2. Monuments and Memorial Spaces of Socialist Bulgaria

Visual Transformations and Curatorial Challenges from a Post-socialist Stance

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Abstract

Focusing on the fates of the socialist monuments in Bulgaria after 1989, this chapter approaches these transformations through curatorial lenses – in view of the effects that these transformations produce on post-social environments and in light of the particular instances of 'agency' that they imply. The chapter traces the changes that have occurred with some of the most representative monuments and memorial sites of the communist period and the public debates targeted at their dismantlement, substitution or reshaping in the post-socialist context. On the basis of exemplary cases of monuments, such as those to the Soviet army in some of the largest towns in the country, emblematic figures for the communist ideology, and the fallen in the anti-fascist resistance during World War II, the chapter shows the visual and tangible transformations in the 'post-socialist space' and their dependency not that much on a preliminary strategy and established agenda but rather on a somewhat spontaneous and ungoverned activity, marked by the confusions in developing a historical and evaluative distance to the preceding period. The chapter, also touching on the point of the still lacking museum of communism in Bulgaria, argues that the curatorial dimensions of post-socialist environments in Bulgaria have not taken place within museum spaces and as part of curatorial plans but rather at the places where socialist monuments originally stayed and where many of them retain their presence until today.

Introduction

This chapter aims to approach the changes that have impacted the tangible, now conspicuous traces of the socialist period in Bulgaria through a curatorial lens, i. e. the former regime's most representative symbolic forms: public monuments and memo-

rial sites built between 1944 and 1989. The chapter traces the turning of socialist into 'post-socialist' environments and the attempts to manifest the historical and evaluative distance to the socialist past through changing representations by shedding light on the gradual transformations of these forms after 1989 and on the public debates that accompanied them. In doing so, I outline how monuments as specific forms of historical representation have faced the post-socialist realities and how their fates being reshaped, displaced and restructured have become emblematic for the post-socialist transition. The dismantlement of the previous ideological monuments and the public debates about their possible reworking and substitution illustrate the new notions of history that emerged after 1989 and the societal efforts of curating socialist landscapes in a new interpretative way. Discussed in detail in the growing literature on the memory wars in the different countries of Eastern Europe after 1989 (e. g. James 1999; Verdery 1999; Rihtman-Auguštin 2004; Forest/Johnson 2011; Basic 2012; Kirn 2012; Begić/Mraović 2014; Dobre 2016; Erőss 2016; Bickert 2018), the monuments and the public debates that continue to surround them are not only indicative of the remaking of cities and public spaces after this time but have also turned into forms that epitomize the changing attitudes to the recent past in the region. By analysing the transformations that have occurred with several major monumental types from the socialist period in Bulgaria (Soviet army memorials, monuments to communists and anti-fascists, and the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov), the chapter outlines the role that these representations played in triggering new visions about the public space and developing initiatives of curating public environments in a novel, post-socialist way. Whilst presenting these changes as falling within the overall trend of reworking former ideological representations after the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the chapter elicits some of the specificities of the Bulgarian context, as expressed in the different cases under public attention and in the major overtones while approaching the communist heritage from a curatorial standpoint.

In order to understand the processes related to the new treatment of socialist monuments after the political changes of 1989, one needs to be reminded about their function as memorial objects during the socialist period when they served not only as sites of memory but also as representations of ideological propaganda. They were raised in honour of figures and events outlined by the state ideology as special and acted as visualisations of the public pantheon that was created and maintained by the communist regime. Public monuments were the main venues of public commemorations and propaganda activities and, as such, were regular destinations for political rituals, ceremonies, celebrations and organised visits. Memorial sites did not only organise space in terms of the hierarchies of spatial arrangements of streets and squares but also organised time through the calendars of commemorations and anniversaries, the rhythm of mourning and celebrations that the regime evoked in its citizens. Monuments and memorial activities structured historical time through the display of a set of events and characters and through the confirmation of the ideologically driven narratives about the past. They organised ritual time, as reflected in the strict scenarios and ritual scripts (see Lane 1981), and structured behaviours and attitudes and

maintained realms of sobriety and awe, which – multiplied by the propaganda and educational activities – permeated the entire public space and sought to stretch across generations. Maintained as 'permanent' by the regime, monumental representations played a crucial role in visualising its messages and solidifying its presence, hence, not surprisingly, they turned into major foci of public contestation after the changes of 1989.

As with other cases of sudden historical overturns, the political changes of 1989 put East European societies in the curious situation of reinscribing the worlds that they inhabited with new terms and interpreting "everything that was supposed to last forever, but would last no more" (Yurchak 2006) in new ways. Monuments and memorial sites of the socialist period were the loci where the political transformations found explicit and immediate manifestation, which was clearly reflected in the numerous cases of toppling statues of Lenin and other Soviet leaders all over Eastern Europe in the first months and years after the political changes. Encompassing a plethora of examples and types (e. g. monuments dedicated to Marx and Engels, Soviet memorials, statues to communist activists), the assaults on such symbols of communist rule and the various debates about their preservation or displacement testified to the efforts in post-socialist societies to distance themselves from the previous regime and to regard it as belonging to the past. From Budapest and Prague to Tallinn and Vilnius, the entire region of the former communist bloc was shaken by public debates around former memorial sites, whose fates as destroyed, reshaped or preserved historical references continue to produce tensions on local, national and international levels. Indicative examples of the latter (though definitely not encompassing the multitude of cases) are the monuments to the Soviet army in the region, which have been regular focal points for contestations and memory wars between colliding historical interpretations and the different states, ethnic communities and political agents that have come to support them (Ochman 2010; Ivanova 2014; regarding the notorious case of the "Bronze Soldier" in Tallin, see Burch/Smith 2007; Zhurzhenko 2007; Brüggemann/Kasekamp 2008). Aside from the direct political implications, the iconoclastic acts and discussions related to the symbols of communist power were also indicative of the efforts of post-socialist societies to rework the surrounding environments and organise anew the material worlds they lived in (Yampolski 1995; Levinson 1998; Michalski 1998). In this process, societies and individuals after 1989 can be understood as 'curators' of these worlds, as managers of their own universes. They embodied and enacted transformative efficacy, undergoing political change while, simultaneously, reflecting this change in the tangible and symbolic environments around them.

This chapter seeks to explain the specific curatorial aspects of treating socialist monuments and reworking memorial landscapes in post-socialist Bulgaria. Expanding on recent studies on the transformations of socialist public spaces after 1989 (Reid/Crowley 2000; Kliems/Dmitrieva 2010; Hatherley 2015; Bach 2017; Saunders 2018), the chapter follows a broad understanding of curatorship in a post-socialist context – one that is not limited to museum spaces and institutional settings of exhibition interventions or to open-air displays of former ideological representations (as

in the case of Statue Park in Budapest and of Grūtas Park near Vilnius) but is related more to the transformations of socialist monuments at their original locations, with a range of individual and collective visions about their post-socialist fate. The curating of these representations and their surrounding memorial spaces will be interpreted throughout the chapter as conferring the post-socialist societies with a particular instance of 'agency', as allowing individuals and groups not only to witness and experience the political transformations but also to act them out. The changes in the public environments and the new visions of organising public space put the museum specialists and the post-socialist citizens on shared grounds – as agents of transformations embracing a proactive attitude and a curatorial stance toward the 'museum without walls' that the communist regime had left behind. On the basis of the symbolic transformations of monuments and memorial sites in post-socialist Bulgaria, the chapter challenges the understanding of curation as a planned and intentional strategy and a vocational expertise of curators but regards it more as a process that does not follow a preliminary master plan and, usually finding expression in grass-root practices and spontaneous acts, manifests the post-socialist societies' attitudes towards and assessments of the period before 1989. In a certain way, these practices of dismantling and ridiculing socialist statues put the overall concept of curation as an organised activity at stake. However, as the chapter argues, they also demonstrate a specific form of curation: a form that is more or less unintended and ungoverned, guided by the uncertainties and confusions that marked the immediate post-socialist years and, to a large extent, inherent in this period as one of 'transition'.

Monuments and Memorial Spaces as Curated Sites during the Socialist Period

A cursory view of the period after 1945 has already shown that systematic policies were undertaken in the first years after the establishment of communist rule in Eastern Europe to create monuments that would celebrate the new order and arrange the public spaces in ideologically approved ways (Åman 1992; Gyorgy/Turai 1992; Michalski 1998; Vukov 2007). Many monuments of the interwar period suffered destruction in the first post-war decades, whilst large memorial representations were built in parallel to honour the communist regime and its main protagonists: Soviet army soldiers, emblematic figures of the socialist movement and, last but not least, Soviet leaders. The countries of Eastern Europe falling within the Soviet sphere of influence developed the steady discourse of the Soviet Union as a liberator, hence, war memorials raised in the immediate post-war years did not work much as forms commemorating the fallen but rather as representations that hailed the victorious establishment of communist governance. These were complemented by a series of grand representations of Stalin, Lenin and the local adherents dedicated to the implementation of their ideas in the different East European states. In addition to the Soviet army and communist leaders, these societies developed strict policies for raising monuments for the main figures

of the anti-fascist resistance (notably those sharing communist ideas), which maintained the narrative of the local and national contribution to the defeat of fascism and the idea of the local roots in the struggle for socialism.

The realisation of these monumental policies was taking place in the context of enhanced political transformations within each of these states. On the one hand, these were related to the efforts to overcome the consequences and visual traces of the war in social life and the public landscape, the rebuilding of urban and rural infrastructures, and the reconstruction of roads, streets, squares and buildings within a short period of time. But on the other hand, they were also linked to the political situation of communist parties taking power over these states, the defeat of their political opponents and establishment of mono-party systems, and the ensuing waves of political repression and indoctrination of the population. By the end of the 1940s, states in the region had already adjusted to the political, economic and social Soviet system with its agenda of state appropriation of private property, land and enterprises, mass industrialisation and collectivization. In this way, they largely repeated the social experiments that had taken place three decades earlier after the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia and the first Soviet republics. After 1945, societies of Eastern Europe witnessed the use of monument buildings as a tool for conveying ideological messages and reconfiguring public spaces in accordance with the political agenda of the day, very much like the monumental propaganda that had evolved in the Soviet Union since the 1920s.

Prompted by Soviet authorities and swiftly implemented by local leaders and party officials on various levels of the party apparatus, the intense building of monuments and memorials commemorating the Soviet army, party leaders, communists and members of the anti-fascist resistance led to an overall transformation of public space in Eastern Europe after 1945 (Åman 1992; Bown/Taylor 1993) and to the execution of a political pedagogy through memorial representations. Monumental sculpture – as Reuben Fowkes (2000) convincingly argues – played a crucial role in the construction of socialist space, and this role was particularly expressed in the late 1940s and during the 1950s. The monuments of the first post-war decade aimed to manifest the victorious establishment of the new order and elicited the main postulates of the ruling ideology, with an emphasis on the historical role of the proletariat and the communist party, the idea of progress, and the glorification of masses and collective labour as a prerequisite for a bright and prosperous future. These postulates gained overt symbolic expressions, as reflected in the propagation of socialist emblems (e. g. the banner, the five-pointed star, the hammer and sickle), in the stereotypical scenes that put the trials of fight and the victory of socialist ideas in parallel (Vukov 2002), and in the excessive representations of the human body in its working-class, youth and manly hypostases (Yancheva 2018). No less importantly, the monuments raised in the first post-war years helped to structure the public pantheon, putting those historical personalities and themes on the pedestal that would maintain a constant presence for years to come and would keep the visions of history and major lines for its interpretation within straight confines.

Following the inspiration of the Soviet example, the policy of monumental propaganda that developed in most East European states in the first post-war decade involved the curating of public spaces in a way that would not only please the party authorities but would also have a lasting effect on the respective citizenry. This curatorial agenda had its roots in the belief about the ultimately transformative power of socialist ideas and the understanding that this power should find expression in an overall reworking and re-signification of public spaces. However, it also had a strong visionary character and modernist undercurrents. It sought to utilise some of the stylistic means of modernist art of the 1920s and 1930s in order to submit them to a socialist realist aesthetics by emphasising the building of a new society for the future – a process comparable to what Italian Fascism and German Nazism did in their policies towards art and architecture (Golomštock 1991). This curatorial agenda was visionary in the way that it imagined and portrayed the role of recipients of this type of art and of the population in general: as masses, adherents to the propagated ideas, subdued to their power and collectively dedicated to the status and function prescribed by the regime. This core meaning of public spaces, as developed by the communist ideology after 1945, reflects the strongest aspect of what I regard as the curatorial policies of the communist regime – one that would be challenged only through the political transformation initiated in 1989.

The pattern of political pedagogy through monumental objects that was established in the first post-war decade in Eastern Europe continued with little modification until the late 1980s, with relatively insignificant variations among the different countries of the region. Indeed, the processes of de-Stalinization in the mid-1950s led to the removal of many monuments to Stalin and the official renaming of streets and squares named after the Soviet leader and his close collaborators. Some of these cases, such as the notorious monument devoted to Stalin in Budapest, the unfinished monument commemorating the leader in Prague and the removed statue in his honour in Varna (which was named Stalin between 1949 and 1956), appeared emblematic for the new political turn (Sinkó 1992; Píchová 2014). The de-Stalinization agenda also affected a large number of smaller statues of the Soviet leader in towns and villages around the region. The removal of Stalin monuments was the major example of reshaping public landscapes through dismantling the regime's monuments prior to the changes of 1989. With few exceptions, the development of memorial spaces was related to expanding and deepening the monumental discourse that was laid out in the immediate post-war years. Among the tendencies in this regard, there can be mentioned the erecting of monuments to social uprisings predating the interwar periods (e. g. in the Middle Ages, the early modern period or peasant revolts at the turn of the 19th century), to national poets and intellectuals, or to heroes of national liberation – all of them interpreted in the light of their being 'predecessors' of communist rule and 'forerunners' of socialist ideas.

Looking Back in Anger: Rearrangements of Socialist Memorial Landscapes

Despite national and local specifics, the characteristics of the memorial landscapes during the socialist period were largely shared among the countries of the former socialist bloc. What can be pointed out as distinguishing Bulgaria in those years was, firstly, the centrality of the monument topic, which resulted in thousands of memorial representations in the course of more than four decades after 1945, and, secondly, the special presence of the monuments of the Soviet army, which, unlike most other East European countries, were being raised in various forms until the mid-1980s. Another distinctive marker (comparable only to former Yugoslavia) is the widespread appearance of monuments to the anti-fascist and partisan struggle that, marking a real outburst in the 1960s and 1970s, left almost no town and village untouched by such commemorative expressions. A further point to raise is related to the monuments dedicated to national heroes and the national liberation struggle, which took impetus from centennial anniversaries in 1970s dedicated to uprisings against the Ottoman rule and to the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877/78. These occasions permitted the regime not only to open the monumental discourse to national history topics but also to affirm itself (through visual means and literal affirmations) as celebrating the centuries of the heroic struggle for freedom victoriously.

Monuments which had been the foci of special attention throughout the socialist period turned into major targets of political contestations in Bulgaria after the fall of the regime. Their prominent presence in inhabited environments and the fresh memories about the propaganda discourse in which they were involved brought them immediately to the attention of public debates regarding their dismantlement or reshaping. In the whirlwind of political protests and demonstrations against communist rule, a number of monuments were toppled down, leaving behind empty pedestals and re-signified squares (Voukov 2005; Vukov 2009). The first ones that disappeared from public view were those devoted to the ideology's founders and most prominent party leaders: Karl Marx, Vladimir I. U. Lenin, Dimitar Blagoev, Georgi Dimitrov, and so on. With the major exception of the mausoleum of Dimitrov in Sofia, most of these representations were removed within a year or two after the end of the regime. While some of them were merely destroyed and their material reused, others were turned into the focus of initiatives aimed at reshaping. A curious example is the huge monument of Lenin in General Toshevo in North East Bulgaria, which was dismantled in 1991. The remains were stored at the municipality and, in 2000, reshaped into an artistic sculpture of flying swallows that sought to represent a symbol of hope. In the same year (1991), the monument to Lenin in the centre of Sofia was destroyed and after the procedure of building a new statue in the square, a symbolic figure of St. Sophia was inaugurated, also in 2000, which gradually turned into one of the city's major symbols. There were palpable signs of confusion in the first decade after 1989 concerning what representations to place in the stead of toppled communist symbols. Zhere has been a gradual inclination of raising monuments to medieval kings and

heroes since the beginning of the 20th century, which bears interesting parallels to processes in other post-communist states (e. g. Hungary, North Macedonia), and – as suggested by Klaus Roth – permits the analysis of new forms of nationalism in the region through a cultural historical and ethnological perspective (Roth 2017).

The first years of political change were particularly threatening to monuments of Lenin and, within a short period, most of his representations were toppled and disappeared from public view. One might suspect that it would no longer be possible to find such statues, but this would be a wrong supposition. Despite the exasperation of public energies in the first post-socialist years, there are several towns in the country where monuments to Lenin are still in situ. These cases offer intriguing illustrations of the arrangement and functioning of public spaces after 1989, for example, the memorial to Lenin and Dimitrov in the village of Banya (Southwest Bulgaria) depicts a hypothetical and historically unproven meeting between Lenin and Dimitrov in the 1920s. Located at a major crossroads by the entrance to the village, it maintains an emblematic status for the population and is even regarded by locals as adding aesthetic effect upon approaching the village. Another one, in Novgrad (North Central Bulgaria), is claimed to be the only monument that the town owns and, as such, it is valued and considered inappropriate to be displaced. A third case – the much larger town of Shumen – shows a very different situation. Whereas the town centre is full of monuments and memorial representations to figures from different periods of Bulgarian history, the statue of Lenin could hardly survive such a competition. Its relatively small dimensions in the size of a human figure and the lack of a pedestal partly allowed it to remain intact. The monument representing the Soviet leader embracing two little children patronizingly (see Fig. 2.1) is nowadays surrounded by stalks of greenery and jokingly interpreted by local people as depicting Lenin as a paedophile who hides in the bushes.[1]

Regarding the main promoters of socialist ideas and leaders of the socialist movement in Bulgaria, displacements (whether of a permanent or temporary nature) have been the most frequent solutions. The monument of the founder of the socialist agenda in Bulgaria, Dimitar Blagoev, in the town bearing his name, Blagoevgrad, is particularly interesting in this respect. It was dismantled in 1992, but in 1996, the Municipality Council of the town voted to return the monument back to its previous place in order to preserve the 'synchrony' between the name of the town and the monumental representation of its patron. Since then, however, it has been a focal point of numerous acts of vandalism and artistic interpretations, including being covered in red paint and turned into a Santa Claus on the occasion of the Christmas holidays. The case of Dimitrovgrad, which bears the name of Georgi Dimitrov, the main protagonist of establishing communist rule in the country, was comparable. In 1992, the monument to Dimitrov in the central square was dismantled and, together with its pedestal, removed to a distant park. Five years later, however, the monument was reinstalled at its original place. In a similar manner, the monument of Dimitrov in Pavel Banya

1 | Interview with I. P.; interview partner, woman aged 68, Shumen (Bulgaria), October 2008.

Fig. 2.1: Monument to Lenin, town of Shumen.

was dismantled in 1993 and, after remaining stored for a period in the municipality basement, was reinstalled in 1996.

Examples like this show a range of approaches to treating monuments of the socialist period and rearranging the spaces that they previously occupied. Memorial representations were destroyed and dismantled, reshaped and expelled from central places, sent to museums and storehouses or to public museum parks such as in Hungary (Statue Park) and Lithuania (Grūtas Park), or remoulded into other forms and symbolic representations. Many of them were covered with advertisement posters and graffiti, removed to isolated parks or replaced by memorials to other figures. They frequently suffered acts of vandalism, whether having paint poured over them or their parts reused for metal scrap or construction materials. In the whirlwind of the debates surrounding their fates, projects for their re-utilisation proliferated – each of them showing in curious ways the flight of imagination in reshaping former spaces of ideology and re-curating public arenas in new modes. Attempts to reinstall monuments ran in parallel to efforts of enacting visual and ideological transformations, often leading to the rediscovery of figures and events related to earlier periods of national history, particularly the Middle Ages (cf. Schulze Wessel et al. 2010; Götz et al. 2017). Declarations for preserving some monuments, appeals for protecting them as 'cultural heritage', and campaigns for cleaning them on anniversaries and special days were the usual counteractive measures taken in their support during the 1990s. In the context of political polarization between opponents and supporters of the so-

cialist party in the first post-socialist decade, such acts were responded to with open letters and petitions that condemned the accused 're-communization processes' and with organised protests against the reinstallation of former socialist symbols.

In these various instances, the monuments of the socialist period were arenas for contesting the legacy of the recent totalitarian system, of reworking the manifestations of its ideology in public spaces by 'rooting it out' from the sites where the regime has previously propagated itself through these manifestations. Monuments had been such powerful manifestations of the previous regime that, once it lost its rule over the state and society, they immediately became targets of dismantlement and displacement. Respectively, their destruction and reshaping, their disclaimed presence and disturbed entity served as indicators of the dissolution of the former ideology and acted as symbols of its overturning. Being focal points of public energies in the first post-socialist years, monuments were instances for reworking the network of symbolic locations that existed before 1989, channels of carrying out the dissociation and purification from the previous ideological messages, and terrains where the communist regime could be directly deprived of its aura and claim of legitimacy. The proliferation of graffiti, slogans and inscriptions on monuments and their pedestals, the swarming of skateboarders and music groups in the previously sober memorial spaces, and the piling of waste and dirt around sites that were carefully maintained and respected before 1989 were an inseparable part of the public demonstrations and protests during the first post-socialist decade.

A useful point for understanding these processes is the notion of the sacred. Whilst monuments and memorial sites were proclaimed as having 'sacred' dimensions during the socialist period (to the extent that they commemorated figures and events that were viewed as sacred by the regime), this halo of sanctity was swiftly discarded after 1989 alongside the vehement disclaimer of the 'heroism' and 'sacrifice' of communist leaders. The dissolution of their previous aura in the post-socialist era was overtly demonstrated through the emergence of a series of new personalities and events that were related to the crimes of the regime or that fell out of its grand narrative of heroic anti-fascist struggle. The waves of newly revealed information about the brutal establishment of the communist rule in 1940s, the subsequent repressions in the country and the violation of human rights until 1989 were regularly voiced to contest the legitimacy of monumental representations. By the end of the 1990s, the processes of building memorial signs to the regime's victims and to politicians and intellectuals who were persecuted by the regime after 1944 were visibly enhanced. Consequently, monuments or commemorative signs in memory of the regime's victims were now placed in many memorial spaces and gardens where representations that honoured the special dead of the communist regime had stood previously. Some of them, such as the monument to the victims of totalitarianism in Sofia (see Fig. 2.2), were built in direct proximity to the former ideological sites, indicating the symbolic disclaimer of the communist regime by the very choice of the location.

Fig. 2.2: Monument to the Victims of Totalitarianism, Sofia.

Soviet Army Monuments

The monuments that have provoked the most vehement debates since the early 1990s have been those raised in honour of Soviet soldiers. They all occupied central or very conspicuous sites in urban landscapes and were among the most important venues of political commemorations before 1989. The dissolution of the narrative of the 'liberation' that was brought about by the Soviet army when crossing the Danube into Bulgarian territory in September 1944 questioned the previous legitimacy of these commemorative forms. Being among the most outstanding representations of communist rule in Bulgaria, these monuments immediately attracted public attention after 1989 and turned into venues for symbolic battles between different political groups regarding their dismantlement, reshaping or preservation as historical sites. During the 1990s, most of them passed through intensive debates about their possible destruction and attracted various projects instigating their transformation. As has already been noted, the process has wide-spreading dimensions around the region, with cases, such as the Estonian "Bronze Soldier" in Tallinn, gaining international notoriety through the tensions that it produced both inside the country and in relation to the Russian Federation (Burch/Smith 2007; Zhurzhenko 2007; Brüggemann/Kasekamp 2008).

With the exception of the monument to the Soviet army in Pleven (which was toppled in 1990 and later substituted by a memorial to the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877/78) and the Soviet monument in Yambol (which was dismantled in 2005 as part

of an overall municipal policy on socialist symbols), the other representations of this type have remained intact until today and continue to stimulate political reactions and creative initiatives. The memorials to the Soviet army in Sofia and Plovdiv have been notorious in this respect. They are imposing in size and occupy very important parts of urban landscapes: the centre of the city opposite the state university in the case of Sofia and atop one of the hills above the city in the case of Plovdiv. Both have been the focus of exasperate debates ever since 1989, and dozens of projects have been developed for their proposed substitution and reshaping. In the case of Sofia, there were proposals, for example, of building a 'park of horror' or a building of the National History Museum around it, of transforming it into an Orthodox church, or of substituting it by monuments to the Christianization of Bulgaria, the national hero Vassil Levski, the medieval ruler Khan Krum or by a Triumphal Arch. Worldwide attention was also gained through several acts of pouring paints of different colours over the monument on the occasions of the anniversary of the Prague Spring and the annexation of Crimea, and through the creative repainting of the main side relief into characters of U.S. American pop culture (Ivanova 2014; Valiavicharska 2014). In the context of the local elections in 2019, a new project of 'hiding' the monument in a specially prepared hill with natural greenery – that would give a fresh new look to the centre of the Bulgarian capital – was promoted. In a similar vein, the case in Plovdiv provoked initiatives proposing the substitution through monuments to Vassil Levski, national independence, fallen soldiers in World War II or Christ the Saviour. Among the most curious proposals were the ideas of enclosing the site within a metal sphere resembling a sun disk or its reshaping into a large bottle of Coca-Cola to serve advertisement purposes.

Proposals for both settings in Sofia and Plovdiv were developed for creating parks of socialist statues in their vicinity. Business cases for purchasing the monuments together with the surrounding areas were also raised on several occasions and duly rejected by municipal administrations. The most frequent contestations related to the pressure of dismantling the two memorials. Escalating on various occasions during 1990s, as well as afterwards, these claims were regularly opposed by Russian diplomatic missions in Bulgaria and accompanied by various acts of protests from Russian institutions and from various political and civic organisations in Bulgaria. These resulted several times in human chains around the two memorials and in numerous organised activities, cleaning them from graffiti and denigrating inscriptions. Their destruction appeared almost impossible or at least very costly, mostly due to their large scale and prominent position in areas entirely dominated by their monumental proportions, which guaranteed their remaining in the landscapes of the two cities. The situation was not much different from the Soviet monuments in other towns of the country (in the cities of Burgas, Russe, Shumen and Varna), which continue to shape some of the most representative parts in urban settings, albeit with relatively fewer public tensions around them after 1989; indicating that despite the developments that have occurred in politics, historical visions and city life, these ensembles will probably remain intact and 'as if out of time' in the long run.

The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov

A different fate afflicted one of the most representative monuments of the communist regime in Bulgaria: the mausoleum of the first head of state of socialist Bulgaria, Georgi Dimitrov. Built in the centre of Sofia within a week after the death of the leader in the summer of 1949, the mausoleum preserved his embalmed body for four decades, attracting thousands of people who honoured his memory in organised visits. The changes of 1989 transformed the building into one of the most contested sites for the next decade (Gradev 1992; Deyanova 1997). Denounced as a 'temple of the devil', it was a focal point for political protests and religious rituals aimed at resanctifying the square. In July 1990, at the insistence of Dimitrov's relatives, the body of the leader was taken out of the building overnight and cremated, the remains then being buried in the Sofia central cemetery. After the removal of the body, the protests targeted the building. The vehement demands for its destruction on behalf of anti-Communist political parties were regularly blocked in parliament and on the municipal level by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, therefore, the visions of the mausoleum's reshaping remained mainly in the sphere of conceptualised yet unrealised projects. Those included, for example, its turning into a monument dedicated to national heroes, creating a museum of communism on its premises, hosting the archives of several state institutions or creating the largest disco club in the Balkans. Following several years of piling waste around it and of covering it with graffiti and slogans, the mausoleum became a venue of open-air opera performances and attracted initiatives for artistic reutilisation in the middle of the 1990s.

In the summer of 1999, after almost a decade of disputes about the future fate of the building, the Union of Democratic Forces took the decision to destroy it. A major argument was the goal of restoring the link between the Royal Palace opposite the mausoleum and the Royal Garden behind it. Before 1949, these two had formed a unity, which was apparently interrupted by constructing the sepulchre to the communist leader. The destruction was supposed to be swift without allowing sufficient time for reactions. However, the first attempts at ruining the building with explosives were unsuccessful, which was interpreted by many people as a kind of resistance on behalf of the former ideology. It was only at the fourth attempt that the mausoleum ultimately collapsed. After the dust and rubble were cleared up, the entity of the Royal Garden was indeed restored, but this part of the garden still bears the signs of emptiness. However, citizens kept on identifying the site as 'the mausoleum' for several years, thus, indicating its special function as a *lieu de memoire* for the population that lived under socialist rule and witnessed the first years of post-socialist transition (Voukov 2001; Todorova 2006).

As became apparent from the examples pointed out so far, the major emphasis of post-socialist strategies towards public spaces was laid on efforts to erase the most imposing representations of communist rule and to clear up environments from ideological symbols. This was done in such a way that initiatives were largely limited to the dissolution of spatial and symbolic arrangements of the previous regime. These

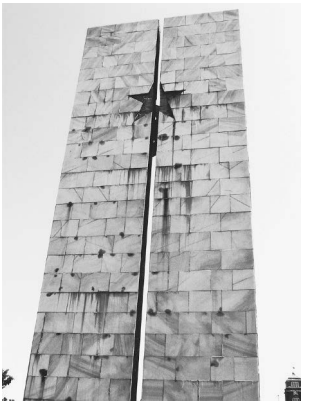
strategies were not based, however, on a clear-cut curatorial vision but were structured more along the lines of opposition to communist rule. Sometimes, as in the case of the mausoleum, the actions did not go much beyond the destruction as such – the emptiness that the ruined building opened in the public space can still be felt, and the parking lot that was created in the square opposite the Royal Palace can hardly compensate for the void. In other cases, such as in the sculptural compositions that substituted the toppled monuments of Lenin, one can see a different curatorial effect – with new significations that developed as emblems, thus, rooting out the memory of the sites' previous functions. A third set of examples – encompassing, as most representative cases, the monuments of the Soviet army – shows the virtual impossibility of dismantling and removing the existing memorial representations (due to their large scale and defence from some political parties). In such a situation, these venues have been subjected to never-ending contestations and debates, as sites reflecting (through graffiti, inscriptions and acts of vandalism) social reactions to political events and stimulating public imaginations in terms of projects for reshaping and overcoming their presence in the post-socialist environments.

Monuments to Participants in the Socialist Movement and the Anti-fascist Resistance

The impetus of curating anew the public spaces with monuments of the previous epoch has also involved a set of examples of individual and collective memorials of socialist party activists or victims of the anti-fascist struggle before and during World War II. Extremely numerous, they were built in almost all towns and villages in the country and serve as testimonies of the energy that the regime invested in sustaining legitimacy through narratives of heroic anti-fascist resistance and nationwide support for socialist ideas. In some locations, they formed grand memorial complexes in memory of fallen members of partisan guerrilla troops; smaller monuments (mostly of a bust type) were created to venerate individual members of the resistance who had died in that period. Regardless of their scale, they all formed memorial spaces which were carefully tended and given commemorative attention before the changes of 1989. In villages, such central public spaces would be treasured as public property and local heritage – also due to the local memories and kinship relationships with the people commemorated. In addition, the fact that these monuments usually involved facial and bodily representations of people who (regardless of their political activity and party belonging) had lost their lives often served as an additional protective measure against claims for dismantlement.

However, beyond these constraints, the immediate associations of these monumental ensembles with the communist regime led to various attacks during the first years after 1989. Many of them were covered with paint, had their red stars erased or covered with swastikas and denigrating inscriptions, or were partially broken (both for political reasons and as a result of intentions to use them as scrap). In these cases,

Fig. 2.3 and 2.4: Brotherly Mound to the Fallen in the Antifascist Struggle, Pleven.



the 1990s were also the decade of most vehement contestations, some of them resulting in the destruction of previous representations and their substitution with presumably more legitimate ones – as in the case of the monument of Vassil Levski in Montana. Although there were various instances of toppling memorialised participants in what the communist regime termed the "anti-fascist struggle", the majority survived the turbulences of the first post-socialist decade. Some of them underwent minor visual transformations – such as the brotherly mound to the dead in the anti-fascist struggle in Pleven, which had its five-pointed star covered in the front by a military cross of honour; notwithstanding that traces of this five-pointed star still remain at the back of the monument (Fig. 2.3 and 2.4). In other examples, such as the brotherly mounds in Plovdiv and Burgas, access was prevented so that they could be observed only from the outside. The case of the brotherly mound in Varna is also interesting as it occupied the place of the previous monument of Stalin, and it functioned during the communist period as one of the most important ideological venues in the city. Nowadays, polished, well maintained and part of an overall memorial assemblage including a range of other smaller monuments, it forms a special part in the Sea Garden of Varna, offering a nice sea view to its numerous visitors.

The reshaping of the landscapes with representations of socialist heroes has been directly linked to the renaming of villages, towns, schools, factories and institutions that previously bore the names of participants in the partisan and resistance movement. Until the mid-1990s, many of the institutions and enterprises that were previously named after emblematic figures of the communist regime received new names (sometimes completely unrelated to historical references) or were closed due to the economic crises in those years. The names of previous heroes seemed irrelevant in the post-socialist context: they did not confer appropriate information and, superseded by names adhering to a more commercial and advertising pattern, were doomed to disappear. The numerous references to the activities of party activists, who had worked and died in towns, were no longer relevant – the tourist brochures stopped

mentioning them as sites appealing to tourists, and it was usually the ancient parts of towns and regions that came to the fore. Cities no longer advertised themselves through their socialist monuments or revolutionary pasts, as they used to do during the socialist period – as visible in postcards, advertisements and organised tourism during that time. In fact, many of the names of figures of the socialist and anti-fascist movement (even the most popular ones before 1989) soon fell into oblivion and many of them are no longer recognised by present-day generations. Maintained as emblematic by the communist regime, their biographies and activities do not bear relevance in the new political context, very much like the remaining memorial representations in their honour, which are regarded by many people today as outdated references to a distant epoch.

In the beginning of the new century, when the decade-long political struggles between opponents and supporters of the socialist period had been largely exhausted, the strategies of transforming memorial spaces gradually switched from the dismantlement of former monuments to the building of new memorial signs and forms. A major tendency in this respect is the revived attention given to national history heroes, many of whom, particularly Vassil Levski, appeared as uniting enough to fill in the void left by those representations that were destroyed after 1989. In the past two decades, visible efforts have been made to restore the existing monuments to figures of the national liberation struggle and to build new ones in their honour. Along these lines – of finding grounds that would unite the nation beyond political divisions – ran the acts of renovating the memorials to the dead in the Balkan Wars and the First World War and for building new ones that would honour 'all the dead of Bulgaria' (in contrast to 'all the dead in the anti-fascist struggle'). Another major input into the memorial landscapes in the post-socialist period have been the interventions in memory of communist repressions; these have appeared in many larger and smaller towns in the country and have been gradually established as sites for official commemorations of the victims of the communist rule. Unlike the modes of representation characteristic before 1989, these new ensembles have not relied on historical postures but put the stress more on human suffering and the religious symbolism in its visual expression.

The Lack of a Museum of Communism

All this puts the intricate question about the absence of a museum of the socialist period in Bulgaria, in contrast to most other former socialist states in Eastern Europe, into a specific light. Whereas museums dedicated to the socialist period were built during the first post-socialist decade or shortly after in countries like Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Romania, in Bulgaria, a museum institution dedicated to this period of 20th century history has not yet been established. So far, with the exception of the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia (which approaches the period solely from the viewpoint of artistic pieces) and several private museum collections in towns and villages in the country (e. g. in Garvan, Mindya and Skrebatno), no special museum

has been created to narrate the past between 1944 and 1989 (Guentcheva 2013). Projects for museums of the socialist period were initiated in the early 1990s, and many of them envisioned, as a major resource in their collections, the numerous monuments of the socialist past across the country. However, despite the various proposals for creating such museums, none of them were realised and, up until today, no specialised museum for the history in Bulgaria after 1944 has been established. Additionally, the period of socialism is hardly even touched on in any of the regional history museums that exist in the 28 administrative districts in the country. The National History Museum in Sofia, in which national history is presented until World War II with some brief references about the establishment of communist rule in the late 1940s, is emblematic in the respect. The museum narrative stops around this point to subsequently 'jump' to 2007 and the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union.

In some way, an exception to this absence turned out to be the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia. Opened in 2011 as part of the National Gallery of Art, it aimed to compensate for the lack of such an institution, but after considerations about its scope and mission, it was limited to art with ideological themes and purposes. Exhibiting paintings and plastic works of artists who worked in that period, it also presents, in its yard, monuments and sculptural compositions, which had either been removed from the places they had once occupied in several towns of the country or were merely part of the museum's collections and had been spared from exhibition after 1989. Many of these monumental representations appear as if they had arrived by chance (due to the gloomy fate they have experienced in the post-socialist years) and – not being accompanied by sufficient information about the context of their existence – seem rather enigmatic to the visitors. In any case, with the emphasis on pieces of monumental and visual art, the museum can hardly fulfil expectations of narrating the history of communist rule in Bulgaria. Given the virtual absence of such a narrative, the main museum of the socialist past (and also of the post-socialist transition) appears to be the numerous tangible traces of that period in the public spaces and citizens' immediate surroundings remaining until today – be it the block of flats, the networks of streets, squares and gardens, or the ubiquitous monuments.

Lastly, one should not miss a very important intervention that occurred in public spaces after 1989 and that affected socialist memorial spaces as well: the development of private initiatives and neoliberalism as a general tendency. Whilst already present in the first post-socialist years, this transformation found reflection in cases of land restitution and privatisation of sites that were previously public property. There were also numerous examples of cafés, restaurants and bars built in close proximity or directly upon the plots of former memorial sites. Some of these acts served as demonstrations of the changing attitude to the ideological representations, but they also indicated new attitudes to public realms in a context in which the previous solemnity of memorial settings was broken and the spaces around them were opened up for private initiatives. It is along those lines that one can interpret the turning of ideological-political ensembles into heritage sites and travel destinations after 1989 as a type of re-curation. After two decades of hesitations and restraints towards the reinterpre-

tation of the material traces of the socialist period in recent years, tourist routes have been developed in Sofia and some of the larger towns in the country which emphasise the remains and reminders of the socialist past in urban environments. These not only helped to maintain the attention to tangible embodiments of communist rule in current landscapes but also contributed to the involvement of tourists and representatives of younger generations in the sharing of knowledge and discussions about their history. Given the lack of specialised museum narratives about the socialist past, these grassroots and private efforts provide the missing link between the different environments (through narratives, comments and interpretations), thus, turning this strata of tangible traces in the public landscapes into living museums that keep on changing and trigger further curatorial interventions in the long run.

Conclusion

The analysis of the tendencies in the treatment of socialist monuments and memorial sites after 1989 permits several concluding remarks. The first one relates to the identity-shaping role of these representations and sites as parts of the overall intention to rework and curate anew the landscapes inherited from the socialist period. With the public attention and debates that they have stirred, monuments in Bulgaria turned, after 1989, symbolically into motors of change, welcoming civic involvement and visible expressions of multiple new identities embraced by a society in transition. This identity-shaping aspect found a particular expression in the psychological and social transformations that evolved through the reshaping of monuments. The debates about public commemorations instigated collisions between political parties and groups, catalysed opinions on the appropriate evaluation of the socialist period and formed positions on major issues of public importance. Joining protests around monumental sites, sticking labels and carrying slogans, and debating on the adequate narration of historical personalities formed a substantial part of post-1989 political culture and was a turning point in developing new communal dynamics and patterns of civic action at the time.

The second observation refers to the status of these memorial forms as embodying the post-socialist transition. Displaying society's efforts to establish a distance to the recent past, monuments acquire a problematic identity – one of being affected by changes and in continuous transition. Reminiscent of Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopia, these representations from the past act as sites in which aspects that were previously displaced, rejected or hidden come into view, thus, becoming grounds for alternative modes of ordering in opposition to the disciplining powers of previous visualisations (Hetherington 1996: 159–160). However, the development of these localities does not only oppose their ideological content and characteristic aesthetics but also discards any claims of 'purity' or 'fixity'. In a period of 'transition' (with all the accompanying notions of deconstruction, displacement and transformation), such settings become both an opposition to previous narratives about the victorious power

of socialist ideas and a tool to discredit the notion of 'a fixed identity profile', with the evident processes of mixing instead of fixing and the associated volatility rather than the stability of messages and meanings.

Thirdly, the fates of these representations raise relevant questions about the nature of 'post-socialism' and the end of the 'post-socialist transition'. Although debates on their standing or removal continue for some of these monuments, the intensity of clashes was largely exhausted in the first decade after 1989. Remaining at their places until today, they may still open discussions about their continuing presence in the public space. From such a perspective, 'post-socialism' – in the meaning of opposition to the preceding period – has not yet achieved its closure and would hardly do so in the near future, as eloquently discussed in works on post-communist transition (cf. Verdery 1996; Rév 2005; Kubik/Bernhard 2014; Todorova et al. 2014). Yet, what could not result in implemented initiatives was gradually compensated for by the passing of time and the veil of forgetting. Many of these present-day remains of the socialist period are deprived of their contexts; they no longer function in the way they did, and they also do not have the same resonances with the people around. The generations have changed, the social and cultural environments have transformed substantially and the radicalized social energies are, in many cases, gone. If the elderly generations are too tired of the debates that they faced in the 1990s, for the younger generations, these representations have lost their special relevance and other criteria, such as practical use, entertainment and the treatment as historical heritage, have emerged as possible points to justify their existence.

Lastly, regarding the curatorial strategies of the post-socialist period, one may admit that, despite the various changes encountered by socialist monuments, the re-curating of post-socialist environments has occurred more *with* and *through* rather than *around* them. Having been the focus of ardent debates for years, most of them stay as remains and precipitates of the former ideology in the public space, as frozen references to a distant epoch within a changing world. Regarding the post-socialist transition, the monuments' effect can be regarded as predominantly external to their bodies – on the social dynamics, the issues raised about socialist heritage and the unleashed visions about their possible transformations and use. As such, they are a good illustration of Louis Marin's notion of "utopics" – a spatial play between no-place and good-place (Marin 1973; Hetherington 1996: 161). After the end of communist rule, they acquired the capacity to depict both another world of a good life, *eu-topia* (the dream space of dismantling and overcoming the socialist legacy in the European present and future), and a *no-place* that is destined to fail achieving such a 'ultimate' condition, to the extent that the reminders of the socialist past will continue to be present in public environments for years to come. This split between the desirable and the unachievable, between the horizons of the imaginary and the limitations of the real, is what may best describe the situation of these monuments and memorial spaces as well as the associated curatorial strategies competing for their fates in the post-socialist period.

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