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## TEACHING COMMUNISM AT THE MUSEUM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MUSEUMS DEDICATED TO COMMUNISM IN EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE

### Introduction

After 2004 adhesion of former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, the European Union became more concerned with communism, its crimes, and its memory. Communist crimes are condemned while victims' memories are promoted as tools of learning from the past atrocities. A collective European memory of communism tends to be created as a top-down enterprise<sup>1</sup>. The memory of communism victims becomes a sort of European patrimony, a heritage to be transmitted to the future generations as a lesson, but also as a part of the European identity.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2009, the European Parliament adopted the Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism, which "condemns strongly and unequivocally the crimes against humanity and massive human rights violations committed by the totalitarian Communist regimes; (and) extends to the victims of these crimes and their family members its sympathy, understanding and recognition of their suffering".

The European Commission had already made an important step in this direction by introducing in its programme for citizens, one *Action* entitled, 'Active European remembrance', which aims at commemorating the victims, as well as preserving "the sites and archives associated with deportations, and other actions. Through such efforts, Europeans, particularly younger generations, can draw lessons for the present and the future from these dark chapters in history."

This paper aims at discussing four case studies of dealing with communism through museums and memorials in Central and Eastern Europe. It will focus mainly on the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anticomunist Resistance of Sighetul Marmatiei, Romania, the Terror House of Budapest, Hungary, the Prague Museum of Communism, in the Czech Republic, and the Memorial to the victims of communism erected in the square of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is used by Judith A. Rasson, "Creating a place of memory: Olvera street, Los Angeles", in *Materializing memory: Archeological material culture and the semantics of the past*, ed. I. Barbiera, A.M. Choyke, J.A. Rasson, Budapest 2009, p. 98.

My aim is twofold: to show how a “collective memory” of communism is created through museums and memorials and how communism is taught in the museums through the items displayed, the story narrated by those items, and the key figures promoted by the creators of these museums and/or memorials.

## 1. Memory, museums and memorials

I use the term “collective memory” as it was defined by Pierre Nora who argues that “collective memory” is “a symbolic ‘topography’ of diverse representational forms, both material and immaterial in nature, that articulate the heritage of a given community”<sup>2</sup>. It is transmitted from one generation to another through commemorations, social and cultural practices, myths, monuments, etc.

The collective memory has a performative dimension, and, according to Maurice Halbwachs<sup>3</sup>, “testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group to select and organize representations of the past so that these will be embraced by individuals as their own”<sup>4</sup>. One interpreter of Halbwachs, Marie-Claire Lavabre argues that the selective reconstruction and appropriation of aspects of the past respond always to the needs of the present<sup>5</sup>, and thus, change over time.

The French historian, Pierre Nora, attributed what he perceived as a recent frenzy to accumulate objects of remembrance to the loss of the sense of belonging to a community and of the disappearance of the *milieux de mémoire*<sup>6</sup>. The social, political, cultural and economic changes of the last decades of 20th century have had an impact on the way people bound with their collective past and personal genealogies. The accumulation of memorial items and their display in special places like museums, memorials and memory centers aims at re-enacting this lost bond to the community, and thus, to oneself.

Furthermore, “the creation of permanent objects of remembrance draws on one of our most fundamental experiences as human beings,”<sup>7</sup> the necessity to materialize, to visualize objects and persons to create a bond. Museums and memorials can play an important role in (re)enacting our feeling of belong to a community (local or national), and they can be subject of manipulation, appropriation, oblivion, remembrance, etc. While a museum is conventionally viewed as an institution dedicated to the conservation of valued objects and to the education of the public<sup>8</sup>, a memorial is conceived as “an artifact that imposes meaning and order beyond the temporal and chaotic experiences of life”<sup>9</sup>. Museum’s goals are to save, record, and produce cultural heritage of the past and the present<sup>10</sup>. Memorials have a civic utility, performing public service and being

<sup>2</sup> N. Wood, *Vectors of memory*, Oxford – New York 1999 (hereafter, N. Wood, *Vectors*), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, 1997. M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1994.

<sup>4</sup> N. Wood, *Vectors*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> M.-C. Lavabre, “Usages et mésusages de la notion de mémoire”, in *Critique internationale*, no. 7, avril 2000, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> P. Nora, *Les Lieux de memoire*, vol. 1, *La Republique*, Paris 1984, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> J.K. Ochsner, “A space of loss: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial”, in *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 50, nr. 3, 1997, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> S. Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum”, in *History and Theory*, vol. 36, no. 4, Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy, December, 1997, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505574>, (hereafter, Susan Crane, “Memory, Distortion”), p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Y.-F. Tuan, “The Significance of the Artifact”, in *Geographical Review*, no. 70, 1980, pp. 462-472.

<sup>10</sup> S. Crane, “Memory, Distortion...”, p. 48.

used to remember the past and/or to give moral value to the past.<sup>11</sup> A museum is a profane spot while a Memorial is a sacred space.

The museums dealing with communist repression, with Nazi and/or communist Terror while performing traditional museum type functions, they attempt at becoming memorials, those sacred places with utility functions and social purposes<sup>12</sup>. Because “sacredness allows a place to be defined as having moral value”<sup>13</sup>, these museums seeks for such an appreciation, which gives them the general moral apprehension over the events and phenomena exhibited.

## 2. Staging memory at Sighet Memorial

*The Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance* is the creation of Ana Blandiana, a poet and former dissident<sup>14</sup>. In 1995, *The Memorial* foundation received the Sighetul Marmăției prison, which was transformed into a museum that opened to the public in 1997. It consists of 50 thematically and chronologically arranged rooms and two courtyards: the first courtyard includes a prayer space and a chapel, and the second, more spacious, is dominated by a group of statues called “The procession of martyrs”<sup>15</sup>.

In 1998, *the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance* of Sighetul Marmăției<sup>16</sup> was listed by the Council of Europe as one of the “hotspots of the preservation of memory in Europe”<sup>17</sup>. It is located in the northern part of Romania, close to the border with Ukraine, outside the capital city, which is atypical for this type of museum. The choice of the site was dictated on the one hand, by the political situation of the country, at the beginning of the 1990s the neo-communists were in power and thus, wanted this kind of museum to be far away of the capital, and on the other hand, by the prison itself, the Sighet penitentiary was the place chosen by the communists to put into practice the extinction of former “democrat” elite, and the founders of Sighet Memorial considered themselves the inheritors of this elite.

The Sighet prison was built in 1897, under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and was an ordinary jail until 1944. At that time, it was turned into a transfer centre for

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Mayo, “War Memorials as Political Memory”, in *Geographical review*, vol. 78, no. 1, January, 1988, p. 62. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/214306> (hereafter, Mayo, “War Memorials”).

<sup>12</sup> The utility functions are to conserve, to teach. The social purposes concern identity, service, honor, humanitarianism.

<sup>13</sup> Mayo, “War Memorials”, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> A. Blandiana was born in Timișoara in 1942. Her first poetry anthology was published in 1964. She also published short stories, novels and essays. A recipient of numerous literary awards in Romania, her work was translated into many languages. Ana Blandiana may be the most known Romanian poet in foreign countries, and represents an important cultural figure in Romania. A representative of the 1960s generation, who had a modern poetic discourse, after more than a decade of restrictive socialist realism she was cast aside during the latest years of Ceausescu’s regime. During, but mostly after, the events of December 1989, she took on the difficult position of a poet with a cause, founder of the Civic Alliance, of the Civic Academy, and of *The Memorial to the Victims of Communism* and to the Anticommunist Resistance.

<sup>15</sup> The Memorial has a very well designed website that can be accessed at: [www.memorialsighet.ro](http://www.memorialsighet.ro).

<sup>16</sup> The town of Sighetul Marmăției is also Elie Wiesel’s birthplace, whose house was transformed into a Museum of the city’s Jewish community. The Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Resistance and Elie Wiesel’s House are listed in tourist tours proposed by tour operators. One programme, called “A Medieval Tour,” offers a day-trip to Sighet to visit both sites: <http://www.medievaltours.ro/en/tour1.php>; (last accessed on February 17, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Thus, The Sighet Memorial joined other prestigious Memorials like, Auschwitz Memorial and The Peace Memorial of Normandy in being listed by Council of Europe as “hotspot of Memory preservation in Europe.”

Jews and antifascists heading to concentration camps in Germany and Poland. The first political prisoners of the communist regime, who arrived in Sighet in August of 1948, were called the “Visovan Group”. It comprised school children, students and young peasants from the Maramures region. As early as 1950, several former ministers, academicians, economists, officers, historians, politicians, and priests were jailed there. Fifty-four of them died in the prison’s cells between 1948 and 1955. Starting in 1955, following the Geneva Accords, a large number of political detainees imprisoned at Sighet were released, while others were transferred to other locations. Sighet became a jail for common law-brokers before being ultimately abandoned in 1977.

Two important ideas which monopolized the post-communist public discourse of the “democratic” elite are staged through material items and visual objects at Sighet Memorial: overwhelming communist repression and genuine anticommunist resistance. Both ideas are documented by the large number of memoirs and documents of the Securitate archived by the Memorial. The frenzy to accumulate memorial items<sup>18</sup> seems to be a major preoccupation of the Memorial’s creators. Most of the material pieces of the museum were donated by the former political detainees, and their inheritors<sup>19</sup>.

The Memorial aims at inscribing the memory of the Romanian communism into a broader context. The exhibited items give a general overview of the situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe under Communism: the establishment of Communism in all the countries occupied by Soviets troops; the Stalinist terror; the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union Communist Party and the Gulag denunciation; the events of 1953 in Berlin; the revolt of 1956 in Budapest; “The Prague Spring” of 1968; the Gdansk events of 1980. Two other rooms on the first and second floor are dedicated to anti-communist revolts in Czechoslovakia and Poland. They exhibit the illustrated history of Solidarnosc, a donation from the Polish Cultural Institute, and items related to “the Prague Spring” of 1968, to the “Charta 77” movement, and to the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989, partly donated by the Czech embassy.

The impact of *The Memorial* in the post-communist society was rather minimal during its first decade of existence, despite the governance of the “Democratic Convention”, an alliance of parties, which proclaimed anticommunism as official paradigm<sup>20</sup>. Eventually, the international context changed this situation. The 1481 Resolution of the Council of Europe, which condemned communist regimes’ abuses, and the Romanian President’s statement from 18 December, 2006, which proclaimed communism as “criminal and illegitimate” legitimated the Memorial existence and activities. By offering proof of the formal condemnation of communism, *The Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anticommunist Resistance* became an acknowledged enterprise whose place in the interpretation of recent history of Romania was officially recognized.

<sup>18</sup> The documents issued by the Communist Secret police belong, in my opinion, more to memory than to history, as they were very much shaped by the ideology, the demagogy and the objectives of the Secret Police. Nathalie Zamon Davis showed the part of fiction that can inhabit archives. N.Z. Davis, *Fictiunea in documentele de arhiva. Istorisirile din cererile de gratiere si povestitorii lor in Franta secolului al XVI-lea* (Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France), Nemira 2003.

<sup>19</sup> One should keep in mind the fact that Ana Blandiana was a preeminent figure of post-communist public space, and that she enjoyed a very good reputation and visibility in the media.

<sup>20</sup> The “Democratic Convention” came to power in 1996. It lost election in 2000 after four years of a type of governance based on an anticommunist discourse, which, nevertheless, did not lead neither to the condemnation of communism nor to the condemnation of those guilty of crimes during the 44 years of communism.

Considered a museum of history by its founders “based on scientific research”<sup>21</sup> and meant to record, preserve, exhibit, and teach, Sighet “museumises” the Communist period according to a holistic perspective and from a “Manichean” angle<sup>22</sup>. It proposes a simplistic account of the confrontation between Good and Evil during the last half of the twentieth century. Eventually, Good triumphed and the museum is the expression of this victory. It stages the winners’ version of the 44 years of communism in Romania.

The museum plays its pedagogical role not only through the “Memory Schools”, but also through its publications and its guests. The school pupils and the students constitute, according to the museum guides, the majority of museum’s visitors. These visits are organized mostly by local schools. Foreigners are also counted among the visitors of the Sighet museum. They are especially welcomed as the museum founders manifest a genuine interest in making known their collective memory of the communist repression to the world.

The museum of Sighetul Marmatiei overpasses its traditional roles trying to become a prestigious memorial enterprise whose mandate is to articulate a repressed memory, and to make justice for the victims it represents. Organized in a former prison, it looks for sacredness and social purposes: it addresses identity (something out of ordinary happened at this place), service (expressed through education about communism), honor (bestowed on the persons who suffered there), and humanitarianism (the plea that the society should neither forget such inhumanity nor allow it to be repeated)<sup>23</sup>.

### 3. The Terror House

The House of Terror is located on the 60, Andrassy Avenue, Budapest, in the former headquarters of the Arrow Cross Party, of Gestapo (in 1944), and of the Communist Secret Police, AVH (Államvédelmi Hatóság). In December 2000, “The Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society” purchased this building with the aim of establishing a museum dedicated to the Nazi and communist periods of the Hungarian history.

During the two years re-construction work, the building on 60 Andrassy Avenue was fully renovated both inside and outside. Opened on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002, at 5 pm, and directed by personal adviser of than and now prime minister, Viktor Orban, Dr. Mária Schmidt, the House of Terror stirred controversy. The affiliation to the central right party, the pictures of the terror perpetrators displayed on the museum walls, some of them parents of the socialist party members, and still alive, as well as the synonymy between communism and Nazism were the main critics formulated towards the museum.

The anthropologist, Anne Marie Losonczy, stated in one of her interventions dedicated to Terror House that the museum displays a vision of Hungarian history as a “rupture”, as if the communist period was an elapse of time in the country’s history.

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<sup>21</sup> Ana Blandiana, an interview *Formule AS* magazine: [http://www.formulaas.ro/reviste\\_635\\_\\_44\\_\\_anablandiana.html](http://www.formulaas.ro/reviste_635__44__anablandiana.html), last visited on 1st of February, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Communists divided the world between ‘the good’, i.e., themselves, and ‘the bad’, i.e., external enemies and class enemies. Its right-wing opponents adopted the same Manichean approach after the fall of communist regime. See: K. Verdery, *Socialismul, ce a fost și ce urmează* (Socialism. What was and what follows), Iași, Institutul European, 2003, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Mayo, “War Memorials”, pp. 63-64.

Furthermore, she argues that the Terror House stages memory in order to create the impression of “a space out of history”, of a history made by the others, “in which the Hungarians were victims and not actors<sup>24</sup>”.

Despite controversy, or because of it, people rushed into museum. Built on two floors and a cellar, and possibly inspired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum<sup>25</sup>, the space helps to mediate the narrative which is told by the museum. It tries to make visitors experience the story in order to understand it.

The outside museum entrance leads to the ground floor, which exhibits in the center a soviet tank and walls covered with pictures of victims of the terror regimes. The floor also houses the bookshop of the museum, and the wardrobe room. The elevator takes you to the second floor where the exhibition begins. There is no other possibility to start the visit, taking the glass elevator being mandatory.

The museum tour begins with the “double occupation” room, which displays on the one side the Nazi occupation and, on the other side, the soviet occupation. It starts with the black colored Nazi occupation of Hungary and prolongs itself with the red one, as two faces of the same coins. The induced impression of equality between the two occupations raised criticism from the Jewish community. The museum creates the impression that the Nazi terror was less invasive comparing with the Red Terror: the visit itself starts with the year of Nazi occupation, 1944, without mentioning the anti-Semitic laws of the arrow crosses regime. The pictures and the plasma monitors incorporated in the walls tell the story of Hungary and Central Europe from the end of the First World War until the end of War World II. On the same floor only two more rooms are dedicated to the arrow crosses regime and to the subsequent pogroms, which are documented only through a few photos. The deportation of a half a million Jews beginning with April 1944 is not even mentioned.

The museum proclaimed aims of coming to terms to the communist past failed. It stirs more controversies, not only related to communism but also to Nazism, to the extermination of Jews, to the First World War, etc. A nationalist view pervade through the way items were displayed and through the comments attached to them. The anti-Semitism of Hungarians before the Nazi occupation is ignored, the participation of the Hungarian army in the occupation of territories of other countries never mentioned while the communist period is presented as an occupation by the Soviets. It creates the impression that the Hungarian sovereignty disappeared during 44 years of foreign occupation.

#### **4. The Museum of Communism in Prague**

Opened in January, 2001, the Museum of Communism is located in the Savarin Palace, near the Wenceslas Square. The space – some 400 square meters – is sub-leased from McDonalds, which have an outlet downstairs in the same building. It was created by Glenn Spicker, a former student in Soviet affairs and a businessman, settled in

<sup>24</sup> A.M. Losonczy, “Mémoires postcommunistes en Hongrie: la maison de la terreur (Terror Haz) de Budapest”, séminaire virtuel en sciences sociales, 2004-2005. Mémoires historiques d’ici et d’ailleurs: regards croisés. Les Lieux de mémoire: histoire et mémoire. Lieux de mémoire postcommunistes, séance du mars 2005 tenue à la maison Suger (MSH), Paris, minute 7.

<sup>25</sup> The interior design and the guided tours, which begin at the top floor and descend to the basement seems to be inspired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.

1992 in Prague, where he opened a few bars, restaurants, etc. The Czech documentary maker Jan Kaplan acted as adviser to Glenn Spicker on the project. 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”, which are: The Dream, the Reality, and the Nightmare. Jan Kaplan was not only the adviser of the American businessman, but he has also furnished the museum with its fascinating items. The museum features a vast array of objects from the Communist era, from school books to military equipment, including art, everyday life objects, sweets, military uniforms, etc.

Visitors, welcomed by a statue of Lenin, are conducted through the small rooms where they are told a story of the Czechoslovakian communist past. It begins with the creation of the communist party, continue with the life under the communist regime, the 1968 Prague spring, the dissidence, and it ends with the collapse of communism in 1989. The chronological approach of the communist period, with an accented feature on every day life, makes place rather to nostalgia than to harsh criticism.

The small rooms and the accumulation of items dilute the idea of repression, resistance and opposition. It creates the feeling of a normal life and of an accepted regime. Occasionally, persecutions occurs, but the room exhibiting items related to communist political violence is rather separated of the main itinerary of the museum, creating, thus an impression of marginality of the repression.

Contrary to the persecution display, the everyday life items are more striking and visible to the museum guests. The *Stadion* motorbike exhibited next to *Fa* soaps and to an advertising of Helena Rubinstein's make up products are more appealing to visitors. It enacts nostalgic memories for those who had lived that period, and create an image of well-being for those who had never experienced communism.

Although, visitors might think that “1968 Spring Revolution” and the “Charta 1977” movement will occupy a large space of the exhibition, they might feel disappointed. A hall, guiding the visitor from the everyday life to the end of the exhibition and of the regime, exhibits items related to the two events. The leading figure of Vaclav Havel stares at the visitors from a few pictures.

As in the 1980s history seems to accelerate, also the exhibition. Perestroika and the Velvet revolution put an end to the communism and to the museum exhibition, while inviting its guests to visit the shop where products of communist inspiration are sold. A series of greeting cards (in various forms and sizes) making fun of communist behavior, life, and propaganda are proposed for buying.

The Prague museum of communism reflects the vision of its founders. A detached history of the regime, a nostalgic approach and a humorous perspective are displayed in the small size museum. The very entrance of museum, the same as for the casino, and the near-by McDonalds, transforms the museum into a place for consumption. It creates the idea that one can apprehend communism by just making a short break on the route to McDonalds or/and to the casino.

## 5. The Bulgarian case

In Bulgaria, during the first postcommunist decade, the only sites of remembrance of the communist repression were the monument near Lovech and the modest commemorative plaques in Sofia, Varna, and Sliven. Only in 1999, a memorial to the

victims of communism was erected in the square of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia. The memorial includes a marble wall on which are engraved the name of 7,526 persons who were killed in the wake of 9 September 1944, and a chapel dedicated to “all the Bulgarian martyrs.” The chapel and the wall are part of the commemoration ceremonies of 1 February. The ceremonies commemorate the events of 1 February 1945, when 147 people accused of fascism were judged by the People’s Tribunal and condemned to death. Beginning with 2011, 1 February has become the official day of Gratitude and Homage to the Victims of the Communist Regime.

The commemoration of the victims of communism became public policy only after a number of resolutions condemning “the crimes of totalitarian regimes” were adopted by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. The aforementioned “Resolution 1481” of the Council of Europe, the “Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism” (June 2008), and the European Parliament “Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism” (April 2009) provided the impulse for the country to officially celebrate the victims of communist repression.

## Conclusions

The building of a collective memory of communism in Central and Eastern Europe through museums and memorials enables us to see what is at stake in choosing places, figures and memories to describe and to stage the communist regimes. It speaks about what societies want to remember and what they want to forget about communism. Nevertheless, this process testifies about the difficulties faced by these countries to cope with their recent past.

The Sighet Memorial and the Terror House are museums, which attempt to become memorials. They seek for a kind of consensus regarding the story of the past they display in their exhibition rooms. Introducing themselves to the audience both as museums and memorials, they want to give a sacred meaning to their sites. The Sighet Museum strongly states in its entitlement its desire to become a memorial: The Memorial to the Victims of communism and to the anticommunist resistance. The Terror House proclaims on its website that “During the reconstruction, the building has turned into a monument”<sup>26</sup>; while stating in the catalogue that “60 Andrassy Road has become a shrine, an homage to the victims. 60 Andrassy Road is the effigy of terror, the victims’ memorial”<sup>27</sup>.

The blur line between museums and memorials of Terror House and Sighet Memorial stir controversy among audience. As museums dealing with contemporary history, they faced the public agreement or disagreement. The visitors have their own memories of the events, items and ideas displayed in the exhibition rooms. They might be different, even contradictory, to those of the two museums.

Although similar regarding to their aims, the two museums are different in terms of content, presentation and discourses. The Sighet Memorial looks much more like a classical historical museum, meant to conserve, to teach and to inform people about the communist regime. Ana Blandiana states clearly that the Memorial is a history museum: “A somewhat surprising feature for a Museum that was designed as a history

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/museum/about\\_us.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/museum/about_us.html)

<sup>27</sup> Terror House Museum Catalogue, p. 5.

Museum based on scientific research, is that documents and proofs are found side by side with art, so that the visitor can better understand the tragedy which unfolded Romania in the last part of the 20th century (the interview is dated September 2004, our note), the aftermath of which is still alive today<sup>28</sup>.

The historical card played by its creators is meant to create consensus around it, and to legitimize it as a right interpreter of the regime. The Memorial includes not only the museum but also a center for the study of communism. The Terror House being more visual and appealing to senses, to the feelings and to the memories of its visitors, creates also much more controversy. It openly publicizes its position on communism, somehow equalizing it with Nazism, on repression and on terror perpetrators. The curators firmly stated adherence to FIDEZ party, diminishing the penetration power of the museum, exposing it to criticism, and constantly facing the possibility to be closed.

Being more “neutral”, the Prague museum of communism enjoyed positive reactions. Its creation by an outsider contributed to the chronological informal view on communism, and to the general acceptance of the public. It is seen more like a place meant to consumption than a site of memorial praise. Actually, one newspaper even talked about the museum as another business of its founder, the American businessman, Glenn Spicker, “the man who introduced that most wonderful of foods, the bagel to the city. Bagels, if you don’t know them, are bread shaped like a donut (with a hole) but bigger, and are a traditional Jewish food. Glenn Spicker now has two branches of his Bohemia Bagels in Prague. Mr. Spicker also owns a couple of bars in the city but on St. Stephen’s Day he was due to open the doors of a new business to the public (it’s me who underlines) – the Czech Republic’s first museum of communism.”

Dealing with a sensitive issue like communism, an important role, informing the content of the museums, is played by the founders’ vision on this epoch. The American businessman sees communism as another epoch meant to be consumed by tourists, as, for instance, they do with the medieval one<sup>29</sup>. Ana Blandiana, on the other hand, aims at making official her own vision about communism while the creators of the Terror House take a stand for a political idea and party.

Beyond, founders’ aims and opinions, the three museums are at the core of memorial discourses on communism, and inform about the society in which they stand as museums and/or memorials. The three museums speaks about how each society is coping with their communist past, about the role of the intelligentsia in the collapse of communism and during the transition period, about the economic and social environment, etc.

The collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia came unexpected, although wanted by the elite, who organized an opposition movement and thought of an alternative to the regime beginning with 1968. After taking power in 1990, the dissident elite succeeded to pass a lustration bill, and thus, to partly purify the society. The economic reforms of the transition period were successfully implemented, while the Slovakian and Czech divorce has been pronounced smoothly. The communist past was not appropriated for some immediate political reasons, and thus, its memory did not stir big controversies.

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<sup>28</sup> A. Blandiana, an interview with *Formule AS* magazine: [http://www.formulaas.ro/reviste\\_635\\_\\_44\\_\\_anablandiana.html](http://www.formulaas.ro/reviste_635__44__anablandiana.html), last visited on 1<sup>st</sup> of February, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Let apart the numerous medieval buildings, Prague also houses a Museum of medieval torture.

In Hungary, the opposition elite had to negotiate the fall of communism, and thus, to promise to the former nomenklatura a “non-lieu” of lustration. The adhesion of the population to the communist welfare state of the 1980s, and the transition’s social and economic problems have not allowed a significant purge of the state apparatus. Furthermore, the bad consciousness of the elite and the collaboration with the regime hindered the process of coming to term with the communist past.

The failed mourning process, “travail de deuil”, of the Romanian society is due to the non-existence of dissident movements during communism, the orchestration of the fall of communism by the second rank nomenklatura, who installed itself to power for the first six years of the transition period, the economic and social problems of the society. Moreover, all the attempts for passing a lustration law fall apart, the collaboration with the former communist system being well-spread among the post-communist elite and high functionaries.

In Bulgaria, the memory of communism became a political frontier and a means of legitimization for political factions. On the one hand, the communist party converted into the socialist party went on promoting the communist ideology and symbols. They supported the ongoing existence of communist symbols like the Soviet soldier’s monuments disseminated in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the united opposition forces fashioned themselves on the basis of anticommunist ideology. They struggled to destroy Dimitrov’s mausoleum of Sofia, and to create a Memorial to the victims of communism.

The museums and memorials dealing with communism in Eastern and Central Europe became a sort of interpreters, among others, of the events, figures, and phenomena. Furthermore, they face the same destiny as the historians dealing with contemporary issues, who are not anymore those professionals in charged with telling the truth about the past, but, as Nora put it, witnesses of “second rank”, “des témoins de second degré”<sup>30</sup>.

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Claudia-Florentina Dobre

### **Teaching communism at the museum: A comparative study of museums dedicated to communism in Eastern and Central Europe**

This paper aims at discussing four case studies of dealing with communism through museums and memorials in Central and Eastern Europe. It will focus mainly on the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anticommunist Resistance of Sighetul Marmatiei, Romania, the Terror House of Budapest, Hungary, the Prague Museum of Communism, in the Czech Republic, and the Memorial to the victims of communism erected in the square of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia.

My aim is twofold: to show how a "collective memory" of communism is created through museums and memorials and how communism is taught in the museums through the items displayed, the story narrated by those items, and the key figures promoted by the creators of these museums and/or memorials.

**Keywords:** communism, museums, memorials, memory, Central and Eastern Europe

### **Uczyć komunizmu w muzeum: Studia komparatystyczne nad muzeami dedykowanymi komunizmowi w Europie Wschodniej i Środkowej**

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie czterech studiów przypadku – przykładów aktualizowania pamięci komunizmu przez muzea i miejsca pamięci w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej. W tekście odnoszę się przede wszystkim do Muzeum Pamięci Ofiar Komunizmu i Antykomunistycznego Oporu Sighetul Marmatiei w Rumunii, Domu Terroru w Budapeszcie na Węgrzech, Muzeum Komunizmu w czeskiej Pradze oraz Pomnika Ofiar Komunizmu wzniesionego na placu Narodowego Pałacu Kultury w Sofii. Mój cel jest dwojaki: 1) pokazanie, jak „pamięć zbiorowa” komunizmu jest kreowana przez muzea i pomniki; 2) jak i poprzez uwypuklenie jakich elementów jest nauczana historia komunizmu oraz jakie kluczowe informacje/dane na temat komunizmu są promowane przez twórców badanych muzeów i miejsc pamięci komunizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunizm, muzea, pomniki, pamięć, Europa Środkowa i Wschodnia

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