



*Great Narratives of the Past. Traditions and Revisions in National Museums* Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Paris 29 June – 1 July & 25-26 November 2011. Dominique Poulot, Felicity Bodensteiner & José María Lanzarote Guiral (eds) EuNaMus Report No 4. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press:  
[http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp\\_home/index.en.aspx?issue=078](http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp_home/index.en.aspx?issue=078) © The Author.

## Uses and Exploitation of History: Official History, Propaganda and Mythmaking in Bulgarian Museums

Gabriela Petkova-Campbell

Independent Scholar

### Abstract

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of a period in Bulgarian development described as ‘a fundamental rupture in the history of modern Bulgaria...as it led to the total repudiation of the political, social and economic system that had been developing in the country since the achievement of independence seventy years earlier’ (Dimitrov 2001:22). The new authorities imposed the requirements for museums to participate in the building of the socialist value system. This provoked the regulation of all museum activities and the introduction of a well-controlled administrative style of museum management. In all decisions of the Central Committee of the communist party the role of the focused ideological education amongst the population was constantly underlined. The approaches to museums inherited from previous governments were drastically reconstructed to meet the new requirements. Or as Iliev (in Dolapchieva 1985:11) underlines, in the years of communist governance ‘the meaning of the cultural – historical heritage reached new dimensions, it became part of the politics of the party and the socialist state. Even more, it became part of the whole ideological activity of the party’.

## **Introduction**

In September 1944 a communist regime<sup>1</sup> was imposed in Bulgaria and the country's political, social and cultural structures were radically changed by the ideology of this regime. Bulgarian cultural life was dominated by communist ideas for 45 years. The Bulgarian museum system developed in a closed country where strict communist party directives had to be followed. After 1944 'the so called socialist museology was imposed ... The main characteristic of museums under this museology was that they were State museums, managed by different organs of the communist party' (Krasteva 2003:141). Rules relating to good and bad practice had to be closely followed in all walks of life, including museums. The most important task however was the 'ideological transformation of all museums. [Communist] ideology was also the guiding principle when building new ones' (Krasteva 2003: 181).

## **Museum organization**

Krasteva (*ibid.* 141) underlines that 'museological activities in Bulgaria were concentrated on building museums whose main aim was to collect materials concerning the process of building socialism'. This resulted in the appearance of a unified and centralized museum system. Bulgarian museums at the time turned into 'political' (Krasteva *ibid.* 275) rather than historical institutions, which had been the situation in Bulgaria before World War II.

What did the 'communist museum' mean in practical terms? Pecheva and Raichev (1955) give an insight as to how communist ideas had to be incorporated into museum's work. In their 'guide book' the first essential for a good museum, is that:

(...) curators must create museums of a socialist type representing the role of the party, the heroic life of a communist hero or the workers building upon socialism and enjoying life under the guidance of the party.

In order to achieve these aims the first task to be undertaken when preparing a museum exhibition was the appointment of a Commission which consisted of the Head of the 'Culture' department of the local municipality, the museum director and two local members of the communist party (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid.* 18). This combination immediately makes one doubt about the success of such a Commission. From the four members only one had a museum background, while the others, especially the members of the communist party, had little or nothing to do with museums.

The criteria for a good museum exhibition included the following principles:

- To demonstrate and underline the achievements of the communist party and to show the real face of the enemies of the working class
- To reflect the historical development of the local revolutionary movement with an emphasis on the difficult but heroic revolutionary struggles of the workers
- To reflect the leading role of the Bulgarian communist party and its role as a protector of workers' interests
- To demonstrate the difference between the socialist way of life and the difficult life of people living under hard economical and social conditions in the capitalist world (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid.* 41).

In order to achieve the above all museums had to be transformed and transformation meant ‘eradicating all signs of the past by completely changing all museum content, essence and forms of previous activities – exhibitions, research and collecting’ (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid*: 6). Furthermore exhibitions had to be structured as follows:

1. A historical section with areas devoted to:
  - Local life before Ottoman domination
  - Revolutionary activities of local people against the Ottomans
  - Workers’ revolutionary activities
2. A ‘Socialist building’ section including:
  - The local history of the development of socialism
  - Present day activities of the socialist people
3. ‘Natural history’ section – including elements of local natural history curiosities (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid*: 7).

Thus, any museum, which had ethnographic or archaeological collection had to present these under the ‘History’ section of the exhibition. The meaning of such presentation was ‘to unify all Bulgarian museums... and to avoid isolated and formalistic exhibiting of materials and collections that museums may have’ (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid*: 8).

Some museums have large archaeological or ethnographic collections, which indicate their biased character. It is intolerable that museums have exhibitions demonstrating only one archaeological or ethnographic collection which made them archaeological or ethnographic museums. Such museums must aim to create the abovementioned three - tiered exhibitions, including all three departments with the relevant sections (Pecheva and Raichev *ibid*: 10).

Following such directives museums in Bulgaria were denied any opportunity for creativity, individuality or self-determination. All exhibitions were to be organized in a similar way, with the priority being to reveal the ‘glorious activities’ of the communist party. The strict division of museums according to their collections disappeared, giving way to museums whose only substantive difference was the name of the local communist hero used in the exhibition. School groups went into these museums with the sole purpose of studying the heroic acts of the communist activist whom they should be proud of and inspired by (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: School group in the museum of Georgi Dimitrov2 in Sofia. (Author's Personal archive)**

This picture was taken in 1978 and shows children at the end of their first year at school. The ceremony, at which the children received their diplomas for successfully completing the year, was held in the house-museum of Georgi Dimitrov, the model for every person living under socialism in Bulgaria. These are seven - year old children but they had to be trained in communist principles from an early age.

### Type of museums and museum collections

Gradually the number of artefacts in museums collections increased, and by 1958 Bulgarian museums had acquired 51,048 new objects. For the period 1960-1970 the new acquisitions averaged some 77,000 objects per year and by 1990 the estimation was for some 4,100,000 artefacts in possession of Bulgarian museums (Kissiov 2004: 25). However, it is not possible to make an accurate assessment of the number of acquisitions, as it is not known how many were held at the beginning of the communist period (Krasteva *ibid*: 278).

It is interesting to look at how museum objects were presented in line with strict party directives and how an object could be ideologically biased. When describing the theoretical structure of a successful socialist exhibition Silianovska (1972: 208) notes:

(...) The successful exhibition can use the method of contrast. This one is particularly useful when presenting class differences. So for example a weaving mill from the time before the socialist revolution in Bulgaria with its primitive machines can be juxtaposed to a modern textile mill using contemporary machines to demonstrate how the workers' life improved under the guidance of the party.

In other words a historical period in the development of the textile industry is not presented as such but serves to represent party success and advance. Isolated features are given a symbolic meaning. Objects, sites and landscapes are re-interpreted to provide new meaning, often different from what they meant in their original context. Bulgarian museums became a prime focus for such undertakings in order to achieve party directives.

The intensification of collecting activities provoked the expansion of the museum network. So for example one of the first new museums built after the communist party came into power was the Museum of the Revolution in Sofia, following a decision of the Central committee of the Bulgarian communist party in 1947. The Council of Sofia took the decision that the house of Dimitar Blagoev<sup>3</sup> in Sofia should be converted into a house-museum (1948). A decision of the Council of Ministers (10.07.1949) also enabled the house of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia to become a house-museum (Kissiov 2004: 18-19). These examples give an indication that decisions for new museums were taken exclusively by political bodies or more precisely by the leading communist party. In 1951 the 'Museums' department of the Committee for Arts and Culture prepared a strategic long-term program for museums building in Bulgaria until 1970. This was a period when a large number of memorial museums appeared. With a decision of the Central Committee of the communist party (16 July 1953) the Museum of Bulgarian – Soviet friendship in Sofia was created 'to reflect the centuries long relations between Bulgarian people and the peoples of the Soviet Union' (Kissiov *ibid.* 17). All these were State funded museums. Gradually their number increased significantly (Table 1) with one third being dedicated to communist heroes. By 1984 the number of such strictly memorial museums was 74 out of 227 (Kissiov 1984:17). This imbalance is a strong indicator of the ways in which Bulgarian museology had been appropriated by the state to achieve its political objectives.

Year	1956	1966	1972	1978	1981	1990
<b>State funded Museums (including art galleries)</b>	98	136	171	207	215	230

Table 1: State funded museums and art galleries. Source: Kissiov 2004: 21.

## Representation of some historical events in Bulgarian museums

### Religion

Religion played a significant role in Bulgarian history especially during the five centuries when the country was under Ottoman rule. So what were the implications of communist ideologies for the churches' collections when 'religion' was regarded as taboo and anti-religious propaganda was rife?

The communist party 'could tolerate no organization or institution that might possibly offer an alternative focus of loyalty' (Sugar 1999: 45). In Bulgaria

(...) the Orthodox church was formally subordinated to the state, prohibited from engaging in education and charity work and deprived of its sources of finance...The Catholic and Protestant churches were all but destroyed because of their suspected links with the West (Dimitrov 2001: 24).

Although the communist regime recognized that ‘various churches could not be eliminated’ (Sugar *ibid.* 45) the main task of communist activists was to eradicate all religious ‘delusions’. Church collections seem to have been deliberately avoided as was any interference with monastic collections. However ‘...the existence of such collections as well as their richness and diversity, could not be completely neglected’ (Krasteva *ibid.* 280). In places such as the Museum of Rila monastery for example, the collections remained but the name of the museum had to be changed to ‘Museum of the History of Bulgarian Literature and Middle-ages and Revival Culture’ so avoiding all religious connotation and as if to underline that museums and religion were incompatible.

### **The Ottoman period**

In the process of re-writing history in communist museums and re-shaping public memory and perception for historicism even more striking is the example of how the Ottoman period was represented in those museums. In the historical section of the required three-tiered exhibitions the revolutionary activities of local people against the Ottomans had to be demonstrated. The period was represented rather briefly but always emphasising how many Bulgarians lost their lives during the Ottoman occupation.<sup>4</sup> Exhibits explicitly provoked hatred towards the Ottomans, which was transferred to the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria and neighbouring Turkey. This created serious social alienation, which culminated in the 1980s with the activities of the Bulgarian communist party, deporting from the country any Turks who refused to change their Muslim names to Bulgarian ones. The hatred was ‘visually’ implanted into museum visitors and especially aimed at children during their compulsory museum visits. The ultimate example for every museum of how to represent the Ottoman period was the depiction of an opened mass grave or an enormous pile of skulls.

### **The Communist period**

Looking at the communist ‘past’ and its representations in museums also hints at a carefully orchestrated ‘history’, meant to serve party needs. Kaneff (2004) discusses specific features that characterised socialist history, while Verdery (1996) even talks about the appropriation of the notion of ‘time’ and its utilisation by communist governments. ‘Intentionally elaborated ideology’ and ‘state-approved rendition of the past’, are but a few of its components (Kaneff *ibid.* 56-7). Socialist history relied greatly on textualisation (Fig. 2 and 3). The past, recorded in manuscripts of letters by communist heroes, photographs of dead communist heroes murdered by fascists, all exhibited in museums, made the past a knowledgeable past, a past that demonstrated the relationship between particular events and present phenomena. ‘Documentation provided ‘evidence’ of the legitimate position of the historical past at the same time allowing contemporary rendition of history to reinforce and build upon the old’ (Kaneff *ibid.* 62). In this way, Bulgarian socialist history represented a road, which linked the past to the present in a particular way. ‘The road led away from one place – fascism-capitalism – and towards a particular destination – communism’ (Kaneff *ibid.* 64).



Figure 2: Memorial museum Vela Peeva, Velingrad (© The Author).

Furthermore a local memorial museum at that time had an immensely important role with regards to the establishment of relations between the local community and the state. Being able to claim involvement in historical events in the fight against fascism meant being able to exercise power but also a means to attract state attention and the consequent benefits. Towns or villages which could prove involvement in the communist past were thriving places with significant funds allocated. Museums were the ultimate place to present such proof, gathering evidence of the involvement of a particular community in the ‘communist past’.

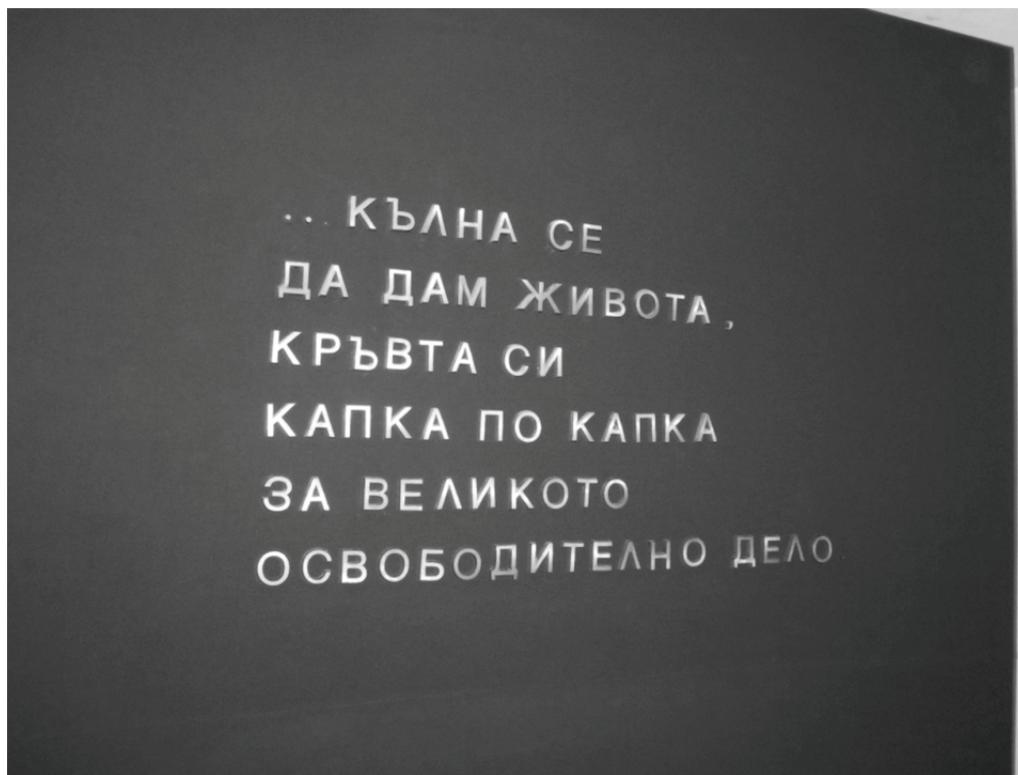


Figure 3: Memorial museum Vela Peeva, Velingrad, quote of a letter, written by V. Peeva. The text reads: 'I swear I will give my live, drop of blood by drop of blood for the great liberation'; translation is mine (© The Author).

Therefore the appearance of so many memorial museums is far from surprising. Not only did they establish a link with the past and proof of the heroism of those who fought against fascism thus providing the basis for the claims of grandeur of the party. In this way museums contributed in the process of use of history as a political resource. They were places where 'documentary evidence' of participation of a community in historical events could be exhibited. Once in a museum such 'evidence' became legitimate and authoritative, which turned museums into means providing access to state resources (Kaneff *ibid*).

All of the above reveals that 'the main task of Bulgarian museology in the communist period was building up a museum system that was socialist in spirit and content (Krasteva *ibid*: 278). The achievements of Bulgarian socialist museology are underlined by Kissiov (1984: 43):

(...) Without doubt the museum system in the years of communist regime achieved incredible heights. It was built under the guidance and with the help of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian communist party, which did what the bourgeois state before could not do.

This quotation glorifies the achievements of the communist party but cannot be substantiated – unless one considers the creation of a large number of identical museums, promulgating socialist ideology as a success. However if Kissiov wanted his texts published he had to conform to censorship rules. But from a contemporary point of view his comments can be seen in a very different light. It is true that the Bulgarian state before 1944 could not create what was done during the years of communist regime and arguably would not have wished to. What the communist regime created were museums where school children and workers were obliged to go to learn and be proud of the achievements of the communist party and its communist heroes. In

other words all cultural activities in the country were simply *in the service* of the leading party, enabling it to reach its target for political, economic or educational success (see Petkova-Campbell 2009 and 2010).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The party governing in Bulgaria for the period 1946–1989 was a communist party. However pure communism remains theoretical and the state was a socialist one. In the present text both terms are used but the term of communism is used prevalently to demonstrate the ideology Bulgarian communist party tried to implement in museum functioning.
- <sup>2</sup> Georgi Dimitrov (1882–1949) – leader of the Bulgarian communist party (1944–1949), General secretary of Comintern, eminent representative of Bulgarian and international communist movement.
- <sup>3</sup> Dimitar Blagoev (1856–1924) - Bulgarian political leader, founder of the Social-Democratic party (1891).
- <sup>4</sup> Although to this day there is no precise and accurate statistics.

## Bibliography

- Dimitrov, V. (2001) *Bulgaria, the Uneven Transition*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Iliev, K. (1985) Balgarskata Komunisticheska Partia I Kulturno-Istoricheskoto Nasledstvo, in: Dolapchieva, T. (ed.) *40 Godini Socialistichesko Muzeino Delo v NR Bulgaria*, Sofia, Komitet za kultura, 3-18 [40 Years Socialist Museology in the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria].
- Kissiov, I. (1984) Muzeinata Mreja v Narodna Republika Bulgaria, Postijenia i Probleimi, MPK, 3: 43-4 [Museum network in Bulgaria, Achievements and Problems].
- Kissiov, I. (2004) *Muzeinoto Delo v Bulgaria, Dokumentalna bronika (1945-1990)*, Sofia, Molivcheto OOD [Museology in Bulgaria – a Documentary Chronology].
- Kaneff, D. (2004) *Who owns the Past? The Politics of Time in a 'Model' Bulgarian Village*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books.
- Krasteva, S. (2003) *Studii po Muzeologiya*, t. 1, Sofia, IA FDK [Museology].
- Pecheva, R. and Raichev, M. 1955 *Materiali po Muzeino Delo*, Sofia, Nauka i izkustvo [Museological Materials].
- Petkova-Campbell, G. (2010) Bulgarian Museums in the Post-communist Period, *Museum Management and Curatorship*: 25 (3), 277–290.
- Petkova-Campbell, G. (2009) Communism and Museums in Bulgaria, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 15 (5), 399–412.
- Siljanovska, T. (1972) *Osnovi na Muzeeznanieto*, Sofia, Nauka i izkustvo [Museological Basics].
- Sugar, P. (1999) *East European Nationalism, Politics and Religion*, Variorum, Ashgate.
- Verdery K. (1996) *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton, Princeton University Press.