic Republic Museum (GDR) in Berlin, and the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest. Two central questions guide the approach of this work: how have these museums, and the countries they represent, portrayed, memorialized – or rejected – socialism in East-
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**Grappling with Nostalgia**

In previously communist countries where basic human rights were violated, conformity was key, and even toilet paper was scarce (Drakulic, 2011, p. 15), it is hard to imagine anyone having a sentimental longing or a wistful desire for the past. Certainly, nostalgia is not unique to post-socialist countries but it provokes a strong response when applied to a historically controversial subject such as this. Nostalgia is a highly contested form of remembrance across disciplines. For Volcic (2009) and Jameson (1989), “nostalgia...is an obstacle to knowledge, clouding “real” history with inauthentic emotion” (Barney, 2009, p. 132-133). Yet, others like Kimberly Smith see nostalgia as a complex and valid contributor to communal identity (2000). Navigating these differing interpretations of the past is an understandably difficult task for museums of communism that, in an attempt to present the past in various forms, risk appearing sympathetic to communism if they embrace this creator of ‘communal identity’. Therefore, museums of communism are required to choose either to embrace a multi-angled approach, attempting to engage with nostalgia by acknowledging different perspectives, or reject nostalgia as a misrepresentation of the past.

Berlin in particular is no stranger to communist nostalgia; in fact, Germans have coined a word for those who still pine for the days of East Germany: *ostalgie*. In the context of *ostalgie*, the GDR Museum has been criticized for their nostalgic displays of everyday objects (Arnold-de Simine, 2013, p. 161). The Trabant P50 is a notable example of an everyday object used to provoke nostalgia. Despite noting that the car “exhibited considerable technical defects” such as dangerous brakes or those who hoped to own a Trabant, affectionately called the ‘Trabi,’ “faced a long wait”, the car is nevertheless cited for inspiring “such loyalty and love” and providing “a measure of freedom in an unfree country” (GDR [website], 2015). The difficulty in obtaining a Trabant, and the car’s problematic safety issues, are overshadowed by romantic memories of an object that is now considered an antique – a vintage and desirable piece of the past. For the GDR, fond memories of Germany’s past are represented as real and valid. By acknowledging the feeling of nostalgia, the museum faithfully represents the coping method of the East German community that dealt with the radical instability of the post-communist era (Barney, 2009, p. 137). In the GDR Guide museum director Robert Rückel responds to critics of the museum that cry ‘осталги! by asserting that a complete understanding of the GDR requires a look at the everyday, not simply the “closed borders and constant surveillance” but also the “shortages, the weekly oath ceremony, and full employment” (2012, p. 4). Through this interpretation, which critics suggest is problematic given that feelings of nostalgia are inauthentic by recreating a fake idealized past, the GDR Museum is addressing a perception of East German life that is real to the people who experience it.

However, this interpretation method needs to be approached with caution as it can lead to the blending memory and history (Nora, 1989; Crane, 1997). The GDR needs to represent the history of socialist Germany while distinguishing it from the *memory*, which “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successful deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation...” (Nora, 1989, p. 8). By allowing too much memory, or nostalgia, to permeate the interpretive narrative the GDR risks ignoring or minimizing the many negatives of living in under communist rule and therefore presenting a heavily biased, non-credible, interpretation of past events.

Though Romania and Germany both experienced an abrupt change during their transformation into democratic states, they dealt with the loss of the utopian dream they had been promised in different ways. In contrast to the *ostalgie* of the GDR, the Romanian Peasant Museum rejects nostalgia completely. This difference in interpretation is partly a reflection of the cultural context and community that is represented, but also because of the museum’s own unique history. In terms of context, Bartmanski argues that nostalgia relies on a cultural rather than a social context influenced by the struggle for a feeling of continuity “not necessarily any kind of longing for the past” (2011, p. 222). Nostalgic cultural context of East Germany was largely a by-product of the East-West divide; the solidarity of a group of people that lived through communism was expressed through nostalgia for GDR material culture.
that was once “a source of perennial dissatisfaction and embarrassment” later “became emblems of pride and nostalgia” (Betts, 2000, p. 736). As the two halves of the country “struggled to amalgamate” easterners took control of their material culture, and through nostalgia, used museumification to turn everyday objects into symbols of “opposition to the lagging Westernization” (Barney, 2009, p. 139). By placing these objects in the GDR Museum, the objects are acknowledged as worth remembering (Scribner, 1999). This difference in cultural context between Germany and Romania is the key difference in desire for institutionalized nostalgia.

Another important factor in the approach to nostalgia is the history of the museum itself. The GDR was established in a post-communist world to acknowledge communism as significant historical event, but the Romanian Peasant Museum had once been the Communist Party Museum, solely dedicated to lauding the regime’s virtues. Nostalgia for communism would have been highly unpopular in Bucharest given the country’s post-communist political climate. After winning the election in 2004, President Băsescu embarked on a policy of systematic condemnation of communist crimes aimed at rewriting the history of communism in the country (Cristea et al., 2008, p. 279). To completely divorce itself from its past, the museum responded by establishing a new identity in complete contrast to the one it previously embodied (Cristea et al., 2008, p. 287). The Romanian Peasant Museum’s decision to re-invent itself is both a reflection of the current social climate, political influence, and a desire for the museum to shed itself of its dreaded past.

The Romanian Peasant Museum instead became focused on nostalgia for the simplicity and quiet nobility of peasant life. The peasant, making what little he had with his own hands, tortured the “rough material, ennobling it through suffering” (Peasant Museum, 2015). In effect the peasant became a glorified martyr while communism was shunned and relocated to a single exhibition in the basement of the institution. It was difficult to escape the past completely, given that the “museum inherited the exhibitions, the entire collection, the library, and, not the least important, the staff of the communist museum” (Cristea et al., 2008, p. 287). Instead of disposing of the past, as the Communist Party itself would have done, most of the exhibits and books of the old museum were placed into a storage room referred to as the “Chamber of Horrors” (Cristea et al., 2008, p. 288). A small exhibition, The Plague: Political Installation, was all that remained. Communism, rather than being represented in a sympathetic light, was effectively demonized (National Museums Europe Report, 2012).

The Czech Republic, similar to Romania, also has very few, if any, traces of nostalgia in their institutionalized memory of communism. Prague’s Museum of Communism defines itself as “Concise, objective, but certainly not pro Communist…” (Museum of Communism, 2015). Overall, the museum reflects its country's rejection of communist nostalgia: in 1999 only one in ten Czechs were in favour of returning to communism (Gherghina, 2010). Sergiu Gherghina argues that the relative wealth, lack of political dissent and deadlock, and the “authoritarian policies of the third Meciar government” (2010, p. 174) resembling those of the previous regime, helped to solidify overall Czech satisfaction with their new democracy. In effect, Gherghina’s argument, that the Czech Republic did not have the national desire to foster strong feelings of nostalgia, reflects Bartmanski’s (2011) assertion of the importance of cultural context.

German feelings of nostalgia are the strongest perhaps because, unlike Romania and Czech Republic, only half the country suffered. The displacement felt by East Germans after being absorbed into West Germany is represented in the common East German saying, “we have emigrated without leaving home” (Berdahl, 2009, p. 65). Where Romania and Czech Republic nationally undertook the struggle to establish a new identity in post-socialism, East Germans were strangers in their own country. Nostalgia for the comfort of familiar everyday material goods that “once served as a source of perennial dissatisfaction and embarrassment” instead “became emblems of pride and nostalgia” (Betts, 2000, p. 741). It is through interpretation of this material that museums engage and reflect the particularities of their own nation’s socialist experience. However, this engagement can only be done with transparency and critical self-reflection so as not to overshadow the history of communism with nostalgic memory.

Representing Individual and Collective Histories

Just as cultural conditions influence the interpretation and display of nostalgia in museums, they also affect interpretation of the collective and individu-
al histories of socialism in each country. As a result, museums of communism struggle with whether or not to balance their portrayal of the individual and the collective in their displays. Presenting the realities of daily life under socialism poses a particular problem – dictatorships rarely allow for expressions of individuality and certainly do not seek to preserve the ones that emerge. At its core, socialism is concerned more with the we than the I. Faithfully interpreting a long and significant period of time as both a macro and micro history that defies a single interpretation is challenging at best, but it presents a serious problem for museums of communism when socialist governments of the past took every opportunity to stifle the individual voice. Some scholars like García Morales see museums of communism becoming increasingly more aware of the need to engage visitors with the individual stories of those who experienced socialism by employing more immersive and interactive experiences (2012, p. ii). Others like Dubravka Ugresic, suggest that collective memory is one of the many victims of communism, and although we may sympathize, we can never truly comprehend at an individual level, the “dimensions of other people’s loss” (2004, p. 172). Some museums, strive to balance both the collective and the individual in their interpretive frameworks, while others consciously choose to represent a singular united and collective interpretation.

Rather than delving into the everyday individual stories of common people, some museums focus on the more violent aspects of the period as a whole. In Bucharest, the only displays of individual histories at the Peasant Museum are found on the upper floors, which are centred on the Romanian peasant. In the basement, The Plague: A Political Installation is comprised of newspaper clippings and propaganda, horrors of the collectivization process, and ‘fake objects’ collected from the previous displays of the former Communist Museum. Distinguishing the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ objects from the ‘fake’ objects of its inherited communist collection is the main way the museum deals with its own communist history (Cristea et al., 2008, p. 286; Bernea et al., 1998, p. 225). Interestingly, though it displays objects considered to be fake as evidence of the oppression experienced under communism, it does not attempt to display objects that might be considered authentic, such as everyday Romanian objects; these are reserved for the displays of peasant life in the floors above.

This avoidance of daily life is a conscious choice by the institution, one that was influenced by cultural experience, the political climate during the creation of the exhibit, and again, the desire to move away from the museum’s own history. This exhibition is viewed in contrast to the museum’s other exhibits where the objects are allowed to be interpreted by the visitor and therefore “speak for themselves” (Badica, 2011, p. 286). Letting objects have more free interpretation is in direct opposition to the curatorial methods used by the Communist Museum. Badica further explains that communist museums would surround the object with text, as alone the object was “silent and dangerously ambiguous; it is difficult to control” (2011, p. 279). In an interesting parallel to this, The Plague surrounds the objects with words, newspaper clippings, and gives the visitor a singular interpretation: displaying communism in terms of its ugliness rather than by the small triumphs and trivial daily activities of ordinary people. By representing the violence, oppression and subjugation, The Plague avoids any contact with the normalcy associated with ordinary people in their daily lives. Yet in an attempt to push away its shameful past, the museum effectively imitates the communist display methods it desires to escape, methods which it broke away from in the peasant exhibits.

Though The Plague itself does not present individual stories, an accompanying exhibit guide The Red Ox gives testimonials of peasants that went through the dreaded collectivization process (Okasana, 2008, p. 293). There is no commentary in the displays on how people perceived the conditions of their lives, whether or not they accepted communism passively or gave any resistance, or how they coped with the constraints of their country. The distinctly visual nature of the room, combined with the lack of multi-sensorial immersion and interaction, gives the exhibit a very two-dimensional interpretation of communism: that of the oppressed people and their captors – an idea that will be explored later in this work.

In Prague, the Museum of Communism takes small steps towards engaging its audience in individual stories. The museum highlights everyday life, along with education, the army, media/propaganda, art, and politics as main topics (Museum of Communism, 2015). These topics hinge on the museum’s themes of communism: “The Dream, The Reality and The Nightmare” (Museum of Communism, 2015). Despite their efforts, reality is less present as the dream and the nightmare take over. One critic of the Museum of Communism stated that there was a serious lack of “individual his-
tory and destiny” in the museum’s interpretation, but Slavenka Drakulic argues that perhaps this “absence of individual stories” is in fact “the best illustration of the fact that individualism was the biggest sin one could commit” (2011, pp. 8-9). Drakulic believes that museums can only go so far, noting that museums cannot display “the shades of grey” that prevailed in everyday life” (2011, p. 8) and that the things that caused daily strife, like the shortages of even the most basic needs, cannot be communicated to an audience that did not experience it. Nevertheless, the Museum of Communism attempts – albeit weakly – to promote some aspects of individuality. While most of the display methods used throughout the museum are traditional visual informational panels and labels, reconstructions of historic displays are slightly more engaging. The first of these recreations is a classroom display that notes the impact of communist education. The area is roped off so the visitor must stand outside of the space looking in, creating a barrier to accessing a more engaging experience. A creepy mannequin of a child in a communist school uniform stands happily by the blackboard that touts communist values, allowing the visitor to reflect that an entire generation of children was raised in this way. However, it is the interrogation room that is often referred to as the highlight of the museum. For Drakulic, the interrogation room is of particular importance, “think of how people lived – hundreds of millions of them – with the feeling that an interrogation room had been installed in their brains.” (2011, p. 17). In a sense, she believes that this is a better demonstration of how people felt about their individuality – the need to keep it secret for fear of discovery.

But to deny that people expressed individuality during their years of living daily life under socialism, and that it cannot be represented in a museum, is inaccurate. Despite the fact that individualism was not encouraged or represented officially does not mean that people obeyed unconditionally. As Rückel explains, though the dictatorship in the GDR shaped the lives of its citizens, it does not mean people did not “smile, laugh, play, love, and disobey” (2012, p. 4). In terms of capturing the everyday life of the common people, the GDR Museum is much more successful at representing individuality than the Communist Museum or The Plague exhibit. The GDR’s interactive and immersive displays are more in line with contemporary curatorial practice aimed at providing the visitor with an individual immersive experience rather than a dictated object-centric story. The museum invites you to open up cupboards and handle objects, listen to audio-recordings, watch GDR films, and use interactive technology displays (GDR [Website], 2015). The everyday objects that need to be ‘discovered’ by the visitor are reflective of the hidden quality of individuality that prevailed in communist countries. Showing the “cursed ‘homo duplex’” where a person was “mentally trained to separate his private life from the collective” (Ugrešić, 2004, p. 169), is nevertheless, a testament to individuality’s existence.

We can understand the institutional representation of the collective versus the individual as being influenced by the cultural context of both past and present. Museums that choose to display individuality within their collections are more accepting of the daily existence under communism, while those who banish their collections to the basement without variety in their interpretation attempt to stop themselves from digging too deeply into the past – perhaps afraid of what they might find.

**Purposeful Forgetting**

Of all the culturally constructed issues facing the museums of communism in Eastern Europe, no other aspect is quite as universal something I have chosen to call ‘purposeful forgetting’. Using the word denial simply does not capture the complexity and nuance of selective memory that has shaped public remembrance of communism. Instead, purposeful forgetting acknowledges the reality of the selective memory, reinterpretation of the past, and self-victimization that is present in all three of the museum institutions under examination.

Despite the fact that each country, and cultural institution, has had to deal with different degrees of purposeful forgetting, they all desire to move past communism (Trnka, 2013; Brier, 2009). Yet, they are also all painfully aware of the possible cost of forgetting communism altogether; without museums, sites of memory, and other ways of preserving history, post-communist countries fear the possibility of “seducing to apathy”, forgetting about communism and “thus enabling its return” (Trnka, 2013, p. 37). Museums in Eastern Europe face having to acknowledge their nation’s place in history within their institutions by displaying “an unwanted relic that national history had to accommodate”
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(Badica, 2013, pp. 108-109). This historical relic does not always paint a flattering picture of the nation or its people. Coping with this undesirable past leads to a refashioning of historical narratives and overemphasis of national suffering while simultaneously skirting any collective or national responsibility.

One way to deal with a difficult past is to ignore it, a method used by many in the early years of post-communism. In the early years of its transformation from a socialist state to a democratic one, the Romanian Peasant Museum ignored recent history “to make it easier to reach back to the interwar period where the ‘real’ Romanian history and identity were supposed to be found” (Cristea et al., p. 290). In the creation of this new/old national history, Verdery asks, “how did it happen that Romania is partly resuscitating the past in this way, seeking to lift out whole chunks of the Communist period as it if had never occurred?” (1996, p. 136). Badica believes that these missing ‘chunks’ of Romania’s past can be largely blamed on neo-communist power that created what she sees as a “black hole paradigm” (2010, p. 82), borne out of constantly denying access to the past, successfully transforming the whole communist era into one big crime. There is certainly evidence of this selective memory in The Plague where communism is vilified in the depths of the basement and the idealized pre-communist peasant is glorified throughout the rest of the museum. The banishment of the exhibition to the basement, a space that is in a way hidden and out of sight from those who do not already know it exists, is a concrete example of Romania’s criminalization of communism. There is also no interpretive text to help the visitor examine the complex involvement Romania and its citizens had with communism, only adding to the silence that surrounds the whole topic.

While looking at gender representations in Romanian public institutions, Alina Haliliuc argues that institutionalized places of memory “intervene in the memory and identity” of the people who lived during and came after the era (2013, p. 109). She argues that the institutions control how history is remembered and have the ability to alter it at will. As many Eastern European countries have state controlled government bodies that exist to study this period, such as the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in Czech Republic3, Haliliuc’s argument allows us to question who really controls institutional memory in post-communism (Sniegon, 2013, p. 106). However, this interpretation gives no agency to the people living in post-communist countries that have experienced this history first hand and remember the realities of daily communist life. Without an underlying cultural desire to forget the past, museums would face greater pressure to create a strong institutionalized memory of communism in their country. Therefore, it is the whole cultural context, both citizen and state, that influences museological interpretation of communism.

Self-victimization is another method used by post-communist Eastern European countries in an attempt both to unify their people under a newly created national identity and to cope with the guilt of their past complacency. By establishing themselves as victims and communists as abusers, nations create a narrative that allows them “to manipulate sentiment and circumvent the difficulties of violent and contested histories” (European National Museums, 2012, p. 51). But countries were not mere victims of communism. Such government regimes would not have lasted long without some support from their people – a reality that similarly haunts countries directly involved with the Holocaust. In the Czech Republic, Drakulic exclaims that, if you believed what people here say, you would think that not a single person in this whole country was ever a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. They were all victims! ... 10 percent of the population were party members... that means one million seven hundred thousand people. (2011, p. 7)

These numbers are staggering, and while not everyone was a true supporter, certainly not all can claim coercion. While the Museum of Communism does not directly challenge this involvement, it does state that its purpose is “[to show] how this amazing Nation lived through such difficult and totalitarian times” (Museum of Communism, 2015), effectively embracing the feeling of nationalism that works to gloss over culpability and uses the museum to skew the past in a more favourable light. To a lesser extent, the GDR Museum also uses selective memory through their concentration on the resilience of everyday people and by creating feelings of sympathy for East Germans. By displaying East Germans as individuals who toiled under, and resisted, the abuses of communism, the audience can connect with their suffering on an emotional level, altering their perceptions of the East German public’s involvement in maintaining the communist regime.

Self-victimization among Eastern European countries also involves using Russia as a scapegoat. La-
vinia Stan argues that societies that failed to act against communism blame Russia, a foreign power, for their dictatorships effectively “exonerating their own societies” (2006, p. 396). With such a large and powerful country like Russia constantly looming the rest of Eastern Europe it is easy to see how this approach might be one of the easiest ways of purposefully forgetting one’s own involvement in the communist regime. The Museum of Communism is subtle in its over representation of Russian involvement (Drakulic, 2011, pp. 12-13) while the Peasant Museum is not so subtle. The GDR, with its strong focus on the daily lives of East Germans, is the one museum of the three under examination that does not try to place blame on Russia. While the Museum of Communism uses text panels and artefacts to discuss Russian influence in Czech Republic, The Plague is entirely centred on the domination of Russia in Romania, both visually and textually. This emphasis on Russia shifts the focus off of their own culpability, and instead, blames a foreign power for the communist ills that befell their own weaker country – unable to defend itself from a tyrant.

By understanding the cultural context of each country that experienced communism, it becomes apparent where these differences in approach are created and also highlight the areas that museums in these countries might want to tackle as a part of coming to terms with the past. Museums of communism, like any museum dealing with difficult knowledge, can be conscious of their audience while also seeking to challenge some of these reactionary tendencies to create distances between the past and the present. This paper has shown that museums of communism are reflective of the cultural context under which they were developed and therefore represent their country’s cultural understanding of a controversial period in history. To fully deconstruct all the facets of museums of communism in post-communist countries would take much more exploration than I have provided here. Instead, I have argued that cultural context in each Eastern European country has shaped their memory of socialism, thereby affecting how this history is presented in museums, often altering this representation to fit an idealize, demonized, or desired perception rather than a multi-faceted and complex history. In the Romanian Peasant Museum and in Czech Republic’s Museum of Communism, collectivism is favoured over individual stories and institutional memory is used to reframe history in more flattering terms with the aim of claiming to be a victim rather than a participant. In Germany, adopting a more individualized approach with an interactive and often nostalgic view of communism, however problematic, is a reflection of their cultural context. With only half the country having experienced socialism first hand, individual stories and nostalgia form links between Easterners themselves while also attempting to reconnect with the other half of the country. As the cultural context of post-communist countries evolve over time, museums will continue to straddle the divide between remembrance and purposeful forgetting, individualism and nationalism, memory and history.

Notes

1 By this I mean museums that focus on communism as a topic of examination in the post-communist era.

2 Ostalgie translates into “nostalgia of the East” (Zeitchik, 2003)

3 Originally called the Institute of National Memory

References


