

Cold War, Hot Topic: Museum Representations of 'Communism' in Post-Socialist Central and  
Eastern Europe

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**Abstract**

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The Cold War era—post-WWII until 1989—presents an array of challenges to interpretation in museum exhibits because of the abundance of national, local and individual experiences it encompasses. In Central and Eastern Europe, the representation of Soviet Socialism or Communism in museum exhibitions is receiving increasing attention in an array of fields including museology, history and anthropology. Recent studies focus on the role of visual material, collective memory and politics in determining museum interpretation and narrative approaches. Given the upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of ‘Communism’ throughout the region, the representation of the realities of Soviet Socialist life has a distinctive timeliness and discursive quality.

This qualitative study explores the range of ways museums represent the Soviet Socialist period (post-WWII-1989) in Central and Eastern Europe. The study emphasizes museums that exclusively interpret this period, Communism museums, and highlights the narrative and interpretative frameworks these institutions employ to address difficult and nuanced histories in their exhibits. The study was conducted in August 2011, through onsite visits and conversations with museum representatives at four sites: 1) Muzeum PRL-u (Krakow, Poland), 2) Museum of Communism (Prague, Czech Republic), 3) Children’s Museum at FEZ Berlin (Berlin, Germany) and 4) DDR Museum (Berlin, Germany). The study is augmented by an open-ended questionnaire from House of Terror Museum (Budapest, Hungary). The data were used to build five case studies.

The results of these case studies illustrate that Communism museums are openly addressing difficult histories in their exhibits and are concerned with whether their interpretation matches visitors' perceptions of the Soviet Socialist era. The analysis highlighted trends in exhibit content (i.e.: daily life and oppression) and in interpretive frameworks (i.e.: oral histories and interactive elements). Communism museums are increasingly employing interpretative strategies such as firsthand accounts, immersive and interactive exhibits to provide context and foster a high level of visitor engagement. Limitations to generalizability include sample size, language barriers and the disparate locations of the study sites.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The Cold War era—the period just after WWII until 1989—is comprised of nearly 40 years of important individual, national and world experiences. It encompasses a time of cultural suppression and civil unrest in the United States (Romano, 2009) as well as economic restructuring, debt crises and revolutions worldwide (Judt, 2005 & others). In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE—see Appendix A, p. 54), much of the region resided under Communist, or as it will largely be referred to in this thesis, Soviet Socialist hegemony. The realities of Soviet Socialist life, embodied in its values, behaviors and social normalcy, were vastly different from Western equivalents (Verdery, 1996). An early fascination with the economic, socio-cultural and political differences emblematic of key themes addressed in museum exhibitions of the 1990s (Scribner, 1999 & others), has given way to a deeper exploration of the context in which ‘Communism museums’ interpret history. Scholars today are examining museums that address the Soviet Socialist era through the lens of collective memory, politics and the dominant historical interpretation. The distinctive and nuanced history of the Soviet Socialist era in CEE continues to make the period both contentious and compelling to interpret and study in museums.

The reality of life in CEE and the effects of the Soviet Socialist political and economic systems are enduring exhibit themes a quarter century since the end of Soviet dominance over the region (Light, 2000). Consumption was one of the first themes explored in museum exhibits that portrayed the realities of life in Soviet Socialist Europe (Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000) in large part because of the many unintended and transformative effects the communist economic system had on society and everyday life (Verdery, 1996). From the procurement of goods to the control of consumer products, consumption as a whole was deeply politicized; the system’s



failure to maintain an acceptable standard of living in countries spread dissent, helped discredit the economic model and emblazon the era in collective memory long after the system crumbled (Verdery, 1996). Society was also deeply affected by state-sponsored surveillance; both its pervasiveness and a willing compliance from people to inform on others, ensured that the effects of surveillance would remain relatively ambiguous until the demise of the Soviet Socialist states (Drakulic, 1993). In post-socialist Germany, the curation of its infamous secret police records had monumental effects on society; it forced East Germans to “figure these reports into their own memories of life in a communist system” and compelled the country as whole to “redefine the way Germans look back on their two histories” according to Scribner (2000, p. 172-173). Differences in lived experiences continue to be perpetuated today, where in the post-socialist world, the former geopolitical distinction of CEE has transcended the Iron Curtain, and is now dependent on diametric oppositions between “capitalism and socialism, civility and primitivism...elites and plebs” (Buchowski, 2006, p. 466). Nearly 25 years after the end of Communism, and years after many joined the European Union, CEE countries continue to be distinguished from the rest of Europe based primarily on a historical past from which recent generations are increasingly removed (Buchowski, 2006).

The representation of ‘Communism’ in museum exhibitions is a topic of increasing interest to CEE scholars because it sheds light on the role of memory, politics and dominant perspectives in historical interpretations of recent history (Apor & Sarkisova, 2008). It also provides an avenue to discuss how visual material connects visitors to the historical narratives presented in museums (Apor, 2010; Apor & Sarkisova, 2008; Berdahl, 2010; Crane, 1997; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000). Recently, scholars have broadened their examination of museums and commemorative spaces across the CEE region (e.g. Apor, 2010; Cristea & Radu-

Bucurenci, 2008; Horváth, 2008; Main, 2008; Mark, 2008; Rátz, 2006; Vukov, 2008 & others). Studies conducted in the 2000s explore the (re)presentation of the Soviet Socialist era by examining the use of visual material, the role of collective memory, the content and context of exhibit spaces and places, and finally the role of tourism and politics in shaping museum interpretation (Apor, 2010; Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci, 2008; Horváth, 2008; Hwang, 2009; Main, 2008; Mark, 2008; Rátz, 2006; Vukov, 2008 & others).

Recently, more attention has also been paid to museum interpretation of the Soviet Socialist era outside of CEE. One scholar examining this subject is Renee Romano (2009) who considers how Civil Rights museums can deepen the historical and global context of their exhibits. The history of the Cold War is an important part of the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Romano, 2009) because 1) the Civil Rights Movement occurred during the Cold War, 2) was part of a global push for universal civil rights and 3) would have been an important propaganda piece for the USSR (Judt, 2005; Romano, 2009 & others). Romano contends the importance of historical context resides in the museum as arbiter of knowledge, namely, presenting the “whole picture” in museum exhibits informs those who may not have had the opportunity to otherwise learn about a specific topic. Romano explains that, “a museum may in fact provide the most complex interpretation of a particular event that [the visitor is] likely to encounter” (p. 33). Therefore, “museums can, and should, embrace this challenge to rethink the traditional narratives they employ to interpret United States history” (Romano, 2009, p. 51).

## **Purpose Statement**

This qualitative study explores the range of ways museums represent the Soviet Socialist period (post-WWII-1989) in Central and Eastern Europe. The study emphasizes museums that exclusively interpret this period, Communism museums, and highlights the narrative and interpretative frameworks these institutions employ to address difficult and nuanced histories in their exhibits.

Museums face many obstacles when it comes to presenting a full interpretation of history (Crane, 1997; Ritchie, 2001). Aside from the subjectivity and expansiveness of Cold War history, much of the scholarship in this area has been conducted in the last decade (Romano, 2009). It takes time for new information to be disseminated and incorporated into museum interpretation (Romano, 2009). Therefore, it is important to continually examine the limitations of museum interpretation and define where historical and cultural context can be augmented (Apor, 2010; Ritchie, 2001; Romano, 2009 & others). Case studies describing how museums cope with difficult histories may broaden our understanding of the field's practice and help practitioners with future exhibits. Given the upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014 and a host of other auspicious anniversaries that mark the end of Soviet dominance over CEE, understanding how museums represent the 'communist' way of life in exhibitions is relevant to past and future generations and has wide appeal among those who lived through the era and later generations who did not.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Although there have been few forays into the representation of the Cold War era and in particular Soviet Socialism in museum exhibits in the United States (Romano, 2009), scholars in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have been weighing in on how European museums represent this period in their exhibits since the 1990s (Berdahl, 2010; Crane, 1997; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000 & others). The following is an overview of themes and trends that have driven the discussion about Soviet Socialism and Communism in museum exhibits in CEE over the last twenty years. Many of the works focus on representations of Soviet Socialism in specific countries such as Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Some authors choose to focus on regions such as the Baltic and the Balkans. Still others focus solely on exhibit content in specific museums like the House of Terror Museum in Budapest.

This chapter is organized into several sub-sections that encompass the range of literature in the field today. From anthropology and history to heritage and tourism studies, scholars are broaching the topic of Soviet Socialism in museum exhibits by examining how **nostalgia**, **collective and national memory**, **commemoration** and **politics** affect museum interpretation. The chapter begins with a discussion of **visual material** and how it serves as an interpretative approach that connects museum visitors to the recent past.

From everyday objects to photographs, newspaper clippings to statues and architecture; visual material conveys ideas, can connect visitors to museum interpretation and serves as a catalyst for memories (Apor, 2010; Apor & Sarkisova, 2008; Berdahl, 2010; Crane, 1997; Scribner 1999; Scribner, 2000). A considerable amount of literature has been published on the association between objects and a “relationship to the recent past.”

As early as the 1990s, scholars explored how museum exhibits about the Soviet Socialist era in Germany elicited debates over cultural authenticity, the ‘successes and failures’ of Soviet Socialism and the veracity of memory (Berdahl, 1999; Crane, 1997; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000). Exhibits at the German Historical Museum (DHM) in Berlin shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany broached the subject of the reevaluation of memories and the public’s perception of history (Crane, 1997). At the time, Germany grappled with accepting a new unified identity (Crane, 1997). DHM intentionally created an exhibit that highlighted both East and West German history in ‘tandem’ (Crane, 1997). This juxtaposition of East and West culture is problematic according to Scribner who points out that museums in West Germany were displaying what were considered the ‘remnants’ of East German or GDR culture (Scribner, 2000) even as many former GDR citizens continued to live life as they had in the previous regime (Berdahl, 2010). Similar exhibitions about the GDR both reminded Germans of the country’s previous division and served, “to concretize the work of memory for the successes and failures of the socialist project,” Scribner maintains (1999, p. 149); their erratic narrative elements ranged, “from sober, historical description to melancholic attachment, from the brutal erasure to the painful work of mourning, and from arrogant dismissal to nostalgic fascination” (p. 139). Curating the GDR further divided the East from the West because it marked the differences between Soviet Socialism and capitalism (Scribner, 1999). The ‘museumification’ of the East may have hindered Germany’s early attempts to reconcile its ‘communist’ past in part, because West German culture was privileged over its GDR equivalent (Scribner, 1999). Despite these issues, for many Germans, museums increasingly became, “a space where viewers [could] not only come together to debate their past and future, but where they [could] also identify and insert

their private lives, their own memories of countless tiny details, into the larger body of [German] history,” Scribner writes (1999, p. 142).

Interest in the museum representation of Soviet Socialism has recently expanded across the CEE region (Apor, 2008; Horváth, 2008; Main, 2008; Vukov, 2008). In Poland, there has been an increase in the interest in and representation of their ‘communist’ past; paradoxically this is taking place at a time when the generational differences between those who lived through the Soviet Socialist era and ‘millennials’ is at its most disparate (Main, 2008). One of the ways museums reconcile this distance is through the use of interpretative and narrative forms—by taking discursive approaches to their exhibits and encouraging visitors to ‘curate their own’ experiences (Main, 2008). Two private museum initiatives in Poland tout the message, “anybody can create his or her own version of the representation of Communism...the field is not restricted to historians and other professionals” (Main, 2008, p. 398). While this interpretative form allows for creativity and ownership of ideas, allowing visitors to curate their own experience poses a risk because when devoid of historical contextualization, Main contends, Communism can be “turned into an allegorical past” (p. 398).

In Bulgaria, the Soviet Socialist era remains a “blank period” in museums (Vukov, 2008, p. 301). Bulgarian museums struggle to find sufficient interpretations and meaning to, “embody [the] post-socialist vision of history in museum narratives,” Vukov observes (p. 310). In large part, this struggle is a result of the role of museums in Soviet Socialist Bulgaria, which primarily held a propaganda function (Vukov, 2008). Similar to the museums in Poland described by Main (2008), projects in Bulgaria such as the website “I Lived Socialism” give, “predominance to personal narratives and private recollections” (p. 135). These projects transcend the typical museum model of top-down curatorial voice, and provide an outlet for individuals who wish to

add their experiences to the collective and collected memory (Vukov, 2008). The end result turns personal narrative into “the museum object” (Vukov, 2008, p. 325).

The self-curated narrative form is an exception to ‘Communism’ museums; many more embrace the traditional curatorial voice or take their cues from politics (Apor, 2010; Horváth, 2008). In Hungary, “the image of the socialist past has been re-shaped as a result of various social, political and cultural developments,” Horváth explains (p. 249). This process has been defined as, “predominantly a symbolic struggle” to assign meaning and delineate the history of the socialist era in that country (Horváth, 2008, p. 250). The paradigm raised by Horváth is that, paradoxically, “the degree to which a mode of remembering is able to shape the broader arena of social memory depends to a great extent on its potential to be institutionalized” (p. 272). This can be generalized throughout the region and has led to the purging of objects and sites with negative associations of Soviet Socialist era (Apor, 2010; Czepczyński, 2008 & others). Simultaneously, it has led to the creation of other sites where the history and memories of socialism can be explored (Apor, 2010; Horváth, 2008).

According to Czepczyński (2008), “historical and sometimes ‘hysterical’ policy creates immense pressure on local governments to purge any post-communist residua still remaining...sometimes against the will of the local population” (p. 123). Czepczyński proposes that statue parks such as the one located in Budapest, Hungary will become more popular as governments further dismantle and displace their soviet heritage. Some have questioned the value of eradicating socialist symbols and monuments from CEE (Horváth, 2008; Czepczyński, 2008) and placing them into collections or museums (Apor, 2010; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000). One reason for this is if the goal of removing these objects from their original context is to keep them out of sight and mind, then any positive associations with the socialist era are

muted and conversation about the time is essentially stifled (Czepczyński, 2008). Removing objects into museum settings also raises questions of authenticity whether in context (Apor; Scribner) or interpretation (Czepczyński, 2008).

Museums can be used to create ‘historical authenticity’ and in CEE, Apor (2010) contends museums use interpretation to legitimize a specific version of history that conforms to a dominant historical perspective of the ‘communist era’. This view is supported by Czepczyński (2008) who writes that:

the communist period and associated cultural landscape is being critically contextualized as a time and space of oppression, devastation and tyranny...Disgraceful and/or insignificant icons bring the dark memory back, so the ‘recent past’ and its residua can be merely kept as warning witnesses for future generations, elements of historical education or tribute to the victims of communist totalitarianism. (p. 138)

Some scholars question the use of museums to ‘create’ context for historical objects specifically when, as Horváth (2008) writes, “the authentic object must be considered as a fragment of an earlier world’s reality, which in a museographic context, by its mimetic function, is able to produce a general meaning” (p. 269). Historical context was a primary motivator to ‘curate’ the GDR secret police files when they were opened to general scrutiny, yet as Scribner (2000) writes East Germans attempted, “to figure these reports into their own memories of life in a communist system,” challenging the notion that museums only create the context for objects and not vice-versa (p. 172).

## **Nostalgia**

Some scholars view nostalgia as a sort of ‘counter-memory’ or alternative view of the transitions (political, economic and social) in the region (Berdahl, 2010; Scribner, 1999 & others). Others maintain that nostalgia over socialism and in particular the marketing of nostalgia is problematic (Czepczyński, 2008 & others).



Nostalgia is alternately called *Ostalgia* or *Ostalgie* (both nouns) when referring to Germany and the GDR (Berdahl, 2010; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000). In the following passage, Scribner (2000) describes the origins of *Ostalgia* in the German context:

A new German word has surfaced to describe this trend: Ostalgie, derived from Nostalgie or nostalgia. Wrested of the letter n, the first syllable becomes ost, the word for east; from the cold war up to the present this word has been loaded with meaning for German speakers. (p. 174)

Berdahl describes *Ostalgie* as, “identification with different forms of opposition, solidarity and collective memory...it can evoke feelings of longing, mourning, resentment, anger, relief, redemption, and satisfaction...” (p. 56). ‘Ostalgic practices’, like shopping in Eastern chain-stores and buying goods formerly produced in the East, for example, “reflect and constitute the construction and expression of a kind of counter-memory” (Berdahl, 2010, p. 55). Goods from the former East are endowed with meaning and, “came to stand for the meaning of transition itself” writes Berdahl (p. 48). Ostalgia is not only a manner of remembering a bygone era; it is a means of forging a personal connection with that time (Berdahl, 2010).

Besides the commercialization of the GDR, the ‘GDR revival’ also entailed the museumification of GDR everyday life namely, “collecting everything from East German packaging materials to work brigade medals,” and curating it (Berdahl, 2010, p. 54). The curation of the GDR in the late 1990s to early 2000s was both a cultural and economic endeavor (Berdahl, 2010; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2000); it is viewed as a positive, albeit unintentional consequence of the dissolution (Scribner, 2000) and also regarded as creating negative associations with a region in a museum context (Berdahl, 2010). Czepczyński (2008) argues that, “in this postcommunist cultural moment the notion of nostalgia is highly contested” (p. 175). Scribner (2000) points out that the GDR museums, “concentrate on the private and the domestic, the realm of what East Germans called ‘niche culture...’” and “assert that private lives were

indeed led under Communism, despite the state's attempts to deny individualistic indulgences" (p. 143). Museum exhibits about GDR everyday life also served to construct, "an image of socialist backwardness as reflected in and constituted by its quaint and outdated products" (Scribner, 2000, p. 50). Showcasing the curiousness of GDR life was another way of making a case for the regime's dissolution and failed to take into account, "the social and historical contexts that may have produced it" (Berdahl, 2010, p. 51). Ostalgia is centered on a binary opposition between East and West, suggests Berdahl, who concludes that it is, "a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantage, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption," reflected in museum exhibits of the East (p. 120).

The notion of *Ostalgia*, brings with it a sense of authenticity; Scribner (1999) writes, "in spite of its drab reality, the East nonetheless embodied the utopian potential of a 'more authentic' existence" (p. 148). But nostalgia, warns Czepczyński (2008), "should not be mistaken with memory," which tends to 'idealize' the past (p. 145). Czepczyński argues that:

remembering the socialist past has been a selective process of forgetfulness and oscillates between carnival, museum, golden times of youth and the promised 'workers' paradise'....ostalgic re-interpretation of the socialist past and its icons might imply falsely positive and embellished image of the times. (p. 144-146)

Nostalgia for 'communist' times seems to be, "a shadow on the political reality...and sometimes on the culture of the period of transformation," writes Czepczyński (p. 144). For some, the events of the 1980s and 1990s marked a transformative era that brought with it the prospects of a new and better future in the form of democracy and market economy as well as, "the realization that all the communist regimes survived 40 years only due to ruthless dictatorships, terror and surveillance" (Czepczyński, 2008, p. 146). For others, the post-socialist age has reduced the residua of the recent past into 'mnemonics', which when, "...viewed in relation to larger

historical and political processes and contexts,” tell a nuanced and complex story (Berdahl, 2010, p. 120).

### **Collective and National Memory**

All collective memories occur in a ‘spatial framework’ and while they all take place in a specific time and space, it is the associations with a place that ‘conjure’ them up (Halbwachs, 1980). Collective memory also has to contend with cultural memory, an idea described by Jan Assmann (2009) as, “a collective concept for all knowledge” predicated on behaviors and experiences repeated and taught over generations that transcend everyday memory (p. 126). Assmann’s writings suggest that “objectivized culture” is highly tied to group and individual identity (p. 28); this is a highly charged implication for museums of Communism as the writings below suggest. Apor & Sarkisova (2008) describe the paradigm in which historians and other scholars are attempting to reconcile the dominant narrative with collective and individual memory in the introduction to Past for the Eyes:

Historians, as well as other students of contemporary East-Central European public recollections, try to understand the subject of their investigations as the result of collective mental practices and processes. This is usually described as collective memory, social memory of historical consciousness and believed to be possessed and dominated by the state or civil society....scholars working on the recent past are paradoxically challenged by abundance of memory and the variety of witness’ accounts which confront the professional historical narrative with the simple claim “I was there and it was completely different.

Assmann observes that, “through the practice of oral history, we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of collective memory (p. 127).

According to Apor (2010), while the museum’s dominance over the ‘formation of national consciousness’ was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the collapse of Soviet socialism has complicated national memory in the region. This is also proposed by Light (2000) who writes

that, “the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have been attempting to redefine senses of national identity” ever since the end of Soviet Socialism (p. 157). Light suggests that:

the process of redefining national pasts in the post-communist period is frustrated by the enduring presence of the material legacy of Communism...some symbols of the former regimes – such as public statuary – can be rapidly erased...other elements of the built heritage of Communism – whether monumental public buildings or the plethora of tower blocks built for industrial workers – will persist for much longer, representing highly visible symbols of a period of history which many people want to forget. (p. 159)

By the same token, Horváth (2008) finds that, “the role of historical consensus is quite ambiguous and the authority of academic knowledge more fragile and controversial” with regard to the recent past (p. 248). Socialist history is anything but, “the exclusive intellectual property of professional academic historians,” writes Horváth; many people are still alive who lived through this period. Therefore, the nuanced and wide-ranging experiences from this era form a ‘communicative memory’ or ‘cultural memory’ (Horváth, 2008, p. 248).

Conversely, Vukov (2008) considers the effects of socialist museum-culture on post-socialist Bulgaria and suggests that during the Soviet Socialist era museums, “served as radicalized forms of the expropriation of the past” (p. 332). Museums were largely used in propagandizing during the communist era in Bulgaria, therefore, “it is not surprising that, given this overexploited encounter between museums and the population in the socialist period, a critical lack of interest in museums with historical collections became dominant after the change of regime” (p. 319). In the post-socialist era, socialism is the ‘unmemorable’ in Bulgarian museums, as an era ‘not subject to forgetting’ but extraordinarily difficult to represent in the museum (Vukov, 2008).

Collective and cultural memory are shaped by that which the group or society wants to emphasize; certainly this is the case in cultural institutions (Apor, 2010; Assmann, 2009; Horváth, 2008). Museums are places where nations can establish a collective or cultural memory

(Apor & Sarkisova, 2008; Crane, 1997; Scribner, 2000). This is done deliberately and at times, is at odds with the general consensus around an historical issue (Duncan, 2000; Horváth, 2008).

Horváth draws our attention to an issue which other scholars (see Apor, 2010) have discussed: there are problematic uses of collective memory—even in museums.

### **Commemoration and the “Politics of History”**

How, where and why we commemorate historical events are decisions that routinely hinge on politics (Apor, 2010; Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci, 2008; Czepczyński, 2008; Horváth, 2008; Main, 2008; Vukov, 2008). Current discourses on the representation of socialism at commemorative sites in CEE, including museums exhibits, routinely consider the influence of individual nations’ political realities. This assertion is supported by Main, Czepczyński, Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci and others who write primarily from an emic perspective. In Poland, Main suggests distinguishing between, “the representation of Communism in exhibitions and contemporary Polish politics is vague and complex at the same time” (p. 397). This view is supported by Czepczyński, who argues that, “every museum, especially historical museums, are always political projects, where the organizers try to stress and commemorate some aspects of the past, since it is never possible to present all of the features of the historical discourse” (p. 145). In Romania, the paucity of museum exhibits representing the communist era mirrors the abundance of memorials sites that commemorate the “communist tragedy” and “anti-Communism” (Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci, 2008, p. 275-276). This is largely due to the political and religious realities of Romania according to Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci, who contend that the religious overtones combined with adamant anti-communist sentiment have turned museums into ‘Temples of truth’ which serve to distance Romania from its own history (p. 278). At the

National History Museum in Sofia, Bulgaria, Vukov writes that, “the elimination of the socialist period from museum display became emblematic of the politics of forgetting,” pervasive in that country (p. 322).

Apor & Sarkisova (2008) point out in the introduction to Past for the Eyes that throughout the region, “many of the museums representing Communism are either the actual result of, or closely related to, resolutely articulated politics of commemoration.” To comprehend the ‘post-communist politics of commemoration,’ Apor (2010) contends it is crucial to understand the, “historically and socio-politically generated conditions and standards of conceiving historical facts,” out of which the current post-socialist CEE region arose (p. 246). This means understanding the end of Communism in CEE as a liminal period that caused, “a transformation of symbolic spaces and the public sphere” (Main, 2008, p. 371). Not only were old Soviet memorials removed but also new memorials to “previously neglected heroes” were erected in Poland and throughout the region (Main, 2008, p. 372 & others). The state of commemoration in CEE is exemplified by Apor (2010) in a web essay entitled “Eurocommunism”:

The museums of Communism play a special role in these politics of commemoration of national pride. The politics of history in contemporary Eastern Europe, which also embrace the interpretation of the communist dictatorships, represent the nation as an eternal entity, a set of virtues and values, whose history is described as a success story of the realization of these qualities. Shameful periods of national history are regarded as regrettable historical accidents caused by various external forces. Representing the communist regime exclusively as a terrorist rule generated by such external forces and maintained solely by violence is a crucial means of implementing this concept rooted historicist understanding of nationalism.

While on the one hand, Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci (2008) maintain that sites of commemoration in CEE, like museums and memorials are important because they become forums for discussing the recent and controversial past, Horváth (2008) and others point out that contemporary politics

can conflate representations of socialism in museums, serving to problematize aspects of recent history and perpetuate the “witness and victim” dyad into a “political, moral and aesthetic problem” (p. 248).

In recent years, the discussion over how to frame the communist period in museum exhibits and the appropriateness of juxtaposing Soviet Socialism with National Socialism has come to head in particular with the opening of museums like House of Terror Museum in Budapest, Hungary (Apor, 2010; Horváth, 2008; Rátz, 2006). The discourse on historical interpretation of recent past in CEE is further problematized by tourism in the region (Rátz, 2006). The steady popularization of what tourism scholars refer to as ‘Dark Tourism’ (Lennon, 2000) has raised debates about how to represent terror and oppression in museums, especially when many of the victims [and perpetrators] are still alive (Horváth, 2008). While some historians maintain that the mission of museums should be to interpret every facet of history, however painful or unglamorous (Crane, 1997; Ritchie, 2001) contested exhibitions and museums like the “Enola Gay” exhibit, House of Terror Museum (Apor, 2010; Horváth, 2008 & others), and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C (Crane, 1997; Lennon, 1999 & others) serve as cautionary tales.

Arguments in support of representing the darker aspects of Soviet Socialism center on its relevance today (Rátz, 2006); Rátz concludes:

From an international point of view, terror is a current and global issue. A cultural attraction based on political suppression, terror and a fight for democracy is like the modern version of popular historic sights [sites] such as medieval torture chambers or 17<sup>th</sup> century slave castles. (p. 251)

While Rátz proposes that, “on the one hand, the selection of culturally significant themes and the interpretation of sensitive political issues depend on socioeconomic framework that heritage and cultural tourism exist in”, elsewhere, Rátz, as well as Light (2000) and Apor (2010) argue that

‘heritage interpretation’ is regularly used by political powers to both shape national identities and legitimize the regime in power. Light, meanwhile, has also pointed out that tourism plays a major role in ‘legitimizing’ CEE governments especially, “in a region where identities are fluid, unstable and sometimes fragile” (p. 173).

Scholars have pointed to the problem of melding Soviet Socialist and National Socialist or Fascist histories in museum exhibitions for a variety of reasons including location, cultural and historical contexts. Apor (2010) provides an in-depth analysis of the narrative form some Communism museums use:

The emphasis on instances of terror and violence in this interpretation is not accidental. The intention is not simply to demonstrate the brutality and barbarity of communist rule in these countries, but rather to represent these regimes as if they had been founded and maintained exclusively by force and profound systems of coercion... Communism is presented as the conclusion of fate, a tragic historical event caused by uncontrollable forces: the Soviets, the Great Powers, the Communists. The history of Communism acquires mythical qualities in these museums as a catastrophe, a disaster that remains beyond the limits of human (national) capacities and comprehension. (p. 236)

Along those lines, Scribner (2000) has cited that, “in the absence of the wall and other cold war symbols,” Communism museums have become a reminder of Germany’s divided past and in a broader sense a link to its Fascist past as well (p. 184). Scribner advocates in favor of Communism museums as, “sites upon which the battle about how to remember the GDR is being waged...in which viewers might work through the complexities of Germany’s divided history as well as the legacies of fascism and totalitarianism which subtend it” (p. 175).

The connections to ‘past traumas’ are not contested in contemporary Communism museums, nor are they essentially problematic according to Vukov (2008); rather it is the museum’s ability to assign victim-status to some and not others that Vukov, Horváth (2008) and others have argued against and the museums ability to disregard some histories while



highlighting others that Mark (2008), for instance, contests in an essay entitled “Containing Fascism.” Museums devoted to the history of Communism in the Baltic States in some cases, “attempted to “contain” Fascism so that it could not compete with Soviet crimes” (Mark, 2008, p. 336). To focus solely on Soviet crimes is problematic, according to Mark, because many of the sites, “did not have “pure” communist pasts” and because museums using these sites would have to address their Nazi pasts (p. 339) or risk, “the commemoration of Fascists in the name of anti-Communism” (p. 349). One example is the use of German war time propaganda as, “authentic evidence of Soviet atrocities,” in the Museum of Occupation in Tallinn (Mark, 2008, p. 355). Apor (2010) suggests that museums, “which depict violence, martyrs and terror within their walls, are the direct descendants of the anti-communist imagination” (p. 235). This view is supported by Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci (2008), who described the state of Romanian history museums where, “...in the anti-communist imagination, the communist period is incorporated into the history of national suffering, the victims of which are comparable to those of the First and Second World Wars” (p. 282). Conversely, Scribner (2000) and Czepczyński (2008) are not convinced that Real Socialism can be removed from the heritage of National Socialism, at least with regard to Germany. Exhibitions portraying the GDR should not be viewed as a, “fetishization of a diseased past,” but rather, should illuminate Germany’s history, which is one, “determined by the crimes of fascism and totalitarianism,” Scribner writes (p. 186).

## **Conclusion**

Scholars and museums have demonstrated that the collective and cultural memory is shaped by what the group or society wishes to emphasize (Assmann, 2009). In general, scholars recognize that museum exhibits cannot exist outside the bounds of historical, social and political

contexts and are often political endeavors. This complicates both the act of remembering and the act of commemorating because, in the context of Soviet Socialism, they cannot be separated (Apor, 2010; Apor & Sarkisova, 2008 & others). Finally, scholars are divided on whether it is appropriate to juxtapose the histories of National Socialism and Soviet Socialism in museum exhibits. Critics point to the absence of historical context, the risk of valuing Fascist ‘contributions’ in favor of staunch anti-Communism (Apor, 2010; Horváth, 2008; Vukov, 2008) and problematize the comparison of the victims of both regimes (Cristea & Radu-Bucurenci, 2008). Others cite that history is understood on a continuum and therefore, separating the history of these regimes would serve to decontextualize historical events (Scribner, 2000 & others).

How socialism is represented in CEE is a topic of increasing interest to historians, anthropologists, tourism and heritage scholars and museologists, to name a few. It provides a segue to talk about how memory, nostalgia and politics shape our understanding of history and drive museum interpretation and what society deems worthy of commemoration in public spaces. These are challenges with which history museums in the United States must also contend. An evaluative study on the range of ways museums in CEE represent Soviet Socialism in their exhibits broadens our understanding of how museums deal with difficult histories and may add to best practices for future interpretation.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

This thesis is framed through case studies—an approach built on qualitative methodologies, specifically: site visits, conversations with museum professionals, researcher observation and web content. 1) **Muzeum PRL-u** is the most robust case study. Located in Krakow, Poland, the museum is a branch of the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw. Two site visits were conducted; one included a lengthy conversation with the director and a guided tour through the exhibit space. 2) **Museum of Communism** is located in Prague, Czech Republic and is the only privately run Communism museum in the country. The case study recounts the details of two site visits and a conversation with the museum director. 3) **DDR Museum** in Berlin, Germany, the last complete case study in this report, details the results of two site visits and a conversation with the museum director. 4) **“Sag, was war die DDR?”** is an interactive travelling exhibit that depicts the stories of children and young people who lived in the GDR. The exhibit was curated at the Children’s Museum at FEZ-Berlin. The case study is informed by a conversation with a museum facilitator and one of the exhibit’s designers. 5) **House of Terror Museum**, in Budapest, Hungary, is the final case study. It is informed by an email questionnaire with a historian at the institution. Table 1 lists the methodological limitations.

Table 1. Museum Methodologies

	<b>Muzeum PRL-u</b>	<b>Museum of Communism</b>	<b>DDR Museum</b>	<b>House of Terror Museum</b>	<b>“Sag, was war die DDR?”</b>
<b># Site visits</b>	2	2	2	-----	-----
<b>Field Notes</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	-----	-----
<b>Interview</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	-----	Yes
<b>Questionnaire</b>	-----	-----	-----	Yes	-----
<b>Website</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the range of ways Communism is represented in museums that focus on the Soviet Socialist period (post-WWII-1989) in Central and Eastern Europe and to illuminate trends in how difficult and nuanced histories are addressed. Representatives from the institutions studied [except House of Terror] were initially contacted via email, spring 2011. Meetings were finalized via email, in person and over the phone. The research trip took place in August 2011. The House of Terror Museum in Budapest, Hungary was added to the study, winter 2011.

The institutions studied are a diverse sample of museums in CEE representing various aspects of life during the Soviet Socialist era. Several criteria were used to select museums that would be included in this thesis. This study uses the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of a museum, specifically a “non-profitmaking, permanent institution...open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.” Other criteria for inclusion in this study were location (e.g. museums in capitol or major cities) and access to museum professionals willing to discuss the museum and exhibits in English and to be recorded. The conversations serve a distinct informative function in the case studies. Therefore, it was important that a language barrier remain minimal.

The goal of the conversations (see Appendix B for questions, p. 56) is to gain a better insight into the context in which the museum thrives. Stark (1995) notes that, "qualitative case study seldom proceeds as a survey with the same questions asked of each respondent; rather, each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell" (p. 65).

Conversations with museum professionals were on-site and in-person. The questions allowed for organic conversation to emerge and were largely exploratory, drawing on themes like the establishment of the museum, how exhibits are chosen, audience responses, and narrative structure. As a result, some of the conversations were relatively long (~1 hour) and included historical context and background information about the establishment of the museum. Others were markedly shorter (~20 minutes). Being in the museum also shaped the course of the conversations (Stark, 1995) and provided the opportunity to (re)visit the exhibit space.

This thesis also employs the use of researcher observation by way of field notes, a method often used in ethnography (Creswell, 2000). Field notes can be a formidable tool for remembering details and as Mulhall (2003) notes, field observation, "provides insight into interactions between dyads and groups; illustrates the whole picture; captures context/process; informs about the influence of the physical environment" (p. 307). In this research, observations were recorded within 4 hours of a site visit, serve as reminders of the research trip and are used to inform the data. The analysis and limitations show that observations are highly subjective and contextual (Mulhall, 2003). The final methodology used 'grey' source material obtained on museum websites of the institutions studied. This type of data was used to augment the contextual information provided in the case studies.

## Chapter Four: Case Study Results

### Polish People's Republic Museum (Muzeum PRL-u), Krakow

Muzeum PRL-u (MuzPRL) or Polish People's Republic Museum is the Krakow Branch of the Museum of Polish History. In August 2011, the director described how the idea for MuzPRL took shape and spoke in depth about plans for renovation and a permanent exhibition. The conversation also touched on the context in which MuzPRL is situated and the milestones the museum is achieving with its temporary exhibits.

In the late 2000s, the Ministry of Culture agreed to create and partly fund MuzPRL. The then long-standing idea for a PRL Museum had been attempted before in Poland's capital city, Warsaw. Polish moviemaker Andrzej Wajda led an initiative nearly a decade earlier, to build a museum of PRL history in the Palace of Culture and Science, a historic mid-century skyscraper built by the Soviet Union. *Socland*, as it was called, would portray the totalitarianism of the Soviet Socialist regime and represent everyday life from the end of WWII until the post-socialist era in Poland. The museum, however, remained largely in project-stage with only a handful of temporary exhibits ever installed.

MuzPRL is located in a vintage cinema in the *Nowa Huta* or New Steel Works district. The building was donated by a former mayor of Krakow. It officially opened in 2009. Figure 1 depicts the façade taken during the August 2011 research trip. Far from a completed project, MuzPRL is housed in structure in need of an overall renovation. The Museum plans to solicit architectural proposals for a complete restoration and transformation of the cinema. In the meantime, MuzPRL mounts temporary exhibits and designs programs in which the community plays an active role. "Projekt HardKOR" was the exhibit installed in August 2011. It combined

the use of, “memoirs, photographs, film clips, eyewitness reports, documents” and other authentic objects to tell the story of KOR or Workers Defensive Committee, the museum’s website explains. Other exhibits installed at MuzPRL since its inception include “From Opposition to Freedom” which depicted the history of the struggle for independence in Post-WWII Poland, “Jaruzelski’s Polish War” that gave an account of Martial Law in Poland in the 1980s, “War of Separation” which chronicled the stories of families separated during WWII and the most recent exhibit, “Halftime 0-1—Football in the PRL” depicts the 1978 European Athletics Championship that took place in Prague.



Figure 1. “Muzeum PRL-u.” Building façade in August 2011.

The Museum also organizes immersive history games such as “City Game Projekt HardKOR,” which took place in Nowa Huta in 2011. Participants were given roles and objectives to complete. As they moved around the neighborhood they were confronted with plainclothes police, militia and other obstacles that would have been normal in 1970s and 1980s Poland. These immersive games are an important part of the museum’s mission. MuzPRL does

more than organize exhibitions; every project the museum organizes has an immersive and interactive component such as a 'City Day.' One of the goals of the museum all along has been to help align with the new role of museums in Poland, specifically with the notion that museums are more than just collections. Contemporary Polish museums, "not only show you things but also [try] to make you think about something in this or that way" (Director Muzeum PRL-u, personal communication, August 9, 2011).

The museum's strategies for exhibit content take into account both the objective to be a participatory space as well as the challenges of addressing Poland's recent past in museums. "It's not an easy story to talk about," the director made clear (personal communication, August 9, 2011). This is partly due to the fact that many people who were active in politics during the Soviet Socialist period remain active in that sphere today. In order to represent this difficult past, it is important to take into account the different interpretations history takes. For example, an idea for the permanent exhibition centers on the 'Polish way to freedom.' It would depict official, social and everyday life, politics, and the economy. Interpreting the past remains a contentious subject in contemporary Poland, where there is a complex and nuanced understanding of WWII and the 'communist' period (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

Oral histories have become a primary way the museum engages with its community. These oral histories also serve to frame exhibits. The exhibit "Jaruzelski's Polish War" on Marshall Law in 1980 is one example. The director recounts how she personally interviewed several people imprisoned during this event and explained how the museum addressed this difficult history:

They didn't know where they were taken. They thought they were taken to the Soviet Union. People really didn't know whether it was [a] third World War or what was going on. It was really complicated. So, we organized the exhibition [Jaruzelski's Polish War]



which explored interviews with people in prison here in Krakow...also in Silesia. There were many interviews with women who were not in prison but stayed alone with their small kids and how they interpret[ed] it...There were interviews, there were some...interactive exhibitions, artists...And it was very well seen. (personal communication, August 9, 2011)

For “War of Separation,” the museum took oral histories from seven families that had been split apart during WWII and met only after the end of Soviet Socialism.



Figure 2. “Jaruzelski’s Polish War.” This figure depicts an exhibit space in MuzPRL. Image credit: A. Pelc.

MuzPRL's interpretation centers largely on the realities of life in Soviet Socialist Poland. The abundance of counter-narratives has forced the museum to confront interpretative dilemmas openly, beginning with the scope of their exhibits, the director explained:

How do you tell this story when you've got many...people that...don't want to tell everything? Where is the beginning of Communism? Is it...1939 when the Soviet Union came to Poland? The Second World War started in 1941. For us it was the first of September and then seventeenth of September when the Soviet Army came down from the East. So, is [that] the beginning or [is it] Katryn... or... Potsdam, the postwar treaty when the huge powers [got together]? We have to decide...when. (personal communication, August 9, 2011)

Though some tension does exist around the museum, it describes reactions from visitors and community response as mostly positive. This is supported by attendance to its 'City Games' and positive feedback on its website and Facebook page. MuzPRL has established itself as place where themes like militias, conflicts and government atrocities can openly be explored. Through its positive relationship with the residents of Nowa Huta and surrounding communities, MuzPRL upholds its role as a 'social campaign' illuminating the many untold stories of 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish history.

## Museum of Communism, Prague

Museum of Communism tells the story of the Czechoslovakia and specifically Prague during the Soviet Socialist era. It was founded in 2002 in a roughly 500 square meter room above a casino near Wenceslas Square. The museum interpretation was developed by a Czech historian whose concept for the exhibit narrative depicts “the Dream, the Reality and the Nightmare” of Communism.



Figure 3. “Czech Schoolroom.” This figure illustrates a typical exhibit in Museum of Communism.

Visitors walk through exhibit spaces that depict a school room, a grocery store, a factory floor and a secret police interrogation room, among other scenes. Thematically, exhibits center on daily life, politics, economics, education, art, propaganda, military forces and conflicts of the Soviet Socialist period. The museum displays authentic objects from the period, some purchased and others donated to the museum by visitors and the founders themselves.

The typical layout of an exhibit at Museum of Communism is depicted in Figures 3 & 4. There is minimal interpretation. According to the director, the exhibits should allow for the

objects and historical documents to speak for themselves: “If somebody came here and never heard about Communism or maybe heard but [had] no idea what it was...we ...show him how it was in 500 square meters...we make it just short and clear” (personal communication, August 4, 2011).



Figure 4. “Czech market.” Exhibit depicting the paucity of goods in Czech markets during Soviet Socialist era.

The exhibits are meant to serve as emblematic examples of the Soviet Socialist era in the Czech Republic. Label copy is translated into many of the major languages found in Europe including English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The exhibits are, nevertheless, meant to translate with or without text. This is important because the audience is largely comprised of young people, like Czech school children during the school year. The Museum of Communism is curated with a younger generation in mind and provides glimpses of what everyday life would have been like in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia.

## DDR Museum, Berlin

The DDR Museum is located in Berlin, Germany and was founded in 2006. *DDR* is the German acronym for German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany. According to its website, the DDR Museum is ‘one of a kind.’ It is a privately funded, completely interactive institution that was nominated for the “European Museum of the Year” award in 2008 and 2012. A 2011 interview with the museum’s director revealed the idea for a DDR Museum in Berlin was a long time in the making—curiously, before the DDR Museum, there were no other institutions exclusively interpreting the everyday in Soviet Socialist Berlin.



Figure 5. “Kitchen in the concrete slab apartment.”  
Figure illustrates DDR Museum’s immersive space.  
Image credit: DDR Museum.

The DDR Museum is unique in large part because the exhibits are entirely interactive. A visit to the DDR Museum reveals drawers and cubbies full of artifacts the visitor can touch, handle and smell. The museum encourages visitors to walk through the spaces and open cabinets. Visitors can watch GDR television from the comfort of a GDR era couch (Figure 5 & 6), peering through the pass-through in the GDR kitchen fully equipped with GDR-era dishes and appliances. There is even a recreated bathroom. The layout of the museum is based on typical GDR era construction. The DDR museum website explains that:

What initially appears to be a grey and dull monotony turns out to be a lively and colourful everyday culture once you take a closer look. The slabs are both room dividers and showcases, offering the visitor the opportunity to not only see but also touch the exhibits, thus giving a better insight into the private life of GDR citizens. Movies, media, drawers, hinged doors and showcases with exhibits and models - they all tell the story of a country long gone.

Though the DDR Museum chooses to frame its interpretation entirely around everyday life, contentious discourses related to Communism are presented and left open for discussion.



Figure 6. "Living Room of the concrete slab apartment." Figure shows immersive space in DDR Museum. Image credit: DDR Museum

The philosophy behind the museum is largely based on the notion that museums should be fun. Museum-goers visit during their free time, the director elaborated, therefore, they expect to learn something but also be entertained (personal communication, August 11, 2011). While the DDR Museum is not without its critics, 95% of visitors are thrilled with the museum, the director added (personal communication, August 11, 2011). This assertion is supported by the museum's dual nominations for "European Museum of the Year" in 2008 and 2012 and their ticket sales—as of 2012, over 2 million people have visited DDR Museum.



Figure 7. "Party conference in 'new' exhibition." Figure depicts interactive political installation in DDR Museum. Image credit: DDR Museum

The majority of visitors to the DDR Museum are German tourists, sometimes they are visitors from the former GDR, but quite often the museum entertains visitors from Western Germany and abroad. To some the DDR Museum serves as a discursive space. The exhibits are informative and the museum endeavors to leave issues open-ended and provide an opportunity to discuss individual experiences. About 90% of visitors agree the exhibits accurately portray the realities of life in the GDR, the director noted (personal communication, August 11, 2011).

While not every visitor agrees with the ironic tone of the interpretation, DDR Museum ultimately handles a very serious topic. The museum represents a contentious era of history both to those who experienced life under Communism and also to an ever growing population that was not alive when the Berlin Wall fell. The director stressed the importance of understanding history especially with regard to the GDR and Soviet Socialism. Communism was a fascinating idea at the time and continues to be popular in some regions of the world. The DDR Museum aims to make clear that Communism went completely awry when put into practice. Dictatorships must be remembered if they are to be prevented from reoccurring.



## The House of Terror Museum, Budapest

The House of Terror Museum, located in Budapest, Hungary, was established through a public endowment in 2002. The museum depicts Hungarian oppression under the Nazi and Soviet regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea for House of Terror was proposed by a prominent Hungarian politician and later augmented through consultations with nongovernmental groups and historians.



Figure 8. “House of Terror Museum (Andrássy Street).” Figure depicts the facade of the museum with well-known ‘TERROR’ awning. Image credit: House of Terror Museum

Exhibits are grouped chronologically: The House of Terror Museum portrays historical events from 1944-1967. During this 22 year period, the “Nazi Arrow Cross (October 1944 –

March 1945) and the Soviets (1944 -1956, and 1956-1967),” presided over Hungary according to a historian at the museum (personal communication, January 25, 2012). The museum focuses exclusively on the totalitarianism of this era in Hungarian history. Exhibits also portray events such as the forced massive deportation of suspicious persons from cities to the countryside, farm collectivization, propaganda and torture cells.



Figure 9. “Propaganda Exhibit.” Figure depicts museum’s permanent exhibition. Image credit: House of Terror Museum

To this end, the museum routinely exhibits temporary installations on events otherwise unexplored in Hungarian society. A primary pursuit of the museum is to represent an understanding of Communism that challenges Marxist ideas. The House of Terror approaches this task through exhibition, confronting historical understanding of events such as the Holocaust, Gulags, and the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe after WWII, for

instance. In 2003, the museum also commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Orwell's birth.



Figure 10. "Hall of Tears." Figure illustrates museum's immersive spaces. Image credit: House of Terror Museum

House of Terror Museum is experimenting with a method of exhibition that places the visitor into, "a historic situation" (See Figure 11: Reconstructed Prison Cell). As a result, the museum has garnered mixed reactions to its exhibits. On the one hand, its efforts are supported by strong ticket sales and a reputation as Hungary's most successful museum, according to an interview with the director posted on the museum website. On the other hand, the museum has also been openly critiqued for its choice of interpretive and narrative frameworks that meld the National Socialist and Soviet Socialist era in Hungary.



Figure 11. "Reconstructed Prison Cell." Figure illustrates museum's immersive spaces. Image credit: House of Terror Museum

While, visitors are largely comprised of adolescents in school groups and foreign tourists, the House of Terror Museum is committed to its role in the community. The museum describes itself as, "a kind of living memento or a focal point of social conscience" (personal communication, January 25, 2012) and continues setting exhibit trends for Communism museums exhibitions and programming.

## “Sag, was war die DDR?,” Children’s Museum at FEZ Berlin, Berlin

To mark the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Children’s Museum at FEZ-Berlin (FEZ) designed a travelling exhibit on life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany. *Sag, was war die DDR?*, which translates to “Say, what was the GDR?,” presents one year and one day in the life of adolescents and children who lived through Germany’s Soviet Socialist period.



Figure 12. “Exhibit cabinets.” Figure depicts interactive cabinets in “Sag, was war die DDR?” Image credit: Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung

“Sag, was war die DDR?” is an interactive exhibit that utilizes printed materials, audio and objects to explore the questions: 1) Is personal freedom universal? 2) What does due process mean? and 3) What does freedom really mean to me? The exhibit poses these questions by presenting them in everyday life scenarios of children living in the GDR and through themes such as travel, dress, hope and dreams. Part of the exhibit space showcases real diaries in cabinets designed to be explored (see Figure 12). Other parts of the exhibit are designed like typical bedrooms and other immersive spaces taken out of the diaries. There is even an airplane in which the visitor can sit and explore the travel restrictions of the period (See Figures 13 & 14). “Sag, was war die DDR?” is an experimentation space. The exhibit is designed to engage children age 6 and older, though even younger children would find an avenue to explore the themes, a designer noted (personal communication, August 11, 2011). It incorporates label copy with immersive spaces, games/activities, sounds and other multimedia to present the exhibit’s themes for consideration to a range of ages.

Developing an exhibit on the GDR required extensive subject-based and audience research. FEZ has mounted other ‘out-of-the-box’ travelling exhibits such as, “Erzähl mir was vom Tod” (“Tell me about death”), which has been viewed in over fifteen European museums as of 2012. The concepts for “Tod” and “DDR” were designed by the same core team. An obstacle to any political exhibit, specifically one that highlights events in the recent past, is how to present the subject without offending those who lived through it, a designer noted. One of the ways the project team sought to minimize offense or controversy was by exhibiting a cross section of journals from children and adolescents with various life experiences. Another way the design team minimized controversy was by stressing the totalitarianism of the GDR regime and specifically not glossing over the contentiousness with which the era is remembered. The exhibit

presents themes and poses questions. This allows the visitor (s) to arrive at unique and personal conclusions about the GDR era.



Figure 13. "Uwe's Room." Figure illustrates bedroom installation for "Sag, was war die DDR?" Image credit: klemens.berlin.info

Reactions to the exhibit have been quite positive. The media and newspapers provided an inordinate amount of positive press for the exhibit. A small number of negative responses, mostly left in the guestbook, denoted that individual experiences in the GDR were sometimes different from those presented in the exhibit. Only 25 years after the reunification, GDR experiences are still fresh memories for some. Like any divisive time, there are extreme positive and extreme negative positions some choose to take. Of the visitors who have seen "Sag, was war die DDR?" at FEZ, most have visited in family groups, some in groups where one or more parents lived in the GDR. This fostered interactions between children, parents and the exhibits, as well as conversation between visitors. The exhibit was planned so that adults could participate

as well. The goal is as much about education as it is about creating discussion points for visitors to explore.



Figure 14. "Airplane." Figure depicts portion of travel Exhibit with interactive airplane in "Sag, was war die DDR?" exhibit. Image credit: FEZ Berlin



## Chapter Five: Analysis and Limitations

### Analysis

The case studies were analyzed by searching for thematic and narrative trends at **Muzeum PRL-u (MuzPRL), Museum of Communism, DDR Museum, House of Terror Museum** and in the exhibit, **“Sag, was war die DDR?”**. Analysis of the conversations with museum professionals at these sites provided another avenue to explore the exhibit content and highlighted patterns in museum engagement, audience and institutional concerns.

The analysis began with an in depth exploration of exhibition content. Two principal themes surfaced: daily life and oppression (see Table 2, p. 43). The actualities of daily life were widely explored in the case studies. For example, MuzPRL examines the realities of daily life in Poland in the 1970s and 80s in the exhibit “Projekt HardKOR” (HardKOR). “HardKOR,” chronicles a period when the Polish government passed extreme austerity measures that lead to workers’ rebellions and demands for unionization. Both Museum of Communism and DDR Museum consider the realities of consumption and education in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, respectively. The DDR Museum also explores topics such as leisure and travel. The latter are also themes that emerge in the exhibit “Sag, was war die DDR?”

‘Oppression’ was the second major theme that arose out of the data analysis. The concept of oppression, alternately described in exhibits and conversations as totalitarianism, lack of civil rights, lack of personal freedom or lack of due process, was present in each museum exhibit in this study. For example, the exhibit “Jaruzelski’s Polish War” at MuzPRL, recounts the period of Martial Law enacted by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in 1981, and the circumstances under which thousands of Polish citizens were detained. Museum of Communism presents the history

of rebellion against the Soviet Socialist regime in Czechoslovakia culminating in the Velvet Revolution and the dissolution of Communist hegemony in the region. DDR Museum presents the paradoxes of Communism and the Communist Party and its deleterious effects on civil society in East Germany. The exhibitions at House of Terror Museum focus primarily on the atrocities carried out by Soviet Socialist and National Socialist regimes in Hungary. Lastly, the exhibit “Sag, was war die DDR?” explores oppression through firsthand accounts from children and adolescents living in the GDR. The exhibit asks the visitor to examine her/his perspectives on personal freedom and due process.

Table 2: Museum Themes

	<b>Muzeum PRL-u</b>	<b>Museum of Communism</b>	<b>DDR Museum</b>	<b>House of Terror Museum</b>	<b>“Sag, was war die DDR?”</b>
<b>Daily Life</b>	Consumption, food & inflation	Consumption, food & education	Consumption, education, food & leisure	-----	Hopes, dreams, music, travel, school
<b>Oppression/ Rights</b>	Workers, unions, Solidarity	Workers, protest, Velvet Revolution	Communist Party, travel & consumption	Focuses on totalitarianism	Personal freedom, travel, due process

One goal of this study is to determine whether there are trends in the interpretative frameworks utilized by Communism museums. The analysis of the case studies revealed three main interpretative frameworks are being used: firsthand accounts, immersive exhibits and interactive exhibits (see Table 3, p. 45).

A few museums in this study directly incorporate firsthand accounts into their exhibits. MuzPRL collected oral histories for its exhibits on Martial Law the Worker’s Defense Committee and the lives of families torn apart during the Second World War. “Sag, was war die

DDR?” recounts one year and one day in the life of children and adolescents who resided in the GDR. Firsthand accounts also played a role in the conceptualization of House of Terror Museum. The museum consulted with prisoner of war NGOs to gain perspective on how to recount that part of history in the museum. Though visitor research was not a methodology used, the analysis did consider the role of firsthand accounts and discussion prompted by visitors in the exhibits. These occurrences were described by several museum representations anecdotally during conversations. At DDR Museum, the exhibit elements are immersive and often tactile—they can become devices that drive memories and conversations about the realities of life from a firsthand perspective and lead to discussions amongst visitors about the veracity of the GDR reality presented in the museum.

Immersive and interactive exhibits were amongst the most widely used interpretive elements at the study sites, as Table 3 highlights. At Museum of Communism, visitors move chronologically and thematically through a range of tableaux such as a schoolroom, a grocery store and a factory, that depict what life was like during the Soviet Socialist era in Prague. House of Terror Museum also utilizes fully immersive exhibits, as well as lighting and sound to frame their interpretation of the totalitarian regimes in Hungary in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The DDR Museum represents the (extra)ordinary aspects of life in the GDR through fully interactive and participatory spaces that engage audiences in discussion. The exhibit, “Sag, was war die DDR?” utilizes immersive spaces and interactive elements aimed at engaging adolescents, children and family groups in considering the importance of inalienable rights, freedom, and due process. Finally, MuzPRL uses immersive spaces and interactive components to engage visitors in the context post-WII Poland.

Table 3: Interpretative Frameworks

	<b>Muzeum PRL-u</b>	<b>Museum of Communism</b>	<b>DDR Museum</b>	<b>House of Terror Museum</b>	<b>“Sag, was war die DDR?”</b>
<b>Oral history/ Firsthand</b>	Used for exhibit content	-----	Occurred in exhibits by visitors	Consulted NGOs	Used journals/diaries
<b>Immersive</b>	‘City Games’ & travelling exhibits	Exhibit spaces	Exhibits—see above	Exhibit spaces	Exhibit spaces
<b>Interactive exhibits</b>	‘City Games’ & travelling exhibits	-----	All exhibits	-----	All exhibits

Table 4 (p. 46) is an analysis of the conversations with museums professionals that took place onsite at MuzPRL, Museum of Communism, DDR Museum and the Children’s Museum at FEZ Berlin (FEZ Berlin), August 2011. It also includes an analysis of the questionnaire retrieved from House of Terror Museum, winter 2011. The table highlights three main themes that arose during the conversations: community engagement, visitor perceptions and audience.

The analysis shows a trend in community engagement. As described earlier in this chapter, exhibition content was augmented with firsthand accounts from oral histories at a few museums. Museums also consulted with community advisory groups, procured donations of artifacts from the community and curated special events to directly engage the community in the context of the exhibits. MuzPRL utilized several of these strategies including collecting oral histories and curating ‘City Days’ or participatory history games and events such as concerts and installations that took place in the surrounding community.

Visitor perceptions of the exhibition content were a genuine concern for most of the museums in this study. This oscillated between concerns that interpretation would not be received positively by all visitors and resignation that history is experienced differently by

individuals who lived through it. Only one museum specifically sought to influence the historical interpretation of the Communist era. All others stated they sought to present the Soviet Socialist era but also allow for individual understanding of the historical narrative.

Table 4. Data Analysis from Conversations

	<b>Muzeum PRL-u</b>	<b>Museum of Communism</b>	<b>DDR Museum</b>	<b>House of Terror Museum</b>	<b>“Sag, was war die DDR?”</b>
<b>Community engagement</b>	Yes— collects oral histories, curates city games with community	Unclear— collected some objects from private donors	Unclear— accepts private donations, installs travelling exhibits	Unclear— consulted with POW groups and NGOs	Yes— collected histories through journals
<b>Concerned about visitors perceptions of Soviet Socialist history</b>	Yes, for people still involved in politics and people who may remember the time differently	No, most visitors are young people or tourists.	Yes, from Prisoners of the dictatorship to those who lived through the era and remember it differently	No, want to change the way historical narrative “Marxist” discourse is interpreted	Yes, resigned that some may not have experienced GDR in same way
<b>Primary audience(s)</b>	Nowa Huta community members, Krakow residents & PRL enthusiasts.	School groups (during school year) & tourists in the summer.	German tourists	Visitors to Budapest	School-aged children, adolescents & family groups

Audience played a major role in interpretation. Museum of Communism and House of Terror Museum have specific target audiences; much of the year they host school groups. Both also enjoy a significant number of visitors from abroad, especially during the summer tourist

season. DDR Museum's primary audience is German tourists though they also entertain a significant number of tourists from abroad. MuzPRL is in large part, the most isolated of all the institutions. Its location in a neighborhood east of the Krakow center and exclusively Polish website render it more difficult to locate for non-Polish speakers. Though previous exhibits at MuzPRL have been translated into English, the one on display in August 2011, was not translated. Finally, "Sag, was war die DDR?" was developed at a children's museum but has since travelled to other museums in Germany, Austria and Luxemburg. Its audience is diverse though, at FEZ Berlin where it was conceptualized, consisted primarily of families with children.

### **Limitations**

There were three main limitations to this study: 1) sample size, 2) the disparate locations of the museums and 3) language barriers. The generalizability of this study is limited by the number of museums visited (5) and amount of data collected during site visits (2). Museums in this study are also located in several cities in Europe. Therefore, revisiting each museum was neither practical nor within the scope of the research. Lastly, language was a major concern in non-English and non-German speaking countries. Data collection was predicated on conversation and observation, which relied on language competency both on the part of the researcher as well as the informants. Conversations were primarily conducted in English though in two cases German was also spoken. Non-English speaking informants were often limited by language barriers when answering or explaining exhibit content, thematic and historical elements. Also, the researcher relied on English or German translations of the exhibits. One example where this went awry was the exhibition at MuzPRL "HardKOR," which not translated

into English. The first site visit to MuzPRL was conducted without an English interpretation available.

Some other limitations to generalizability are historical context and the nature of qualitative data collection. Each museum in this study presents the history of a different country. Some focus on the experiences of a specific city during the Soviet Socialist period. Generalizing across museums is problematized by the enormity of experiences encompassed in the Soviet Socialist era on a local and individual level. This thesis uses case studies from museums that were founded within the last decade, the newest of which has not yet developed its permanent exhibition. It is, furthermore, complicated to compare four museums to an exhibition. Museums, in general, cover a range of themes in a larger space and ideally change over time as new interpretation comes to the fore or outdated exhibition methods are replaced. Exhibitions are generally more concise, and in this case, the exhibit is tailored to a specific audience, namely children. In brief, qualitative data was collected through conversations and researcher observation, which are subjective. There is an absence of quantitative data or visitor research. These methods and sources limit the conclusions to researcher analysis of institutional views.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

This qualitative study explores the range of ways Communism is depicted at five museums in Central Europe. Site visits, conversations with museum representatives and museum websites were used to establish case studies. The study identified trends in the exhibit themes and interpretive frameworks used to represent the Communist era at Muzeum PRL-u (Krakow, Poland), Museum of Communism (Prague, Czech Republic), DDR Museum (Berlin, Germany), House of Terror Museum (Budapest, Hungary) and in the exhibit, “Sag, was war die DDR?” (Children’s Museum at FEZ Berlin).

The analysis examined two principal exhibit themes: daily life and oppression. Most of the museums/exhibits in this study depicted the realities of daily life. All five presented different characteristics of totalitarianism and oppression in their respective regimes. The analysis also highlighted three interpretive trends lending authenticity and context to Communism museum exhibits: firsthand accounts, immersive exhibits and interactive exhibits. The study found that firsthand accounts authenticate the story told within the museum. These accounts address difficult and nuanced histories and lend a discursive quality to the exhibit. Collecting firsthand accounts or oral histories also provides the museum an opportunity to engage with its community. This type of engagement can strengthen the museum’s role in the community and fosters a sense of ownership over the stories told within, as the Muzeum PRL-u case study demonstrates. Another trend identified in the analysis is the use of immersive and interactive exhibits. Each of the five sites studied employ the use immersive exhibits. These exhibits surround the visitor in the context of the historical narrative—this could mean a tableau of a grocery store or a recreation of child’s bedroom. Several of the museums also use interactive elements to engage the visitor. These are typically tactile components within the exhibit, such as



the cabinets that reveal interpretive elements in the exhibit, “Sag, war die DDR?” and the artifacts at DDR Museum. Lastly, the analysis found that museums are concerned with visitors’ perceptions of the history they present. Most openly address this contentiousness and several consciously leave interpretation open-ended to allow for discussion within the exhibit.

The discussion surrounding Communism museums illustrates that the many obstacles they face when representing contested histories are essentially universal. Politics, dominant perspectives, context and memory play a part in nearly every museum exhibit. These elements require continual reevaluation as newer ways of understanding and interpreting history come to the fore. Understanding the kinds of interpretative frameworks Communism museums employ in their exhibits has the potential to augment museum practice in the United States and elsewhere. This thesis illuminates specific trends in how Communism museums present difficult and often nuanced histories. The study sites use firsthand narratives to lend authenticity to the story told, immerse the visitor in the context of the exhibit and allow the visitor to engage with representative tactile elements that further expound on historical context. These are strategies that can be adopted by a wide range of historical museums desiring to contextualize difficult histories and potentially strengthen the interpretation of their exhibits and visitor engagement.

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## Appendix A: Map of Central and Eastern Europe



Image credit: [www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/easteuro.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/easteuro.pdf)

## Appendix B: Conversation Instrument

This research required the use of one instrument with seven questions. The questions were posed during semi-structured interviews on location at Muzeum PRL, DDR Museum, Museum of Communism and at the Children's Museum at FEZ Berlin. At *House of Terror Museum*, the interview instrument was emailed to a historian and taken as a questionnaire.

### Conversation Questions:

1. How was the museum created? [Ex: Who came up with the idea? What is the concept behind the museum? Were there earlier versions of the museums/earlier museums like this one?]
2. Describe some of your strategies for the exhibition content. [Ex: How did you choose the permanent exhibits? How do you choose the temporary exhibits?]
3. Can you give examples of exhibits that you think most represent how the museum is unique? Or examples of exhibits to which visitors react?
4. What kind of responses has the museum received?
5. How does the story the museum tells compare to one found in a national historic museum/local history museum/other museum?
6. Who is the museum's intended audience? [Ex: Who visits the museum? Who doesn't visit the museum?]
7. What role does the museum play in the community?