

## THE ATTITUDE OF MUSEUMS TO SOCIALISM IN THE PERIOD OF BULGARIAN TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

A. IGNATOVA<sup>1</sup> I. GANCHEVA<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *The museum stands for a social and cultural testimonial deposit of history, which is greatly influenced by the State policy of the country. During communism, throughout many countries of Eastern Europe, museums played an ideological part, enforcing the Marxist-Leninist dogma and the socialist lifestyle into the people's minds. Nowadays, Bulgaria does not possess a socialism-profiled museum; however there are institutions, museums and temporary exhibitions, both State-owned and private, which display communist artifacts. The article herein sets off to describe them both in a few words and resorting to a few pictures. It also aims at emphasizing their role, which is to analytically and critically point to the past ideologies and events, to the past culture and civilization, in order to synthesize and build a glorious future.*

**Key words:** *history, museum, communism, socialism, Eastern Block.*

Unlike a number of Member States of the former 'Eastern Bloc', Bulgaria does not have its own museum of socialism that should present a comprehensive history of the country from September 9, 1944 to November 10, 1989. There are comparatively few Bulgarian museums that expose subjects related to the near communist past, as permanent or temporary exhibitions. This paper presents some of the most active museums and institutions in this field, as well as the public and private initiatives aiming at collecting and debating the socialism era. Special attention is given to projects focused on building museums that should reflect the socialist period.

The museum as a social and cultural Institute is highly dependent on the State policy of the country. During the period of communist rule, in Bulgaria, as in many other countries of Eastern Europe, museums functioned as ideological institutions. Government officials were assigned the task of using museums in order to contribute to instilling a Marxist-Leninist worldview among the population and to consolidating the socialist way of life. In this regard, in the late 40s, museums paid attention to the search and collection of corporeal and documentary materials related to the revolutionary past of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Through a special decree of the Politburo of the Workers' Party (c), in

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of History, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of History, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria.

1947, which marked the beginning of the Museum of the Revolutionary Movement in Bulgaria, new museums were created. Among them, the Museum of Socialist Construction in the town of Dimitrovgrad was founded in 1951. It had the task of showing the establishment and development of the first socialist city in Bulgaria which is named after the communist leader Georgi Dimitrov. The museum was the first of its kind in the country and had long been a model for building similar types of museums (Dimitrovo town - Pernik town today, Madan town and others) and also departments of 'socialist construction' within historical museums.

Bulgaria's close links with the Soviet Union were reflected in the creation of the Museum of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship, in 1953. During the years of the communist regime an extensive network of museums was built in Bulgaria, which, at the end of the period consisted of a total of 217 museums. Among these, 45 were general, 59 – commemorative and 113 – specialized [1]. Significant material and documentary collections relating to the socialist development of the national economy in the Republic of Bulgaria were established in the National History Museum, the National Museum of the Revolutionary Movement, the National Polytechnic Museum and all regional historical museums with departments featuring 'Socialist Construction'. In the late 70-ies, it was recognized that collecting activities for the period after 1944 was inadequate. One of the main reasons is that it is difficult to separate the important from the unimportant in the selection of museum objects for modern history [2].

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, some transformations occurred in the museum network. Some museums, closely related to the ideology of the Communist Party, attempted to adapt to the new conditions. In late 1990, the National

Museum of the Revolutionary Movement was transformed into the National Museum of Political Parties and Movements and it concentrated on researching, collecting, exhibiting and promoting the history of the political parties and movements during the period of their development 1879-1991, in particular their participation and importance for the development of democratic processes in Bulgarian society [3]. For two years, the museum developed its current policy, expanded its collecting activities and organized numerous exhibitions, which were met with great public interest. After the restitution of the museum building, it was closed and its fund was handed over to the National Museum of History. The Museum of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship was transformed into a new museum 'Bulgaria and the Slavic World' and later turned into a branch of the National Historical Museum, without constant exposure to date. Consequently, the museum deposits of the National History Museum [4] were enriched with hundreds of thousands of objects but the socialist period was not present in its permanent exhibition.

A number of memorial museums dedicated to the life and work of people associated with the Bulgarian Communist Party and the anti-fascism fight ceased to exist. Their deposits were transferred to the respective historical museums.

Permanent exhibitions in many regional museums representing socialist construction were closed in the early years of the transition period. The same thing happened to almost all other historical museums. Only a very small part of the existing museums in the country dared to include in their exhibitions, objects from the past. Among them, there were historical museums in the first socialist city in Bulgaria – Dimitrovgrad, in Pravetz town - birthplace of Todor Zhivkov and, in Omurtag town.

The modern exhibition of the Historical Museum in Dimitrovgrad, with the exception

of some minor cosmetic changes, has remained the same since the second half of the 80-ies. In 1983, a decision of the Committee for Culture made another change in its profile. From the Regional Museum of Socialist Construction its conversion into a Museum of the Brigade Movement in Bulgaria was announced, in 1963. On September 2 1987, it opened its permanent exhibition, presenting two main topics: 'Youth Brigade Movement in Bulgaria (1946-1986)' and 'Dimitrovgrad - beginning and development of the town, socio-economic development, international relations and culture'. After 1989, during the transition from socialism to democracy the work in the cultural institutions managed to survive as it expanded its activities towards the study of historical Dimitrovgrad before the establishment of the city - the history of settlements and ethnographic studies etc. The theme 'History of the Brigade Movement in Bulgaria' is maintained and the collections associated with it are periodically enriched. In 1998, under a decision of the Municipal Council of Dimitrovgrad and the Ministry of Culture, the Museum of the Brigade Movement in Bulgaria was renamed as the Historical Museum with two departments: 'Modern and Contemporary History' and 'Ethnography' [5]. Other municipal museums in the country applied a similar formula for survival.

Today the permanent exhibition of the Historical Museum – Dimitrovgrad presents the youth brigade movement in Bulgaria (1946-1988) and the overall development of the first socialist city. Its main flaw is the lack of attractiveness. It is very informative – a significant part of the exhibition consists in photos, documents and texts [6]. This is partly due to the fact that most objects in the museum fund are documents and photographs. In the hall for temporary exhibitions, an ethnographic exhibition exists upon calendar customs, somehow offsetting

the lack of constant exposure of the department 'Ethnography' [7].

The structure of the museum also includes a House-Museum 'Penyo Penev'. This exhibition for the poet-builder has become the undisputed symbol of Dimitrovgrad [8], and also the Art Gallery, which shows the best works devoted to Dimitrovgrad.

Museum professionals do their best to preserve and present to the public museum collections related to objects from the socialist period, because they realize that the strength of their museum is in this collection. Indeed, the museum presents a different story that changed the fate of several generations - a break with the capitalist past and the firm imposition of the socialist way of life that is most pronounced in this first socialist city of Bulgaria [9].

Dimitrovgrad has not only a unique museum, but also a unique architectural heritage - its specific architectural ensembles are a kind of neoclassicism socialist replica of the nineteenth century interpreted in the spirit of the modern urban European thought from the 20-ies and 30-ies. The city, founded in 1947 was designed to be multifunctional with an optimum for its urban plan that was implemented with the enthusiasm of young people from over 900 cities [10]. The proposal of the architect Pavel Petkov that the town should 'be declared a special area - as a group architectural monument' sparked in 2007 among museum professionals in the city the idea of 'Dimitrovgrad - Museum of the 50-ies'. The idea collected broad public support. On February 20, 2008, a social movement 'Dimitrovgrad' - the living monument of architecture was established. Among the strategic guidelines for its development in 2008 - 2009 there were: preparation of a proposal for the declaration of the immovable cultural heritage to the National Institute for Monuments of Culture (today the National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage); the movement is preparing to build a museum: 'Monuments

of the Era of Socialism' and to that purpose it will establish a database of existing movable monuments from the time of socialism in the country and it will contact the Municipalities and organizations for the collection of cultural movable monuments; the development of tourist routes; the promotion of cultural tourism, and the implementation of international cooperation [11].

In January 2011, the following sites were declared to possess national cultural values in Dimitrovgrad: 11 mansions built in the early 50-ies of last century, the theatre building, the Community Center 'Hristo Botev', the Hotel 'Moscow', the former Bank 'Hebros', the square in front of the former cinema 'Medea' with its neighboring blocks, the hostel 'Neochim' and all the areas throughout the Maritza park [12]. The town will be included in the European totalitarian tourism route which will include 15 cities from 11 countries. The project 'Atrium' is managed by the municipality in Forli, Italy - the birthplace of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, and will last 30 months [13].

In Pravetz town - birthplace of the longtime head of State of socialist Bulgaria, people's memory of their distinguished fellow citizen is palpable. However, the former village became a model socialist town in whose center a monument of Todor Zhivkov stands. After his fall from power the monument was dismantled but soon after at the entrance of the town, another monument was installed built in the 70-ies.

The house of Todor Zhivkov's birth was restored to its present form in 1974 and was turned into a museum. It is an architectural and ethnographic reconstruction of the late Revival Balkan type house from the late XIX and early XX century and it recreates the atmosphere in which the future communist leader grew up. After 1990, the house was returned to the Zhivkov family but they offered it to the municipality, which has

opened it to visitors for a modest fee [14]. Built in the yard 'Foster Pravets building' where the First has led delegations, it is available since 2002 in the Historical Museum of the town. Here, a collection of gifts received by Todor Zhivkov is exhibited, in his capacity as head of state. Among them there are a camel saddle from the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, a hunting kit by Leonid Brezhnev, a vase with the image of Todor Zhivkov, which was given by the people of Uzbekistan on the occasion of his birthday, a decorative table from Zambia, stools from Ethiopia and dozens of other things from all over the world. The gifts are a testament of the broad diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and the rest of the world and they represent the culture of different peoples. There are also gifts from the Bulgarian towns and villages that reflect the attitudes toward the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party during various stages of socialism. Many of them have great artistic value [15].

The period 1944 -1989 is presented in the permanent exhibition in the National Museum of Military History – Sofia. It shows the development of the Bulgarian Army after World War II, its participation in the Warsaw Pact, as well as a Bulgarian national volunteer company N 4093 consisting of NATO members, with permanent location in the U.S. garrison from Gemershaym town, West Germany. The Company included 200 soldiers – Bulgarian volunteers who performed security functions and lasted from 1951 to 1964. The idea of its creation came from the Chairman of the Bulgarian National Committee, Dr. Georgi M. Dimitrov, general secretary of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union in exile [16].

Some museums display for the public part of their collections related to the socialist period, through organizing temporary exhibitions. Most of them are organized in conjunction with the 20th anniversary of the Berlin Wall. An exhibition was opened for

public audiences on 18 January 2011 at the Regional History Museum - Ruse town, entitled: 'Bureau of the dictator'. It also includes items received in recent years by the museum deposits from the project 'House Guest' in the forest park 'Lipnik' near Ruse (called Todor Zhivkov's residence). This was built as a place of frequent meetings between Todor Zhivkov and Nicolae Ceausescu in the most recent years of socialism and includes: desks, glass ink, chandeliers and floor lamps, which were part of the daily furniture of the two leaders' apartments. The difference between the two identical apartments used by Zhivkov and Ceausescu is the carpet - the Bulgarian leader's one was red and his Romanian counterpart's - blue. Before dismantling and moving the objects, they are photographed in their authentic environment which will enable future exhibitions and authentic restorations [17].

Overall, however, the exhibition of objects from the period of socialism in Bulgarian museums can be relatively rarely seen even if the public's interest in it has recently risen.

During Bulgaria's years of difficult and painful transition from totalitarianism to democracy there was created a number of private and public collections of materials from the period of socialism. The beginning of many of them can be found in the first years of transition but information about them has begun to appear in public only in recent years.

By mid-2006, the doctor Darin Toshev from Pleven town disclosed to the media that his intention to open, by the end of that year, the first private museum of socialism, in an exhibition hall where there would be presented printed material, medals, plates and other items from that period in Bulgaria and abroad - monumental memorials. The collection was launched in 1990, when Toshev purchased several thousand volumes of party literature after the liquidation of the former Party House in Pleven. Fifteen years later that number grew to about 10,000. His

motive for the creation of the museum is that 'we should not ignore all the stages of the development of our country'. He said that his family was connected to that system, and children should have an example of the period in order to link the concept of socialism to something that is concrete and visible [18].

An impressive collection of objects associated with the socialist daily life was gathered and displayed on the walls and shelves of the family home of a librarian from Veliko Tarnovo, Nikolay Kolev. In the mid 90s the former student majoring in History at Veliko Turnovo University 'Cyril and Methodius' often met with colleagues and friends here. Among the topics discussed was that of socialism. Gradually the guests began to carry objects from that period, which became a tradition, and soon the place became known as the 'Red Ceiling'. Explaining his collection, the holder told a journalist of the newspaper 'Monitor': 'All these things and objects are not just something old and useless. Through them, we, modern people, can go back in time and learn a lot about that controversial era. A poster for the exhibition of the artist from fraternal Vietnam or even a coupon for a work or a student's buffet can tell a lot' [19].

Velislav Minekov's collection of items from the socialist way of life is represented for the audience in the so-called 'Red House' in Sofia, and among the items that it includes mention should be made of the 'Inventory book of socialism', composed by the writer Georgi Gospodinov and culturologist Yana Genova. Among them there are symbols of the time, subjects such as radio; TV 'Opera'; Vero detergent for washing dishes; circular plane; device for roasting peppers known as 'chushkopek'; komsomols cards; 'Udarnik cigarettes'; Krava chocolate and others [20].

The Virtual Museum of Communism on youtube.com was constructed by Velislav Radev [21]. Here, archival video and

documented personal testimonies can be seen from the author of the socialist past. Another virtual museum – ‘SOCMUS’ [22] presents different areas of the graphic design of Bulgarian socialism. This project is focused entirely on the artistic value of works rather than their historical context.

In connection with the 20th anniversary of the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria, several collections have been issued with objects from the years before the democratic changes such as those in Silistra Village of Raven [23], in Plovdiv school ‘Kliment Ohridski’ [24]. The International Society ‘Elias Canetti’ which is headquartered in Rouse town, in October 2009, arranged the exhibition with forgotten and unnecessary objects from the time of socialism. The exhibition is assembled by residents of the town. One of the organizers’ ideas is for all exhibits in time to be arranged in a flatlet panel, which becomes a sort of museum of the people’s lifestyle in socialism [25].

The debate ‘for’ or ‘against’ the exhibition of the socialist period began first in the social network, greatly expanding in the public space in conjunction with the celebration of 20th anniversary of the Berlin Wall. Supporters of the museum display cultural heritage from the communist regime in the country that highlight as arguments the existence of museums of communism in many former socialist countries as well as the younger generation and foreign interest in this historical period. Opponents believe that it is too early and too painful to display the memories of the past to one part of society.

Real contours yield a long-standing idea of building a Museum of Totalitarian Art [26]. This idea is in accordance with the one approved by the Council of Ministers on February 10, 2010 ‘the concept of major metropolitan museum’s’ of the Ministry of Culture. In its closed and open part, there will be exposed works of art from the era of socialism. It will be located in the building of

the Ministry of Culture in the metropolitan area ‘Izgreve’. In the surrounding area, it will be exposed in the open, including monuments from the period after World War II to November 10, 1989. Part of it will be the existing concrete bunker which will partly recreate the atmosphere, resembling the former mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. Part of the door of the mausoleum will be exposed, which presents the Minister of Culture Rashidov, who pocketed it after the destruction of the surface part of the mausoleum in 1999, as well as the wax mummy of Georgi Dimitrov. According to the concept, all this attempts ‘to imagine the museum as part of a network of traces of that time, which can be found in all areas of Sofia: from the suburbs (monument ‘Flag of Peace’, Boyana Residence) to the city center (complex of Largo, undergrounds of former mausoleum, monument of the Soviet Army, Common Grave, etc.)’ [27].

In connection to the construction of the new National Museum, there are presented the art and culture of the Bulgarian society during the socialist era. On the 17th of May 2011, a letter was sent (electronically) by the Deputy Minister of Culture Todor Chobanov to directors of national, regional and municipal museums in the country with a copy to the mayors of municipalities. It was required, by the 28<sup>th</sup> day of that month, that museums should submit to the Ministry of Culture, lists of cultural values held from the socialist era such as monuments, sculptures, easel (interior) sculpture, paintings, memorable signs and other artifacts. These should be characterized with the status, inventory number and size. Actions taken in recruiting the museums to identify exhibits give reason to hope that in the near future there will be open a permanent exhibition.

Creating an art museum for the period 1944 - 1989 did not remove the need to build a historical museum for the same period. With the announcement of the creation of the Museum of totalitarian art, other opinions

were heard in the public domain, which were not devoid of logic. This is what Tsvetana Kyoseva, Acting Director of the National Historical Museum, said in an interview printed in the newspaper 'Novinar': 'To me, however, the idea of the totalitarian art museum somehow sounds too closed. This art has its basis in that it was born by the ones living during totalitarianism. We also should tell how people lived at that time. I think this should be a historical and art museum. I would call for a general museum of totalitarianism, not only of totalitarian art. However, I think the time will come for this museum. Young people do not know what it means for a pioneering organization. It is much easier to be adopted with such exhibits' [28]. Undoubtedly, Bulgaria needs a comprehensive museum presentation of the communist period in its history. It should be fair and balanced and all sides of life in the recent past should be presented with their positive and negative traits.

Instead of a conclusion, we will end with a quote from a letter sent recently by a group of intellectuals to the Minister of Interior, an appeal to order for the building of the Museum of the Police to be given to the Museum of Communism: *'The museum of Communism is good practice for the generations who have lived - to assess it, and for the following - to learn about it. The existence of such a museum is a clear sign of belonging to a democratic world.'*

### Notes and references

1. Недков, С. История на музейното дело в България. С, 2006, с. 272.
2. Долапчиев, Т. Национално съвещание в Силистра – Музеи и паметници на културата, 1979, кн. 1, с. 72.
3. ЦДА, ф. 275, оп. 6., а.е.1, л. 23.
4. More information about museum objects available from the period 1944-1989, in: Кьосева, Ц. „Червената колекция’ на Националния исторически музей – В: Панаир на музейни изложби, 27-29 октомври 2010, с. 22-25 [http://www.museumruse.com/actual/katalog\\_MEF\\_2010.pdf](http://www.museumruse.com/actual/katalog_MEF_2010.pdf) >
5. <http://museum.dimitrovgrad.bg/history.php>
6. Тодорова, Н., Н. Умурска Да запазим миналото, такова, каквото е – как да съхраним уникалната история на Димитровград? – В: Българските музеи в условията на членството на страната в Европейския съюз. Сливен, 2008, с. 388.
7. See more information: <http://museum.dimitrovgrad.bg/expo.php>
8. Penyo Penev is one of the most dramatic and provocative personalities in Bulgarian poetry from the 50s of XX century
9. Тодорова, Н., Н. Умурска Да запазим миналото, такова, каквото е..., с. 392.
10. A strategy for development of the Association 'Dimitrovgrad - the living monument of architecture' 2008-2009
11. ibid
12. Declaring a part of Dimitrovgrad protected monument of cultural heritage is characterized as a precedent, as under current law until 2009 on Monuments and museums such status can only get items with more than 100 years of history
13. [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=10150204966349243&comments](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=10150204966349243&comments) >
14. Йолчева, Т. Насаме с Тато – в. „Стандарт’ от 24.10.2009 <http://paper.standartnews.com/bg/article.php?article=298880>
15. See more information: <http://www.museum-pravets.com/muzeen.komplex.php>; <http://www.museum-pravets.com/colekcia.podaruci.na.todor.jivkov.php#>; Татяна Борисова: Засилен е интересът към колекцията от

- подаръци на Тодор Живков в Историческия музей в Правец, 19.04.2011  
<<http://botevgrad.com/news/31807/Tatjana-Borisova-Zasilen-e-interesat-kam-kolekciyata-ot-podaraci-na-Todor-Jivkov-v-Istoricheskiya-muzej-v-Pravec/>>
16. See more information:  
<http://www.militarymuseum.bg/Expozitziq/postoqna/12.html>
17. Exhibition chord of socialism in Rousse, 18.01.2011 [http://www.ruseinfo.net/news\\_84406.html](http://www.ruseinfo.net/news_84406.html)
18. Mitko Palauzov and Alyosha shining in First Private Museum of socialism, 11.05.2006  
<<http://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2006/05/11/mitko-palauzov-i-aliosha-blestiat-v-pyrvi-chasten-muzei-na-socializma.22624>>
19. Първанов, Ив. Библиотекар създаде Музей на комунизма – в. „Монитор“ от 24.07.2009 <http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=207139>
20. Каролеева, Т. Ивентарна книга на социализма, 22.11.2006  
<[http://dariknews.bg/view\\_article.php?article\\_id=100132](http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=100132)>
21. <http://www.youtube.com/user/BulgariaXXVek?blend=5&ob=5>
22. <http://www.socmus.com/>
23. Пунчева, А. Музей на комунизма, 30.05.2009 <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4290159,00.html>>
24. Museum of socialism in Plovdiv School, 29/03/2011  
<<http://novatv.bg/news/view/2011/03/29>>
25. Йорданова, Ж. Соцът възкръсна в русенски музей, 23.10.2009  
<<http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=218858>>
26. On February 23, 2005 Chairman of the Committee on Tourism Municipality of Sofia Rumen Draganov offered around Monument ‘1300 years Bulgaria’ at the National Palace of Culture in the capital to build a Museum of Totalitarian Art, including commercial buildings in the center built in Stalinist architectural style: former Party House, Presidency and Council of Ministers – Баева, И., Е. Калинова Социализмът в огледалото на прехода. С., 2011, с. 84.
27. Станчев, Т. Тоталитарният музей/музей на комунизма, 11.09.2010 <<http://bulgarian-museum.blogspot.com/2010/09/blog-post.html>>
28. Цветана Кюсева: Пазим над 270 хиляди паметника на тоталитаризма: Интервю на Димитър Николов, 10.03.2010  
<[http://www.novinar.net/news/tcvetana-kioseva-pazim-nad-270-hiliadi-pametnika-na-totalitarizma\\_MzIxMzszMg==.html](http://www.novinar.net/news/tcvetana-kioseva-pazim-nad-270-hiliadi-pametnika-na-totalitarizma_MzIxMzszMg==.html)>
29. Лозанов, Г. Как да подредим Държавна сигурност до шоколада „Крава“, 9.11.2009  
<<http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=276040>>