

Past for the Eyes

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East European Representations
of Communism in Cinema and Museums
after 1989

Edited by Oksana Sarkisova and Péter Apor



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400 West 59th Street, New York NY 10019, USA

Tel: +1-212-547-6932

Fax: +1-646-557-2416

E-mail: mgreenwald@sorosny.org

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How Is Communism Displayed?

Exhibitions and Museums of Communism in Poland

IZABELLA MAIN

It was a cold Monday in early December 2006. On the way to work I passed a tram stop. A black and white poster with heavy red lettering “Thou Shalt not Kill” hung on the wall of a tram shelter. It hung between two colorful posters, one with a girl saying “I am looking for a mummy and a daddy”—part of a social campaign for adoption—and another “Apocalypto by Mel Gibson”—a movie advertisement. My first idea was that the black and white poster must relate to the fairly controversial anti-abortion debate. Yet, a closer inspection explained everything: there was a large, blurred picture of a street with a tank and some people, alongside two small black inscriptions: “13 December 1981. Katowice” and “The Pacification of ‘Wujek’ Coalmine.”¹ The quote from the Ten Commandments was in red ink—the color of blood, of the workers’ movement and of Communism. It was a public exhibition about one of the most tragic events of Communist rule in Poland. In spite of many years of investigations and trials, nobody has ever been found guilty on the basis of the existing evidence. Interestingly, there was neither a caption nor an author’s name. It was an anonymous public commemoration.

The end of Communism and the introduction of parliamentary democracy led to the transformation of symbolic spaces and the public sphere in Eastern Europe. In Poland, pre-war national holidays, such as 3 May and 11 November, were re-introduced, while the communist celebrations of 22 July and 7 November were erased from the calendar of state holidays. Furthermore, the names of streets and squares were changed throughout Poland, many monuments to Soviet leaders and heroes were removed, and new monuments and memorials commemorating previously neglected

¹“Wujek” coal mine is in Katowice. On December 16, 1981, after the introduction of martial law, the workers on strike were brutally attacked by the army and riot police, who opened fire, killing nine and injuring twenty-one miners.

heroes were constructed.² The national coat of arms was changed by the new Constitution: the White Eagle was given a crown—a return to the pre-war emblem.³ Members of former opposition and informal groups established a number of institutes and centers for the promotion of history and heritage by supporting research and publications as well as organizing educational programs and projects.⁴ Historical research and studies about the period of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) flourished after the years of neglect, in part thanks to the fact that the archives were becoming more accessible. An enormous number of books, memoirs, and several new journals have been published, and many historical debates have taken place in newspapers and journals. It seems that history has become one of the best represented subjects in the media and on the Internet, although not necessarily reflecting the interests of a society which is often more concerned about the current economic and political situation.

There are many stories about Communism in Poland, and there are many places where these stories are visually represented.⁵ These places were either created by the government, like the Institute of National Remembrance, or supported by the authorities of the city of Warsaw, like the History Meeting House and the SocLand Museum. Some sites, established originally for other purposes, such as the Zamoyski Museum and the Ethnographic Museum, presented objects from the communist period because these objects were already in their collections. There are also places created by organizations and groups: The Karta Center and, momentarily,

² Maria Bucur, Nancy M. Wingfield (eds.), *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001); Marcin Frybes, Patrick Michel (eds.), *Po komunizmie: O mitach w Polsce współczesnej* [After Communism. About myths in contemporary Poland] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krupski i S-ka, 1999); Marcin Kula, "Dlaczego Polacy dziś cenią Konstytucję 3 Maja" [Why do Poles think highly today of the constitution of May 3?], *Magazyn historyczny. Mówią wieki* 5 (1991): 16–21; Izabella Main, *Political Symbols and Rituals in Poland, 1944–2002: A Research Report*, Arbeitshilfe 2 (Leipzig: GWZO, 2003).

³ Maria Woźniakowa (ed.), *Orzeł Biały. Godło Państwa Polskiego* [White eagle. The emblem of the Polish state] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 1995); Wiktor Osiatyński, "A Brief History of the Constitution," *East European Constitutional Review* 5 (Spring 1997), at www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol6num2/feature/history.html (accessed 21 March, 2007).

⁴ To mention only a few: Theatre NN in Lublin, Borderlands in Sejny, Borussia in Olsztyn, the Krzyżowa Foundation and The Karta Center.

⁵ There are plans to open new museums related to the period of the Polish People's Republic: the Museum of the 1956 Uprising in Poznań and the European Center of *Solidarność* in Gdańsk.

exhibitions of the SocLand Foundation. Finally, there are sites owned by individuals, such as the Internet Museum of People's Poland and the Proletaryat Café. Apparently the number of ways of referring to, representing and displaying various objects—which correspond to events, persons, movements of the communist period—is increasing. The 50th anniversary of the Poznań Uprising observed in June 2006, the 25th anniversary of *Solidarność* in July and August of 2005 and the 25th anniversary of the introduction of martial law in December of 2006 were very conspicuous events. Public spaces in larger cities, for example, Poznań, Lublin and Warsaw, were covered with posters, billboards, open air exhibitions, and objects (for example, a tank in front of the castle in Poznań or a railway coach which travelled across Poland celebrating the anniversary of strikes in Lublin in July 1980).

The projects for exhibitions and museums represented two distinct types: some curators intended to create collections of objects which would allegedly speak for themselves (neglecting narrative, debates, definitions) while other curators proposed particular contexts for the objects and displays and, thus, narratives of Communism illustrated by selected items. Displaying authentic objects was not a precondition of many exhibitions and some curators created exhibitions consisting simply of panels with enlarged photographs and commentaries. At the same time the process of collecting objects representing the communist period seems just to have started: it is not being done on a large or organized scale.⁶

COMMUNISM AS ART

The oldest collection of art devoted predominantly to Communism is kept in the Gallery of Socialist Realist Art⁷ created in 1994 in Kozłówka, a village in the Lublin region. The collection started as a storehouse of unwanted socialist realist sculptures in the 1970s, but the exhibition was created in the 1990s when other outdated monuments, sculptures and paintings were moved to Kozłówka. The collection was inaccessible to the

⁶ I have faced several challenges and limitations when working on this project. The temporary nature of several exhibitions prevented me from actually seeing them, and I have therefore confined my analysis to press reports, published catalogues, and interviews with curators. The paper reflects the situation at the beginning of 2007, including temporary exhibitions and projects in making.

⁷ Socrealism, another term for Socialist Realism, a style of art officially approved in the Soviet Union and other countries of the Soviet bloc.

general public before 1994, though it was used by journalists, art historians and film makers (director Andrzej Wajda used the collection as a film set for his *Man of Marble*).⁸ It is displayed in a coach house of the former manor house of the Zamoyski family, known since 1944 as the Zamoyski Museum. Although the Zamoyski Museum and the Gallery of Socialist Realist Art are situated around 150 km from Warsaw in a village without a rail link, they are well-known tourist destinations.

The permanent exhibition consists of sculptures, paintings and drawings, which are accompanied by music from the period. In the surrounding park, there are dismantled monuments to Bolesław Bierut (unveiled in Lublin 1979 and removed in 1989), Vladimir Lenin (formerly in Poronin) and Julian Marchewski (formerly in Włocławek).⁹ On the 10th anniversary of the Gallery, in 2004, a temporary exhibition, “Thrown Away Art,” was organized. Several famous paintings and sculptures were borrowed from the National Museums in Cracow, Warsaw, Wrocław and Łódź. In 2005, the permanent exhibition was re-arranged in order to offer the visitors a better understanding of socialist realist art. The pictures, sculptures and photos are organized according to leading themes, such as industry, agriculture, the countryside, coal-mining, metallurgy. Jacek Szczepaniak, the curator, has told me that the exhibition presented the art of the period and explained what socialist realism was. Additional information about the Communist period is provided upon request for guided tours and museum classes. There are plans to create a multimedia presentation about the 1950s, based on original newsreels, currently “on hold” for financial reasons. The curator also pointed out that one needs to know something about the period to understand this art. Clearly, this small collection presents only art of the Stalinist period and its curators have limited possibilities for extending the exhibition due to limitations of space.

The growing interest in socialist realism in recent years is exemplified by another temporary exhibition, entitled “About a Happy Socialist Polish Village. Socrealism in Folk Art” in the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. This exhibition displayed colorful works of folk art, which represented the struggle against illiteracy, work competition, the Stakhanovite movement and gifts for Stalin on his 70th birthday. The curator, Alicja Mironiuk-Nikolska, prepared the exhibition, using the collection of the museum,

⁸ Personal communication with Jacek Szczepaniak, the director of the gallery and the curator of the exhibition.

⁹ Web page of the Zamoyski Museum: www.muzeumzamoyskich.lublin.pl/amainpage!.htm (accessed 25 November, 2006).

which was created in the early 1960s. The goal was to restore the collection of socialist realist folk art in people's minds.¹⁰ The opening ceremony took place on 22 July 2005, a state holiday in the communist period. The exhibition guide referred to the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, neglecting the other meaning of this date. The curators either assumed that the visitors would know the date or that it was insignificant and did not need to be remembered. A journalist from *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote that the curator failed to give a definition of socrealism, at the same time confirming that "defining socrealism would be very difficult."¹¹ His review of the exhibition was aptly entitled "Socrealism like pornography" because he argued that while it is as hard to define socialist realist art as it is to define pornography, everyone knows what it is.

On the poster of the exhibition, the name of the curator, Alicja Mironiuk-Nikolska, was accompanied by a phrase "a stakhanovite—300% workload," which suggests an ironic attitude to the ideology of the period. The meaning of the displays of socialist realist art in Kozłówka and the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw for visitors from Eastern Europe who experienced life under the communist system is not primarily "art." When James Clifford described a consultation of elders in the Portland Art Museum displaying objects of the Tlingit authorities, he concluded that the objects of "art" were referred to as "history," "law" and "records."¹² Yet, the irony in these museums is readable only to those who are familiar with the propaganda heroes of socialist labor. The curators of the two Polish exhibitions left the audience alone with questions about history, representation and politics. Only the titles "Thrown Away Art" and "Happy Socialist Village" referred to the fact that there was a break between these objects and the present time: socialist realist works no longer decorate rooms in official buildings or public spaces, and are no longer created by artists. The curators offered no explanations as to how and why this happened because they were only interested in offering the possibility of seeing a collection which had been kept in storage.

Kevin Hetherington wrote in a short essay on the relationship between modernity and museum that articulating narratives of experience and iden-

¹⁰ Interview conducted by the author with Alicja Mironiuk-Nikolska, the curator of the exhibition.

¹¹ Wojciech Orliński, "Socrealizm jak pornografia" [Socrealism like pornography], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (1 August 2005): 14.

¹² James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 191.

tity is the main objective of museums of art, historical museums, specialist collections, and other collections in a modern world where the relationship between time and space is in doubt.¹³ Currently, museums are attempting to place experience in a singular narrative space which makes sense of the modern world.¹⁴ The exhibitions on socialist realist art were created on the basis of authentic objects, made by artists and folk artists in Poland, representing a particular style and themes. Displaying objects without commentaries, however, detaches them from significant questions of the relationships between these representations of life under the socialist regime and the history of the period as well as the memory of people. Also, the position of the creators (professional artists, folk artists, participants in a local competition organized to celebrate significant dates) is left without explanation. The museums of socialist realism fail to make clear that their objects on display were the outcomes of a specific historical period with certain political, social and cultural priorities and contexts. Thereby, they remain mere illustrations of a vague abstract “Socialism.” Communism as a real, historically situated period appears unworthy of recall, and thus fit to be ignored.

COMMUNISM AS COMMODITY. THE PROLETARYAT CAFÉ IN POZNAŃ

The consumption of an assortment of products—alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, food, socialist realist art and objects made during the communist period—is the objective of another display site—the Proletaryat Café. It is not the only such site in Poland, as there are similar places in few other cities, but it is the one I had the opportunity to observe. The Proletaryat Café was opened in January 2004 in the center of Poznań. Its design is making ample use of communist symbols and everyday objects, both Polish and international. In the window there is a big bust of Lenin, inside there are pictures of Stalin, Marx, Dzerzhinsky and a recently unveiled bust of Gierek (the party leader in the 1970s Poland). The walls and the counter are red, there are red flags and posters from the epoch encouraging people to fight class enemies. Drinks are served in old glasses which were actually mustard containers. The menu lists many kinds of alcohol, Polish and foreign, but also a special beer labeled “Proletaryat.” The music performed includes Polish revolutionary songs, but also Cuban and Soviet ones. There are many everyday objects displayed

¹³Kevin Hetherington, “Museum,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 600–1.

¹⁴Hetherington, “Museum,” 600.

in glass showcases, such as food coupons, Soviet army uniforms, documents, money, matchboxes and so on. There is a shelf with forty-five volumes of Lenin's works. There are also old name-plates of streets and buildings, like Dzerzhinsky Street or Province Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Although there are many objects from the period, the design is actually modern (the sofas, armchairs and tables are new) and there are high-tech elements, such as a display board with slogans from the epoch. The place has a website with entries such as Speeches, News, Menu, Events, Rostrum, Gallery and Our Museum.

One of the owners, Sławomir Cichocki, in the interview he gave just before the opening of Proletaryat, stated that he was doing it "not for ideology but for fun." He continued that it was a fashion to collect objects from the communist period. "This place is for people who are in their thirties and forties, like the owners, who remember the last years of Communism, but who keep it at a distance and have a sense of humor."¹⁵ The other owner believed that this place was needed because there is nostalgia for Communism in all former communist countries, including Poland. According to *Newsweek Polska* magazine, which awarded Proletaryat the first prize for design among Poznań cafés in 2004, "Proletaryat slightly mythologizes the Polish People's Republic but does it with good taste."¹⁶

Both journalists and a few guests whom I interviewed in 2005 focused on design and menu, neglecting the question of how Communism is represented in the café. Nevertheless, the place proposes a timeless and depersonalized version of Communism. There is a mixture of gadgets, music, slogans from different periods and countries without any additional information. The experience of people who lived under Communism is reduced to a few funny artifacts. Many visitors are too young to remember Communism, or were never interested in learning about it, and the place offers them a simple—almost fairy-tale—version. Communism is limited to examples of the cult of personality, slogans from the *Communist Manifesto*, such as "Workers of all countries, unite!" and the predominance of the color red. There are no artifacts related to prisons, camps, oppression, social change or opposition. The objects in the café serve to create an atmosphere of absurdity and fun rather than a serious reflection about Communism. There is a huge poster, saying "The Museum of Communism" on the wall but it is an unjustified claim. The place uses objects from the Communist period and

¹⁵ "Proletaryat. Rozmowa ze Sławomirem Cichockim" [Proletariat. An interview with Sławomir Cichocki], *Gazeta Wyborcza. Poznań* (16 January, 2004): 2.

¹⁶ Information from www.proletaryat.pl (accessed 5 December, 2006).

the nostalgia of some Poles as a commodity to attract customers. Although it is neither a museum nor an exhibition, the café offers its visitors an ambiguous representation of the communist past—the display can be read as funny, ironic, nostalgic or trendy. The Proletaryat Café creates a sense of distance towards the communist past and avoids any individual or collective reflection about it.

THE INTERNET MUSEUM OF PEOPLE'S POLAND

The most comprehensive collection of objects—photos, sounds, texts—is available on the Internet at www.polskaludowa.pl. The Internet Museum of People's Poland started in 1999. It is the most popular such collection in the country: the site has so far been visited by over 1,200,000 people. It was established by a group of individuals who placed items from their own collections as well as items sent by others on the Internet. The curators are anonymous, that is, they do not list their names online and refuse to reveal their identity. The only way to contact them is by e-mail, but my own messages were never answered.

The first goal of the curators was to gather items depicting everyday life in the Polish People's Republic and to make them available to everybody on the Internet. Everybody was welcome to send in their own mementos of the Polish People's Republic. In 2003, the curators announced that their popularity had exceeded their expectations and that the team working on a voluntary basis was not able to place all the objects received on the net immediately. The second objective was to gather the material without any attempt at historically assessing the period of the PRL. The viewers were invited to make the assessment themselves. The aim of the curators was to keep the memory of the PRL alive, "hoping that the PRL will never happen again."¹⁷ The curators went on to say that the exhibits were presented in order to inform, to allow explanation, critical analysis and education. They also explained that the Museum was a non-profit organization and not connected to any institution.

The exhibition is divided into five parts: The Collection, The Documents of Opposition, Documents, Sound Recordings and The Curator's Office. The museum is a virtual labyrinth, with many hyperlinks and numerous pages. For example, in "The Collection" one of the fifteen links is called "Objects of everyday life," leading to eighteen topics with thou-

¹⁷ Kilka słów od kustosza... [A few words from the curator...], www.polskaludowa.com/kustosz/od_kustosza.htm (accessed 24 November, 2006).

sands of scanned photos of objects: from a piggy bank to a paper bag with a May Day slogan. There are many museum aids: information, calendar, biographical entries, quiz and sounds of decades. Finally there are links to other Internet sites related to the PRL and Communism. Other internet projects are usually shorter, smaller and often limited in theme.¹⁸ However, what is missing in the Internet Museum is the narrative aspect, since objects are clustered according to themes or form separate entities.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines the museum as “a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment.”¹⁹ The specific principles concern preservation, maintaining the collection in trust for the benefit of society and its development, providing opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and promotion of the natural and cultural heritage, holding resources for other public services and benefits. Further, ICOM states that “interaction with the constituent community and promotion of their heritage is an integral part of the educational role of the museum.” While most of these principles are fulfilled in the Internet Museum, it limits the audience to people familiar with the Internet. Another restriction springs from the unusual choice of only one language. The curator writes that it is maintained in Polish only as it is mainly intended for a Polish audience. Interaction is rather imaginary: visitors and donors must write messages to the curators and patiently wait for the answer, since there is no other way of reaching them.

The Internet Museum of People’s Poland cannot replace a collection in a building, though internet pages of museums are a great source of information. The virtual institution runs neither museum classes nor organized discussions or meetings; nor does it undertake research or offer publications or souvenirs. Although the interactive aspect is essential for museum practice, the existing websites do not offer any possibilities for such contact (e. g. using forums online). “When visiting online museums, lost to the electronic viewer (...) is the power of display,” writes Mary Anne

¹⁸For example: on Nowa Huta: www.nowahuta.org.pl/index.php?dzial=237, Internet Museum of *Solidarność*: <http://elfal.com/solidarnosc/>, Warsaw in the PRL: <http://republika.pl/printo/warszawa/>, Gomułka online: www.gomulka.terraemail.pl/, socialism online: www.socjalizm.info/?go=strona_glowna, information on *samizdat*: www.incipit.home.pl/bibula/, (accessed 15 December, 2006).

¹⁹International Council of Museums: <http://icom.museum/>, (accessed 24 November, 2006).

Staniszewski.²⁰ In an actual (non-virtual) exhibition the meaning of an object is transformed by its display through a specific design and installation, which provide a specific context and possible explanation, but these aspects are missing in the Internet Museum of People's Poland.

THE NON-EXISTENT SOCLAND MUSEUM OF COMMUNISM

The number of press articles and various preparatory initiatives makes the SocLand Museum the best-known museum of Communism in Poland.²¹ Thus, one may be surprised that it exists on paper only. In 1999, the SocLand Foundation was established by the architect Czesław Bielecki, the film director Andrzej Wajda and the artist Jacek Fedorowicz. They decided to create a museum which would show what it was like to live under Communism. The name "SocLand" referred to Disneyland, since the future museum would be organized in a way likely to appeal to young people. The council of the Foundation included the founders along with Krystyna Zachwatowicz (a stage designer), Teresa Bogucka (a journalist and writer) and Anna Fedorowicz (an artist). Members of the council had been involved in anti-communist opposition to different degrees. Teresa Bogucka was arrested after the 1968 revolt and later became head of the team of experts on independent culture in the Regional Committee of *Solidarność*, created in Warsaw after the imposition of Martial Law in 1981.²² Bielecki took part in student strikes in 1968, in illegal groups in the 1970s, and in *Solidarność* since 1980; he managed CDN, a samizdat publishing house, during Martial Law.²³ Bogucka and Bielecki published in the samizdat *Tygodnik Mazowsze*.²⁴ Anna Fedorowicz was active in the Primate's Committee of Charity for the Oppressed, established after the

²⁰ Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Museums as Web Site, Archive as Muse: Some Notes and Ironies of the Conventions of Display," *Convergence* 6/2 (2000): 15.

²¹ The project was described by the press in Poland (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Trybuna*, *Newsweek*) and abroad (*Die Welt*). It was also mentioned in Volkhard Knigge and Ulrich Mählert (eds.), *Der Kommunismus im Museum. Formen der Auseinandersetzung in Deutschland und Ostmitteleuropa* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005), 39.

²² Andrzej Friszke, "Regionalny Komitet Wykonawczy Mazowsze" [Regional Executive Committee Mazowsze] in Andrzej Friszke (ed.), *Solidarność Podziemna 1981–1989* [Underground Solidarność 1981–1989] (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2006), 473.

²³ Paweł Sowiński, "Czesław Bielecki" in Jan Skórzyński (ed.), *Opozycja w PRL. Słownik biograficzny 1956–1989* [Opposition in the Polish People's Republic. Biographical dictionary 1956–1989], Vol. 2 (Warsaw: Ośrodek Karta, 2002), 34–7.

²⁴ Friszke, "Regionalny," 373.

imposition of Martial Law.²⁵ Jacek Fedorowicz produced satirical anti-regime radio programs during the 1980s, which were distributed in Poland and broadcast by Radio Free Europe. He also co-organized the archives of *Solidarność* activity in 1980–1981.²⁶ Wajda's films, especially *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, contained many political references, the first questioning the myth of the socialist worker in Nowa Huta, and the second depicting *Solidarność*.²⁷ Some members of the council were active in politics after 1989: Wajda was elected a senator in 1989 (till 1991) while Bielecki was a member of the Sejm in the late 1990s. The list of honorary members included Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former U.S. National Security Adviser, the French historian Alain Besançon and the former Czech President Václav Havel.²⁸ The stature of the members of the founding committee and the honorary committee led to extensive publicity for the idea, wide media coverage and several preparatory activities.

The council issued the statute with the following main objectives: to pass the historical truth about Socialism on to future generations, to explain the past and rebuild bridges of understanding between the generation affected by Communism and the new one, to help deal with a totalitarian legacy and build a society immune to totalitarian temptation. In 2001 and 2003, the SocLand Foundation, supported by a grant from the Culture 2000 Program of the European Union, organized a number of temporary exhibitions in Cracow, Nowa Huta, Łódź and Warsaw. The exhibitions consisted of photographs, posters ("Watch out for the nation's enemy!"), portraits, newsreels, a duplicating machine used by *Solidarność* in the 1980s, ration coupons, barbed wire, a map of the Gulag archipelago, fragments of documentary films as well as a staged "interrogation room."²⁹ According to a journalist of *The Warsaw Voice* all the parts con-

²⁵ Friszke, "Tymczasowa Komisja Koordynacyjna NSZZ Solidarność 1982–1987" [Temporary coordination commission of Solidarność] in *Solidarność*, 74.

²⁶ Friszke, "Regionalny," 474.

²⁷ Tomasz Lubelski, *Wajda* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2006), 168–72, 187–93. For an interesting analysis of Wajda's *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, see Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge—London: MIT, 2003), 60. According to the author the films were less stories about workers' collective solidarity than about a patriarchal unity.

²⁸ Original web page of SocLand Foundation: www.socland.pl (accessed in 2005, no longer available); Marek Mikos, "Muzea PRL-u: w kapciach do komuny" [Museums of the Polish People's Republic: In slippers to Communism], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (21 July 2004).

²⁹ Wojciech Stanisławski, "Stalinism Made Chic," *Central Europe Review* (21 October 2003), available at:

stituted a coherent whole representing the period of 1917–1989. Furthermore, the newspaper reported that the exhibition attracted large audiences and was widely covered in the mass-media.³⁰

The temporary exhibitions are described in the catalogue entitled “Museum of Communism (under Construction),” published in 2003. The catalogue, edited by Czesław Bielecki, presented the themes of the museum—seven sections with pictures and commentaries: “The Specter of Communism,” “Invasions and Imposed Revolutions,” “The Installation of the System,” “Creation of a New Man,” “Absurdities of Everyday Life and Revolts,” “Opposition. The Birth of Solidarity” and “Conspiracy. Breakdown of the System. Victory.” It also included a few short essays by the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, the Czech President Václav Havel, the Lublin bishop Józef Życiński and the Polish historians Andrzej Paczkowski and Andrzej Friszke.³¹ Interestingly, there was no discussion of the reasons why such a museum should be created, but only a few apodictic statements. The editor wrote: “Today we don’t like to think about it. Yet we cannot avoid the question: what was Communism? It was the only realized utopia that engulfed half the world for half a century. Its collapse started in Poland and that is why here a Museum that would show the paralyzing power of this system, its duration and disintegration should come into being.”³² This statement contains blatant generalizations and oversimplifications in the assessment of the communist system. Neither was that system the only utopia in history nor did it engulf half the world. Bielecki’s commentaries in the subsequent parts of the catalogue represent a few dominant, albeit only vaguely explained, ideas: the totalitarian character of the system, its imposition from above and the implied innocence of Poles, the creation of *homo sovieticus*, and implicit support for lustration.

Among a few introductory sentences on the inside cover one reads: “The Communist system and its disintegration will be shown in such a way as to give a powerful insight into the everyday reality of that totali-

www.tol.cz/look/CER/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=14&NrIssue=53&NrSection=5&NrArticle=10836&ALStart=120 (accessed 24 November, 2006).

³⁰ “Red Letter Days,” *The Warsaw Voice* (31 July 2003) available at: www.warsawvoice.pl/view/3138/ (accessed 24 November, 2006); Jerzy Sadecki, “Siedem odsłon komunizmu” [Seven scenes of Communism]. *Rzeczpospolita* (17 April 2003) available at: www.rzeczpospolita.pl (accessed 24 November, 2006).

³¹ Czesław Bielecki (ed.), *SocLand. Muzeum Komunizmu (w budowie). Museum of Communism (under construction)* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 2003).

³² Bielecki, *SocLand*, 7.

tarianism.”³³ Similar goals were revealed on the earlier website of the SocLand Foundation: it was to show how inhuman and crude the communist system was, how deep the brainwashing went, and how the revolts were organized and crushed before the system was finally overthrown. This intention makes this museum project different from the previously described exhibitions on Communism. Here the idea is precisely to define clearly the context of the displayed objects. The intention of the initiative is to evoke Communism in order to remember it, or more precisely, to remember certain well defined aspects of it.

There is a nationalistic tone both in the introduction to the catalogue and in Bielecki’s commentaries: “we, the Polish nation were the first ones to overthrow the system, so we should create such a museum.” While the first part, “The Specter of Communism,” focuses on the number of its victims in the Soviet Union,³⁴ the next two parts describe how the communist system was imposed in Eastern and Central Europe after Yalta. The author states: “Poles, just like other subjugated nations, fell into the trap of history: the struggle was hopeless, resistance was a question of honor and loyalty, surrender did not guarantee anything.”³⁵ Communism is presented as having been forced on Poles from above by the Communists, who are undefined. This is an example of historical revisionism implying that Communism was imposed from above by foreigners and Poles had nothing to do with it.³⁶ Again there is an emphasis on “Poles” as if no other groups lived in post-war Poland. The language (“honor,” “loyalty,” “no guarantee”) evokes questions of morality or its absence: for Poles honor and loyalty are important values while it is implied that the Communists lack these virtues. The last two parts of the catalogue describe the birth of *Solidarność*, showing photos and names of its leading members and quoting the words of John Paul II: “There can be no just Europe without an independent Poland.”³⁷ Again, the uniqueness of the Polish nation is emphasized, also by recalling the name of the most prominent Pole in recent history.

³³ Bielecki, *SocLand* cover.

³⁴ During the time when “the Soviets showed how Utopia in power changes into tyranny and terror.” See Bielecki, *SocLand*, 19.

³⁵ Bielecki, *SocLand*, 36.

³⁶ A similar example was analyzed by István Rév, “Parallel Autopsies,” *Representations* 49 (1995): 33. “According to post-Communism revisionism, Communism in Hungary was the tragic result of a conspiracy organized from abroad, it was the work of outsiders.”

³⁷ Bielecki, *SocLand*, 77.

The way people are presented on the pages of the catalogue is also interesting. They are either victims—soldiers of the Home Army, private entrepreneurs, and Primate Stefan Wyszyński (imprisoned in the early 1950s)—or party leaders.³⁸ In contrast, the next part presents the “Creation of a New Man,” drawing attention to the characteristics of the system and of the new man, *homo sovieticus*. According to Bielecki, “the essence of the system was its all-encompassing greed, insane propensity towards monumentalism and façades (...) inspiring jealousy, suspicion and mistrust (...) a front mentality.”³⁹ Bukowski in his essay about the Soviet Union stressed the uniqueness of the communist system and its impact on society: “so what remained? A castrated country with a degenerate social system, in which the type of human who is capable of work was utterly exterminated. Fear remained, not sitting just under the skin, but in the genes.”⁴⁰ The catalogue suggests that the system created by “the others” divided societies into victims and oppressors (the Communists) and transformed humans into a new species. This view resembles a discourse that was constructed in the Polish mass media and also in the works of sociologists after 1989.⁴¹ In this domestic version of orientalism, analyzed by Michał Buchowski, a passive part of society which was demoralized under Communism, called lumpenproletariat, socialist nomads, or orphans of the PRL, today forms the Other, the legendary *homo sovieticus*.⁴² Buchowski links these orientalizing practices with liberal thinking, the legitimization of political practices and the concoction of distinctions between elites and plebs, winners and losers of the economic reforms in Poland.

Two essays by the historians Andrzej Friszke and Andrzej Paczkowski, at the very end of the catalogue, contradicted many statements about the repressive and imposed nature of the regime and the creation of a new man. Paczkowski called for an honest description of the events, and rejected gen-

³⁸ The picture of the leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party shows a few leaders during Mayday in 1968 without commentary. There is no mention of the first communist leader, Bolesław Bierut, who ruled the country in the Stalinist period when the system in Poland was at its most criminal. Izabella Main, “President of Poland or “Stalin’s Most Faithful Pupil”? The Cult of Boleslaw Bierut in Stalinist Poland” in Balázs Apór, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones, E. A. Rees (eds.), *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Block* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 179–93.

³⁹ Bielecki, *SocLand*, 45.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Bukowski, [no title] in Bielecki (ed.), *SocLand*, 13.

⁴¹ Michał Buchowski, “The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79/3 (2006): 467–72.

⁴² Buchowski, “The Specter of Orientalism,” 463–82.

eralizations. By the example of young people he showed a more nuanced picture: although some objected to the system others supported it, and therefore one should avoid drawing the general conclusion that the system was based on younger people. He also opposed the identification of every rebellion with resistance or opposition, pointing out that strikes often had material causes while the protests of the young against the “old system,” were generational.⁴³ Friszke focused on the issue of who benefited and who suffered in the Polish People’s Republic. Tellingly, he never used the term “Communism” but referred to the system using the official name of the state. The two essays are unconnected to the rest of catalogue and it is hard to believe that these established Polish historians would agree with the commentaries published in it. The catalogue shows that the idea of SocLand Museum was formed with little, or only ineffective, consultation with the historians, sociologists and researchers who had been analyzing the period for more than a decade.

At the same time the Foundation started to collect objects for the future museum, appealing for donations. One of the days for collecting future exhibition material was organized in Warsaw on July 22, 2005. Recordings of official speeches by the former communist leaders and the listeners’ applause were played around the Palace of Culture. Across Warsaw billboards showed the figure of a young man holding a sizeable volume with the names of Marx, Engels and Lenin on its cover, accompanied by the perky slogan “Bring Communism to the museum.”⁴⁴ The first attempt at collecting revealed some misunderstandings. Some citizens of Warsaw brought old and broken household equipment, although many contributed documents, collections of medals, money and cards. Were the broken objects meant to be put on display as representations of Communism as a period when things were of poor quality, or were people using the opportunity to avoid paying for rubbish collection? The media reported that many came to see the temporary exhibitions and many donated objects, which showed the existence of social support for the idea of creating this museum.⁴⁵

⁴³ Bielecki, *SocLand*, 106.

⁴⁴ Konstantin Akinsha, “Bring Communism to the Museum” in *Kontakt. The Arts and Civil Society Program of Erste Bank Group. Report* (December 2006), available at: http://kontakt.erstebankgroup.net/report/stories/issue12_story+den+Kommunismus+ins+Museum/en (accessed 21 March, 2007).

⁴⁵ Ewa Michałowska, *SocLand. Czyli w oparach absurdu* [SocLand: In the fumes of absurdity], Polskie Radio (Polish Radio) Program 3, Documentary (23 June 2005). In the collection of I. M.

The location proposed by the Foundation was the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, the “gift” of Joseph Stalin to the Polish people in 1955. The Palace seems the perfect place for the museum, with its symbolic meaning and socialist realist architecture. The building is in itself controversial. On the one hand, there were plans to destroy it in the early 1990s, on the other, it won a competition for the favorite place of the citizens of Warsaw in the category of architecture.⁴⁶ In early 2007 the debate about the future of the Palace was resurrected after plans had been announced to list it in the national register of historic monuments.⁴⁷ Already a few years before, an architectural project of the Museum had been prepared by Czesław Bielecki, who proposed building an entry hall in front of the Palace and using the Palace’s corridors and cellars.

In 2003, the Foundation signed a contract with the City Council of Warsaw and the Office of Coordinator was established. It is funded by the City of Warsaw. The media reported the beginning of construction work in 2005, on the 50th anniversary of the Palace.⁴⁸ Yet, the City Board decided that Bielecki’s project should not be accepted *a priori* but that an open competition for the architectural design ought to be organized: public money had to be spent according to the procedures of a democratic state. In December 2006, the future Museum still exists only on paper and the tentative date for its opening is 2009 or 2010. Its fate depends not only on political alliances and the parties in power but also on the existence of an active and determined group of curators and organizers. It seems that the members of the Foundation and, later, of the Office of Coordinator, were not very good at finding supporters for this initiative. The view that the post-communist parties would not support such initiatives while post-*Solidarność* and right-wing parties would be more in favor is hard to prove since any actual support for the project—or the lack of it—will be only revealed when the politicians decide upon the budget for the museum. At the end of 2006, the Office of Coordinator is under the authority

⁴⁶ “Sentyment do PKiN” [Sentiments for the Palace of Culture and Science], *Rzeczpospolita* (26 June 2006); “Plebiscyt pozytywne miejsca Warszawy rozstrzygnięty” [The plebiscite of favorite places in Warsaw is resolved], www.pozytywnemiasto.pl (accessed 27 November, 2006). The citizens voted for different buildings for one month; the results were announced on June 8, 2006.

⁴⁷ “Dar Stalina największym zabytkiem Warszawy. Czy warto chronić Pałac Kultury?” [The gift of Stalin is the biggest historic monument in Warsaw. Should the Palace of Culture be protected?], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (16 January 2007).

⁴⁸ Izabela Kraj, “Zabytkowy Pałac Kultury” [Historic Palace of Culture], *Rzeczpospolita* (9 December 2004).

and funding of the City Council of Warsaw, while it would be easier to create the museum if its support came from the Ministry of Culture. In the case of such expensive projects, the support of many institutions is necessary, especially since a few new museums have been recently created or approved in Warsaw (The Warsaw Rising Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews). Although the encouragement of museum tourism by creating clusters of museums is an established strategy in urban development,⁴⁹ there are also financial limits to such activities under the present economic circumstances in Poland.

THE PRESENTATION OF OPPOSITION, TOTALITARIANISM
AND EVERYDAY LIFE BY THE KARTA CENTER

The oldest center of research and popularizing activities concerning the recent history of Poland and Eastern Europe is The Karta Center, an independent non-governmental organization. It continues the activities of the illegal group that published the *Karta* journal and started the clandestine Eastern Archives of the 1980s. In 1982, the first issue of the samizdat *Karta* was published by Zbigniew Gluza. At the same time, the editors started to collect documents and related material about opposition, Martial Law, and the political upheaval in March 1968. The Eastern Archives began to document the history of the Soviet Union, a remarkable activity to be undertaken under communist rule. Before 1989, the Karta Center was organized as an underground organization; after 1989, it was sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education and many international and Polish foundations.⁵⁰

In 1991 the first legal issue of the *Karta* monthly was published and the archive of the Polish People's Republic created. During the 1990s, The Karta Center organized many public debates, which made important contributions to facilitating cooperation between historians. In 1992, it organized the Week of Conscience, during which Polish, Ukrainian and Russian historians and researchers met and embarked on an exchange of views. The Karta Center coordinated the work of its local partners in these

⁴⁹ Irina van Aalst, Inez Boogaarts, "From Museum to Mass Entertainment: The Evolution of the Role of Museums in Cities," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 9 (2002): 195–209.

⁵⁰ Zbigniew Gluza, "Karta—sposób na historię" [Karta—History in its way], *Karta* 50 (2006): 112, 115.

countries and published the *Dictionary of Dissidents in Poland*; other volumes are being prepared.⁵¹ When Gluza, in a recent interview, claimed that The Karta Center documents the experience of people and social groups living in the PRL, he meant, first of all, the attitudes of dissidents and opposition figures.⁵² It is a peculiar perspective to choose only the experiences of dissidents to represent life under Communism, but it is related to the personal experiences of the Karta founders themselves. The Karta Center has organized conferences and meetings with witnesses of the Stalinist terror, the imposition of Martial Law, March 1968 and other important events; it has published books and occasional newspaper articles, and produced television programs. Since 1997, it has organized annual essay competitions dealing with contemporary history for secondary school pupils (since 2001 within the EUSTORY network), as well as a number of other projects, including “Remembering the Polish People’s Republic.”

Along with popularizing and educational activities, The Karta Center has organized several temporary exhibitions about the Gulag, opposition in Eastern Europe, the political changes of the 1980s, *Solidarność*, Swedish aid for Poles in the 1980s, meetings and relations between Poles and Hungarians, private companies in Poland, and others. These exhibitions have taken place in museums, galleries and public buildings in Poland and abroad since the early 1990s. They have usually been in the form of large panels with private and archival photographs, fragments of diaries, and commentaries. Most often, they followed themes documented in the journal *Karta*, which had a section on “the picture of the system,” and another section with voices and testimonies from the past. The exhibitions did not usually display objects.⁵³ The objective was to present the event from lay perspectives: to hear the story of a previously silent witness, to comment on his/her story through another story or picture, to provoke a dialogue between stories and pictures, or to reject a story by providing counter-

⁵¹ The Karta Center web page: www.karta.org.pl/historiaOsrodka.asp (accessed 26 November, 2006); personal communication with Zbigniew Gluza, President of the Management Committee, Karta Center, Gluza, “Karta,” passim.

⁵² Zbigniew Gluza, “Historia na huśtawce” [See-saw of History], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (10 February 2007).

⁵³ The exception was a recent exhibition, “From the Ashes of Sobibor,” displayed in July and August 2006, where panels with pictures and historic documents were accompanied by a few installations of a hiding place, barracks, a barrack square, the entrance to a gas chamber. The Chronicle of The Karta Center: www.karta.org.pl/Kronika_Wiadomosc.asp?WiadomoscID=687&jezyk=1 (accessed 30 January, 2007).

evidence. This was a new formula for constructing a historical exhibition, formed little by little by the team of The Karta Center. It is based on their belief that testimonies (visual and oral) are so powerful that they offer the best way of representing the event from inside, while objects would bring in their own stories.⁵⁴

A recent large temporary exhibition, entitled “Faces of Totalitarianism: Twentieth Century Europe,” was organized by The Karta Center in the History Meeting House between September 2005 and December 2006. The History Meeting House was created by the City of Warsaw and The Karta Center. Its partners are well-established institutions for the study and research of contemporary history: the Institute of National Remembrance, the Institute of Political Science of the Polish Academy of Science, the Sikorski Museum in London, the Memorial in Moscow, the Hannah-Arendt Institute in Leipzig and the Körber-Stiftung in Hamburg.

The exhibition “Faces of Totalitarianism” relates to some of the most tragic episodes of twentieth-century history. It is divided into eighteen parts, covering the Soviet and Nazi regimes. It starts with a presentation of the results of the Great War, Bolshevik Russia, the Polish–Bolshevik war of 1920, the class struggle and the Great Terror in the USSR. It continues with the racial divisions in Nazi Germany, the alliance of two totalitarian regimes, the Soviet occupation, the Soviet repression, and the clash of two totalitarian regimes. The last part displays the Nazi occupation and repression, the Holocaust, the Warsaw Uprising, the underground state, the expulsions and “the defeat of Nazism and the triumph of Communism.” Parallels are drawn between crimes and repression committed by Nazis and Communists. The occasional leaflet published by the History Meeting House claims that the exhibition presents a sequence of stages in the totalitarian experience. With only a few short introductory commentaries, the majority of the exhibition consisted of historical accounts (fragments of personal memoirs and recollections), copies of documents, photographs, propaganda posters and original recordings of witnesses and participants of the events.

In my reading, the objective of the exhibition was the visualization of the thesis expressed by Stéphane Courtois in the introduction to *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. The juxtaposition of Nazism and Communism as equally criminal systems in the essay by Courtois led to disagreements between the co-authors of the edited vol-

⁵⁴ Interview with Zuzanna Bogumił, Department of Exhibitions and Public Relations of the History Meeting House, conducted by the author in February 2007.

ume and provoked a public debate in the French media.⁵⁵ *The Black Book*, published in French, Italian and German in 1997, appeared in Polish two years later, also triggering debates about Communism. The themes of repression, crime, opposition and struggle with the communist regime is a common subject of research in Poland. But another part of historical research and writing covers aspects of social, cultural and economic history. Popular publications about the Polish People's Republic are often devoted to the absurdity of life, cult objects (packages, toys, clothes, cars), jokes and music. These different themes are often intertwined: for example, the same historians write both about repression and about everyday experiences. The exhibition "Faces of Totalitarianism" covered the period until 1947, when the faked elections led to the communist takeover in Poland. The narrative presented the background of the system in Poland and Eastern Europe, stressing its totalitarian character.

The other exhibitions organized in the History Meeting House presented different aspects of Communist history: "Warsaw–Budapest 1956," "Private Small Companies under Communism," "Zielna 37" (a street in Warsaw), "The White Rose" (a non-violent resistance movement in Germany during World War II), "The Student Movement of Dissent," "Warsaw in the 1960s" and "Martial Law." Gluza, the founder and director of The Karta Center, stated that its goal—which had not changed during its history—was to attempt to name what was happening under Communism and to search for spheres of freedom in totalitarian conditions.⁵⁶ Accordingly, everyday life was shown as partly controlled by the authorities but also as permitting individual choices and stances. The totalitarian character of the regime was thus not the only story presented by The Karta Center, even though it was the dominant motif of its largest and longest exhibition.

⁵⁵ Krystyna Kersten. "Wstęp do polskiego wydania" [Introduction to the Polish edition] in Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panne, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, Jean-Louis Margolin (eds.), *Czarna Księga Komunizmu. Zbrodnie, Terror, Prześladowania* [The black book of Communism: Crimes, terror, repression] (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 1999), 8.

⁵⁶ Interview with Zbigniew Gluza, conducted by the author, January 2007.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

The leaders of Law and Justice (the Polish acronym is PiS), a political party in power since October 2005, expressed their support for another project, a Museum of Freedom, which would present the struggle for freedom during the communist rule and in previous centuries in Poland. Kazimierz Ujazdowski, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, expressed in an interview the view that such a museum would show “unique aspirations for freedom during the time of the First Republic (sixteenth–eighteenth century), the struggles in the nineteenth century, and the successful struggle with two totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century: the Polish victory over Communism and Nazism.”⁵⁷ This project, although it soon disappeared from public discourse and its realization is highly unlikely, represents nationalistic thinking about history and recalls the messianic vision of the role of the Polish nation in history.⁵⁸ In this vision the nation is the ultimate hero of history as the fighter for freedom and democracy and also the ultimate victim of historical injustices, including Nazism and Communism.

The idea of creating the Museum of Freedom went hand in hand with the idea that the state should have a “politics of history.”⁵⁹ Both the need for such a policy and the meaning of this concept were debated in a number of polemical essays, published in leading Polish newspapers: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*. In 2005, Tomasz Merta, a conservative politician and the author of the PiS’s program of culture, co-edited a volume entitled *Memory and Responsibility*.⁶⁰ In the introduction, Merta and Robert Kostro (both authors of school textbooks in history and civel education) stated that history was not only the subject of historians’ interest and internal discussions but also the reason for international controversies. Furthermore, they wrote that Poland was not well prepared for the “battle about memory,” although they did not elaborate what this battle should be about. They continued with the claim

⁵⁷ Robert Traba, “Kicz patriotyczny” [Patriotic kitsch], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (6 January 2006): 10.

⁵⁸ On the messianic tradition see, for example, Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: the Case of Poland* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Ewa Morawska, “Civil Religion vs. State Power in Poland,” *Society* 21/4 (1984): 29–34.

⁵⁹ Kazimierz Ujazdowski, “Powrót do historii. Rozmawiał Paweł Wroński” [Return to History. A conversation with Paweł Wroński], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (8 July 2005): 21.

⁶⁰ Robert Kostro, Tomasz Merta (eds.), *Pamięć i odpowiedzialność* [Memory and responsibility] (Cracow—Wrocław: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej—Centrum Konserwatywne, 2005).

that a section of the political and intellectual elite had decided that the politics of memory was an anachronism. They noted with regret that this conviction had led to neglect of the “politics of history” in both the internal and the foreign policy of the state.

Merta and Kostro listed several areas of neglect and controversy and proposed their own solutions. They first addressed the issue of “critical patriotism,” that is, the greater affinity of some citizens for “Others” than for “Us.” For example, Dariusz Gawin, another author in the volume, compared the different attitudes to Germans expelled from the former German territories and to Poles expelled from the East. In his view the suffering of German expellees was more often referred to than the fate of Polish expellees from the Eastern provinces, which was shrouded in silence. He also argued that critical and self-accusatory attitudes among Poles prevailed over positive assessments of their own past.⁶¹ It is rather a particular view, taking into account that both before and after 1989 history was mostly written from a national perspective and the idea of Poles as perpetrators during or after the war came as a surprise for many.

Second, the authors argued that a lack of awareness of one’s identity, one’s past, one’s national community hindered or even prevented civil education and international agreements. The authors pleaded for attractive methods of popularizing historical knowledge, citing as examples the House of Terror in Budapest and the recently opened Warsaw Rising Museum.⁶² The latter, opened in 2004, is applauded by the proponents of the “politics of history” for presenting a heroic vision of the insurgents and citizens of occupied Warsaw and paying homage to the victims in a technologically advanced and interactive way. Gawin, one of the museum’s directors, stated that the Warsaw Rising Museum aimed at offering neither a story of heroism nor of victimization.⁶³ However, the less heroic moments of the uprising, the disagreements about its meaning and its failure were hardly mentioned in the exhibition.⁶⁴ It is also telling that the House

⁶¹Dariusz Gawin, “O korzyściach i szkodliwości historycznego rewizjonizmu” [About the benefits and harmfulness of historical revisionism] in *Pamięć*, 28.

⁶²Robert Kostro, Kazimierz Michał Ujazdowski, “Odzyskać pamięć” [To regain memory] in *Pamięć*, 48.

⁶³“Polski patriotyzm po przejściach” [Polish patriotism after trying experiences], *Dziennik* (9 November 2006).

⁶⁴A political scientist and philosopher, Marcin Król, wrote with irony that, having seen the exhibition, one might not realise that the Uprising was defeated. See Marcin Król, “Nie używajmy historii do politycznych celów” [Let us not use history for political goals], *Dziennik* (19 June 2006): 28–9.

of Terror in Budapest was given as an example. The presentation of the crimes of Nazism and Communism between 1944 and 1956 in the House of Terror tries to imply that the two regimes were equivalent, but the comparison is highly problematic and controversial.⁶⁵ For example, as the critics of the Museum have pointed out, only a couple of rooms are devoted to Nazi crimes, the rest being devoted to communist ones.⁶⁶ Rafał Stobiecki, in his study of contemporary Polish historians of the communist period, suggested that there were two common ways of conceptualizing their work: either as belief in the search for absolute truth (the positivist, scientist model) or as the pursuit of axiomatic, missionary and moralistic objectives.⁶⁷ I would suggest that the supporters of the “politics of history” understand history in both ways: as a missionary search for absolute truth.

The slogan “politics of history” entered the mass media at the time of the presidential and parliamentary campaigns. The idea was criticized by Robert Traba, historian and editor of the journal *Borussia*, in his essay “Patriotic kitsch.”⁶⁸ He objected to the affirmation of national history, heroic patriotism and the role of the state in forming and promoting the politics of history. Traba’s essay triggered a debate among historians, political scientists and politicians.⁶⁹ Andrzej Nowak, a right-wing historian, stated that during the last sixty years a false history had been propagated and there was a need for counter-propaganda at the moment. He expressed this view together with his criticism of the post-1989 system at a conference in the Institute for National Memory (IPN), where politicians

⁶⁵ See the analysis of Zsolt K. Horváth in this volume. See also István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 277–303 and a comparative essay about museums of Communism by Arnold Bartetzky, “Visualizing the Experience of Dictatorship: Communism in the Museum,” *Centropa* 6/3 (2006): 183–93.

⁶⁶ Beverly A. James, *Imagining Postcommunism: Visual Narratives of Hungary’s 1956 Revolution* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 3–4. Gabriella Iloncszki, Sándor Kurtán, “Hungary,” *European Journal of Political Research* 42 (December 2003): 967.

⁶⁷ Rafał Stobiecki, “Spór o PRL. Metodologiczne oblicze debaty” [Argument about the PRL. The methodological side of the debate], *Kultura i historia* 2 (2002), available at: www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/80 (accessed 30 January, 2007).

⁶⁸ Traba, “Kicz patriotyczny,” 10.

⁶⁹ Among the participants in this debate were Paweł Machcewicz, Andrzej Romanowski, Paweł Cichocki, Aleksander Smolar, Adam Leszczyński, Paweł Wroński, Robert Krawowski, Anna Wolff-Powęska, and Andrzej Nowak.

and historians discussed the “politics of history.”⁷⁰ Paweł Wroński, a journalist and historian, criticized this view, maintaining that the project of the “politics of history” was part of the election campaign, and that the goal of the project was to turn historians into supporters of the government.⁷¹ Paweł Machcewicz, professor of history and former director of the education office of the IPN, attempted to reconcile different stances by claiming that the politics of history was nothing new and was not actually neglected after 1989. The only issue which had not received enough attention was the remembrance of *Solidarność* and its role in the process of overthrowing the Communist regime.⁷² Marcin Kula, a professor of history, protested against any attempts to involve historians in politics. He criticized the idea of “one true history” being popularized in society, and opted for constant research and debate. He noted a serious concern that history will be instrumentalized, which would resemble the communist ideologization of the past. Conversely, he pointed out that recent history was in fact being studied and its important events and anniversaries commemorated.⁷³ Kula’s voice is significant because he is one of the more active researchers and promoters of contemporary history as an editor of the series *In the country of the Polish People’s Republic*, which includes almost forty volumes about the social, political, economic, and cultural history of Communism in Poland.

The PiS government meanwhile reshaped its program on the “politics of history.” On May 2, 2006, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage announced the creation of a Museum of Polish History which would “undertake civil and patriotic education (...) emphasizing exceptional, specific and fascinating elements of Polish history.”⁷⁴ In an essay entitled “History: A Space for Dialogue,” Traba expressed his hope and faith that before this museum was opened, there would be a public debate, and that politicians would not dictate either “affirmative” or “critical” approaches to history.⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, there are many examples showing that the

⁷⁰ Paweł Wroński, “Polityka historyczna. Fundament IV RP” [The politics of history: The foundation of the fourth polish republic], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (31 March 2006): 4; “Polska polityka historyczna” [The Polish policy of history], *Biuletyn IPN* 5 (2006).

⁷¹ Wroński, “Polityka,” 4.

⁷² Paweł Machcewicz, “Polityka historyczna to nic nowego” [The politics of history is nothing new], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (20 April 2006): 20.

⁷³ Editorial, “Polityka historyczna—za i przeciw” [Politics of history—for and against], *Mówią wieki* (17 August 2006).

⁷⁴ Robert Traba, *Historia. Przestrzeń dialogu* [History: a space for dialogue] (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2006), 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

“politics of history” was realized during the post-communist period, before the PiS won the elections.⁷⁶ It is particularly visible in the establishment and activities of the Institute of National Remembrance.

THE INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL REMEMBRANCE –
THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF HISTORY

The Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation,⁷⁷ created in 1998, was invoked by the proponents of the politics of history as a good example of the popularization of recent history. The IPN was established to preserve, manage, make use of and disclose the materials of the state security agencies from the period between 1944 and 1989.⁷⁸ The three main tasks of the Institute are archival, judicial and educational. The vetting process,⁷⁹ the investigation of the Jedwabne murder⁸⁰ and the disclosure of secret agents dominated the media coverage of IPN activities. However, one of its publications, a monthly *Bulletin of the IPN*, covers a wide range of topics in contempo-

⁷⁶ The changes in the national emblem and national holidays, the removal of monuments and the amendment of the name of the state in 1989 were already part of the politics of history.

⁷⁷ The second part of the name refers to the earlier Commission, established in 1945, incorporated into the IPN.

⁷⁸ The official website of the Institute is www.ipn.gov.pl. It is partly translated into English, German, French and Russian (accessed 21 March, 2007).

⁷⁹ When the Parliament passed a bill creating the IPN on September 22, 1998, it intended first of all to start an institution appointed to hold, manage, make use of, and disclose the materials of the state security services from 1944–1989. The lustration concerns senior public officials, such as the President, members of parliament, senators, judges, public prosecutors, and top functionaries in the state-owned companies. They must sign a statement that they never cooperated with the security services between 1944 and 1990. This is then checked with the archives held by the IPN. If an incriminating file is found, the person concerned loses the office. Private persons may apply to obtain their files. The Act introduced various categories of people whose files were in the IPN: “observed party” (*pokrzywdzony*), “secret informer” (*tajny współpracownik*), “open informer” (*jawny współpracownik*). Only those who received the status of “aggrieved party” may obtain their files from the IPN. It was up to the IPN to decide whether or not to disclose the names of secret informers. See: www.ipn.gov.pl.

⁸⁰ Jan Tomasz Gross, *The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Tomasz Łukowski, “Les conflits de discours sur le massacre de Jedwabne en Pologne,” *La nouvelle Alternative* 56 (2002), available at: www.nouvelle-alternative.org/num/56/chronique1.php (accessed 21 March, 2007); Marci Shore, “Conversing with Ghosts: Jedwabne, *Żydokomuna*, and Totalitarianism,” *Kritika: Explanations in Russian and Euroasian History* 6/2 (2005): 345–74.

rary Polish history. The majority of issues involve research into the political opposition, the secret police and the “observed parties,” but social, religious and cultural aspects of communist history are also included.

The IPN has organized more than seventy temporary exhibitions, among them: “People and Documents of the Security Services,” “For Bread and Freedom—Dissent in Communist Poland,” “Celebrations of the Millennium of Poland’s Baptism,” “Defectors from the Polish People’s Republic,” “Martial Law,” “Mourning the Death of Stalin,” “Jerzy Popiełuszko,” “Polish Help for the Jewish Population in Białystok under German Occupation,” “The Extermination of Polish Elites—Action AB and Katyń,” “Those Sentenced to Death During Stalinism and Their Fate,” “Land Reform after Sixty Years—Documents and Recollections,” “The Self-Defense Workers’ Committee,” “The State Against the Church,” “The Stalinist System” and others.⁸¹ The exhibitions varied in form: they either consisted of large panels with commentaries and pictures (especially when displayed outdoors, as for example a current exhibition in Poznań showing the victims of Martial Law) or panels accompanied by authentic objects. Each exhibition was shown in several towns, both larger and smaller, across Poland. The exhibitions presented the outcomes of research projects in the IPN archives, documenting the activities of the state apparatus for the surveillance, persecution and repression of individuals, opposition groups and the Catholic Church. Since the exhibitions used the archival documents of the former security services they reflected the regime’s search for signs of opposition and discontent, its propaganda and its attempts at manipulation and conspiracy. The picture is one-sided. To take only opposition as an example, the dissidents who are the subjects of these documents frequently prove dishonest. What is more, the IPN archives overlook many other spheres of Polish life (private, social, economic, sporting activities) which are also neglected in the exhibitions organized by the IPN.

The IPN represents an attempt to institutionalize and, due to its favorable human (more than 1500 employees) and financial resources, to situate in a dominant position a particular version of Polish history. The name implies that the Institute is dealing with national remembrance; it attempts to define the way in which Poles should remember the past. It works on the assumption that an institution, with its established structure, its scheduled tasks, its clearly defined responsibilities, and assisted by a number of well-educated historians, archivists and lawyers, can create a coherent and

⁸¹ Institute’s webpage: www.ipn.gov.pl (accessed 1 December, 2006).

proper vision of the national past. The files of the security services, on the other hand, were created with a clear agenda: to investigate and to control illegal activities during the communist regime. Thus, relying on these sources, even only for scholarly research (not to mention lustration), is insufficient.

The Institute of National Remembrance—although it has given rise to several interesting research projects, the publication of extensive source material and analysis, and a number of exhibitions and conferences—was and is immersed in controversies, resulting from its mission and the founding Act, which create the possibility of the political use and abuse of historical research. A moral judgment on the past, which mixes the functions of historians and moralists, easily leads to manipulation and omission. Remembrance may easily mean forgetting, if the choice between what to remember and what to forget is made by a state institution which itself threatens the independence of scholarly research. This became even clearer after the election of the new president Janusz Kurtyka, on December 22, 2005, by the new Parliament with a PiS majority. The election resulted in immediate changes in the IPN staff, which also increased expectations of a rapid and widespread vetting as well as possible changes to the research agenda. Recently the IPN has supported an initiative of the PiS to change the last remaining street and square names as well as monuments and plaques related to the communist period.⁸²

EVOKING COMMUNISM: TO FORGET AND TO REMEMBER

The relationship between the representation of Communism in exhibitions and contemporary Polish politics is vague and complex at the same time. In the case of an institution such as the IPN, politicians had and have a significant influence on its activity (for example, its president is appointed by Parliament). The recent idea of creating a Museum of Freedom as an expression of the idea of “politics of history” was formulated by politicians and supporters of the current government formed by the Law and Justice Party. Their idea of history encompassed both moral duties and a nationalist perspective on the past. The Karta Center, though a non-governmental organization, depends not only on its employees and volunteers but also on the support of state institutions and their funding for the scope and success of its activities. The realization of the project of the

⁸² A press release of February 21, 2007. See IPN webpage: www.ipn.gov.pl/wai/pl/305/4663/ (accessed 21 March, 2007).

Socland Museum of Communism in Warsaw also requires substantial funding and, clearly, the support of political parties. The present PiS government, supporting a “politics of history,” may prove to be a difficult partner when it comes to give both financial assistance and freedom of realization.

However, I do not think that there is a clear link between political parties, subcultures and the different projects. Many projects received state funding during the government of the Democratic Left Alliance,⁸³ while it might have been assumed that the Alliance, as a successor to the Polish United Workers’ Party, would not be in favor of them. At the same time, the establishment of the IPN and the politics of history show that, for some politicians and parties that attempt to use the legacy of the *Solidarność* movement, dealing with the past is an important aspect of politics. The character of the exhibitions in Kozłówka and the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw was defined by the curators and there were no links to political groups. The Internet Museum of People’s Poland and the commercial Proletariat Café are private initiatives and their message seems to be that anybody can create his or her own version of the representation of Communism, and that the field is not restricted to historians and other professionals.

Many of the existing exhibitions and museums offer a display of objects representing the communist period in Poland without any reference to the life of people in the PRL, the nature of the system or the emergence of dissent and opposition, and many other themes. These exhibitions offer a collection of items, either art (in the Ethnographic Museum and in Kozłówka) or documents, photographs and objects (Internet Museum, Proletariat Café) without any background narrative. Such an attitude actually leads to an a-historical view of the communist period. In the case of Proletariat Café, the owners offered a mixture of objects from different times and places. Communism is thus turned into an allegorical past as it is not situated in a proper historical context.

Narrative representations of the communist period were created in the Karta exhibition entitled “Faces of Totalitarianism,” temporary exhibitions organized by the SocLand Foundation, The Karta Center and the IPN, the SocLand catalogue of the Museum of Communism and the pro-

⁸³ The Democratic Left Alliance triumphed at the elections in 1993 (it was the second largest party in 1991 and 1997) and the former minister of the Polish United Workers’ Party, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, won the presidential elections in 1995 and 2001. See Kate Hudson, *European Communism since 1989: Toward a New European Left?* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 202–7.

ject of the Museum of Freedom. These narratives had several themes in common. First, the emphasis on the totalitarian nature of the system, its repressive character, and sometimes, its imposition from outside. Second, the strong nationalist overtones in some projects and the linkage between the treatment of the past and moral issues. Third, the restriction of the history of people living in the Polish People's Republic to opposition circles (individuals, organizations, the Catholic Church) and circles of power (security agents, political leaders). This representation (in Karta, IPN) resulted from their background, the character of their sources, and related research projects. In some projects, a peculiar *homo sovieticus* appeared—the “other” in contemporary society—and remained undefined, a-historical and imaginary.

Finally, the exhibitions and museums of Communism reflected different attitudes to the question of authentic objects from the past. In some cases, the curators decided to use authentic sounds and enlarged photographs and documents as the best way, in their opinion, to give testimony about a selected event (especially in the Karta exhibitions). This attitude results not only from the character of the Karta collection but probably also from its distrust of museums. The exhibitions organized by the IPN consist mainly of large panels with texts and photographs while objects are only sometimes used as illustrations. The Internet Museum offers no possibility of a direct relationship between the visitor and genuine historical objects, there are only copies on-line. Other exhibitions were based on authentic historical objects, but these objects were either mainly works of art—paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc. (exhibitions in the Ethnographic Museum and Kozłówka)—or if they were authentic historical objects they were mixed with modern copies without any explanations (Proletaryt Café). Only the temporary SocLand exhibitions offered a larger and more diverse selection of objects as well as installations.

In my view, the limited use of authentic objects results from the lack of collections in museums and institutions, which also leads to similar ways of representing Communism in subsequent exhibitions. There are many private collections, often resulting from a fascination among younger Poles with the art and objects of the period. Such fascination would be aroused by the creation of a narrative display of historical objects representing personal experiences and memories of the PRL, not limited to opposition and repression but showing a wide range of human experiences. However, the current political atmosphere, with its condemnation of the previous regime and its nationalistic program, offers hardly any space for such projects, especially since those constructed by independent

groups like The Karta Center, actually offer a representation of the Polish People's Republic as opposition of oppressors and oppressed which is structurally similar to the politically-driven narrative of the current government.