

Truncheons in the display case by Wojciech Stanisławski

For a quarter of a century we have sought to memorialise the victims of communism by erecting monuments and opening museums. But at times it seems that the most important things continue to be left unsaid - claims Wojciech Stanisławski.

The concept of the 'museum' has a long and convoluted heritage. It is generally held - and no-one has described it better than Krzysztof Pomian - that it all began with the collections of oddities in the Renaissance. There, in fascinating disorder, lying side by side, were minerals, seashells, ancient coins and drawings. In time, collectors of paintings and coins concluded that it would be better to tidy things up to better exhibit their collections. Collectors of drums and masks from the Southern Seas, entomologists, hunters, lovers of maps, copper engravings, book-plates and side arms followed suit.

But there also exists one of the oldest trails of human remembrance: the preservation of famous battlefields and massacre sites, places where kings duelled and gathered. There are separate trails leading across specific mountains and through olive gardens to places where mortals met deities and where all of Europe's once common *historia sacra* unfolded.

Much closer to our contemporary thinking is the notion of memorialising elements of daily life to show to the posterity the entire civilisation of their ancestors rather than just their most outstanding achievements. This idea arose in Scandinavia, with the development of *skansens* (open-air museums and collections of historical structures). Exotic villages and temples, reconstructed for World Fairs by colonial powers proud of their subjects, competed with (and certainly came out victorious against) windowless Laplander huts.

But they provided as much knowledge about the world as the old German-born merchant Mincel did when lecturing a shop assistant in his broken Polish in a scene from the 19th-century Bolesław Prus novel *The Doll*. ('See vas ist in dis drawer. *Es ist Zimmt* or cinnamon. And ven do ve need cinnamon? In soups and desserts ve need cinnamon. And vas ist cinnamon? Er ist de bark from dis one tree. And ver do dis one tree live? In India lives dis tree. Look on de globus - here lies India. So gif me cinnamon for a tenner...'). It wasn't until the mid-20th century that museum curators and managers began giving thought to ways of conveying other cultures in a consolidated manner within a limited time and space.

Cast-iron corpses

Those for whom memorialising everyday life under communism for posterity is close at heart have tried all these means and formulae. Small towns attempt to lure tourists with 'collections of oddities' such as amusing signs saying 'Attention

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farmers! Wash your eggs at the procurement stations' or the humorous labels on cheap fruit wines. The cast-iron corpses of former monuments lie in the grass in parks on the outskirts of big cities (Memento Park in Budapest) or even behind royal residences such as Mogoşoaia Palace, which once belonged to the rulers of Romania. Great art museums have separate rooms for grim propaganda paintings, and collectors of A2-sized posters greatly fancy communist-era appeals for vigilance and productivity. To show the ugliness of daily life under communism, here and there between the Elbe and Danube yet another flat in a tower block is adapted and fitted out with a wall unit, PVC flooring and a yearbook of the magazine *Woman and Life* on the table. (In Warsaw a similar skansen can be found on Grochowska Street.) But it isn't easy to complete the furnishing: the vintage artefacts now cost a fortune on auction sites.

Time and again a titanic notion arises to bring it all together and create a kind of 'total museum' of the epoch. This should not only show the annals of the system and highlight its victimisers and victims, but also explain the mechanics and conditions of totalitarianism while offering the visitor a wealth of details. Probably the boldest project of this type has been SocLand, created over the past decade or so by enthusiasts led by Czesław Bielecki.

The scope and fantasy of this project are truly impressive. It was to have been situated beneath Warsaw's Parade Square and, thanks to an ingenious trick, would have 'subordinated' the huge Stalin-era Palace of Culture, symbolically reducing it to the size of one of the other period exhibits. This was also a judgement-of-Solomon-style solution to the insoluble dispute between the advocates and opponents of demolishing the Palace of Culture. But the reasons behind its failure included the scope of the project, as shown by the visualisations, combined with the pettiness of Warsaw's city-hall officials. But dreams of a museum of communism have not disappeared. Evidence of this was provided in mid-November by the authorities of the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, who have come up with the idea of turning a large part of their city covering an area of more than 120 hectares into a museum of the Soviet Union. However, the internet is probably the best-suited medium for a project of this type. A certain American foundation, whose co-founders were Zbigniew Brzezinski and Vaclav Havel, has been working for fifteen years or so to create a similar 'virtual museum of communism'.

The snap of the bolt-lock

But what of those who seek the truth about the past and need tangible evidence, even if they are not allowed to touch it? Such people will sooner or later make it to several Central European museums ranging from the Terror Haza (House of Terror) in Budapest to the KGB Dungeon Museum in the Estonian city of Tartu. They share one thing: both are housed in old, converted security service buildings where prisoners were incarcerated, interrogated and sometimes killed.

The originators of the KGB Dungeon Museum, the Museum of Genocide in Vilnius, Romania's Museum of Remembrance in Sighet, and even the more modest

Leistikowstraße Memorial in Potsdam have followed in the footsteps of the victims of Nazi totalitarianism. Warsaw's former Gestapo headquarters in Aleja Szucha as well the infamous concentration camp at Auschwitz have been turned into museums of Nazi terror. The reason is partly because no 'socially beneficial' use could be imagined for these places other than bearing witness to past atrocities, but above all because this role was deemed the most meaningful.

A question remains as to the devices curators can use to recreate the atmosphere of horror and violence. Some elements such as a prison's very look and feel are always effective. Whether climbing the rattling metal stairs of Sighet or crouching low in the 1.5-metre-high dungeon in Andrassy Avenue in Budapest, everywhere it is equally stuffy, cramped and threatening amid the snap of bolt-locks being closed, eye-wearing bare light bulbs and beds of boards. The interrogation rooms are the same in Budapest and Vilnius, with massive oak-veneer desks confiscated from some 'enemy of the people', pink-rimmed NKVD hats near their edge and interrogation lamps shined in the prisoner's face. In such a setting, the question asked by Polish writer Marek Hłasko inevitably returns: 'Are the scoundrels shown in films imitating the real ones, or is it the other way round?' When we sit on a chair meant for an interrogated prisoner, we can easily imagine being on the set of Ryszard Bugalski's film *Interrogation*.

The creators of the memorial in Tuol Seng, recalling the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, seem to have taken things the furthest. Only a few years ago were they persuaded to abandon a map of Cambodia made of victims' skulls. But, all in all, doesn't the silence and mounds of hair at Auschwitz cry out the loudest?

Killing fields

This aspect of communism – not violence against the individual but genocide, whose victims were entire social or ethnic groups – is easiest to evoke by means of a museum exhibition in Russia. On the islands of the Gulag Archipelago, prisoners' hair was not shorn with a view to stuffing mattresses. But maybe a stretch of a railway embankment, to which the corpses of forced-labour-camp victims were added to improve its stability in permafrost conditions, would suffice. And next to it a barracks with narrow beds of boards, a tin bowl, and a torn quilted jacket. Such crude reminders suffice if we look at the faces of visitors leaving the former Nazi German extermination camp at Majdanek in Poland or Washington's Holocaust Museum.

But no such collection has been created and it is doubtful whether one ever will be. This in itself is very meaningful. Beginning in the late 1980s, several monuments have been erected in Russia, mainly through the efforts of the Memorial association. Usually they have taken the simplest (albeit most eloquent) form of a commemorative boulder, the most famous of these standing outside Moscow's Lubianka prison and former KGB headquarters. Among the best-known exceptions are the sculptures of Ernst Nezvestny. One of them titled 'Mask of pain' was erected in Magadan in Asiatic Russia; and one in Elista in Russia's Kalmyk Republic is

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dedicated to the victims of forced exile.

And what about museums? Even the most modest ones? These can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. Usually on a wave of pro-perestroika enthusiasm, local museums would set aside a room containing a few photos, photocopied documents and rusty pick-axes. But the museum in Vorkuta tells more about Russian historical memory than volumes of research ever could. There, side by side, is an exhibition devoted to a labour camp theatre (it looks like things weren't that bad after all!) and a display case proudly highlighting heroes of the Great Patriotic War (as the Second World War is known in Russia).

But efforts continue. In her book *Gulag Remembrance*, Zuzanna Bogumił compiled a list of probably all known attempts to create makeshift semblances of museums dedicated to communism. In the village of Kuchino, several barracks of the Perm-36 labour camp have been preserved and exhibitions have been set up in them. A small museum has been opened in Yagodnoye, and several display cases have been set up in Solovki. Young people from the Perm section of the Memorial association have for years been trying to safeguard the ruins of the Stvor labour camp on the River Chusovoy. And that's about it! That's about it in a country covering one-sixth of the earth's surface. Nearly two decades ago, Tomasz Kizny photographed the 'road of death', or what was left of the Salekhard-Igarka railway line, built by Gulag prisoners, and remarked that woodworm and permafrost would finish it off. But the terror was hardly limited to the Arctic Circle. It is estimated that the 'Ukrainian killing fields' in Bykovnia contain the remains of over 100,000 people, the victims of the 1937 Soviet wave of terror as well as murdered Polish officers. This very site was alluded to in a poem by Janusz Kotański:

*the way to the kyiv road
is shown by a sign
with the word 'memorial'
behind it are wooden stakes
adorned with red stars
after a few kilometres
one passes amid
rectangular hills
overgrown with young woodlands
(...)
a woman standing there
of middle age
begins to silently
weep in despair
the hilly terrain
overgrown with pines
stretches over an area
of a dozen hectares*

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