Negotiating post-1989 identities:

Foreign visitor encounters in museums of Communism

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the intersection between Communist heritage and identity through the lens of the museum, and the role of foreign visitors within this. It asks how contemporary museums that focus on the Communist period reflect, create, and reinforce post-1989 identities, and in what ways foreign visitors engage with and make sense of messages of identity in these museums. Two case studies were chosen: the Museum of Communism in Prague, Czechia, and the Museum of Life Under Communism in Warsaw, Poland. Existing research into how the former regimes have been interpreted in the museum has most prominently been dedicated to institutions in Germany, Romania, Hungary, and the Baltic States, but fewer studies have been carried out to date in Poland and Czechia. At the same time, little has been written about the role of foreign visitors to museums dealing with Communism, with most research foregrounding the way the existing material legacy has been interpreted and used by locals.

To pursue these questions, this thesis first explores the exhibition techniques the case studies use to authenticate their respective approaches, before analyzing how these contribute to the construction and perception of Czech and Polish national identities. To this end, display analysis and the analysis of guided tours at each site were undertaken, which allowed for an examination of how different sources of knowledge about Communism have been exhibited and authenticated in the museum. The final part of the thesis presents an analysis of in-depth interviews carried out with five foreign visitors from Western countries to the museums. These conversations allowed me to ascertain how this subset of the museums' audiences engage with such representations and where this has a bearing on their understandings of Czech and Polish identities.

The findings presented in this thesis demonstrate how the Communist past continues to be central to contemporary identities in Czechia and Poland. More specifically, they underscore how the case study museums, by attempting to separate their respective states from their Communist pasts, craft origin stories rooted in the collapse of their regimes which are the foundations of these identities. Furthermore, it concludes that the interest of foreign visitors in Communist-era heritage offers those who manage such heritage the opportunity to reflect and construct contemporary identities, challenging previous arguments that such foreign interest has become an obstacle to nations and individuals' attempts to work through their Communist pasts.

For Dr. John C. Arnold
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For teaching me that it's never too late to start over.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Where It All Started: The Gaze of An International Tourist

I would like to open this thesis with an anecdote, which doubles as something of a motivation for undertaking this research project. It begins in January 2012 with my first trip to Eastern Europe and ends in 2016, when I stood in front of the gates of the Gdańsk Shipyard. In 2012, I was visiting an old friend from Wrocław, who spent our time together pointing out the remnants of the Communist era around his home city. Before taking me back to the airport, he brought me to his parents' house, still decorated in a delightfully vintage style. It was a short visit, not long enough to fully commit this interior design to memory, but flashes of it would resurface many years later as I stepped into the mock flat installed in the Museum of Life Under Communism in Warsaw. If my time in Wrocław in January 2012 was an enjoyable yet eye-opening experience, my visit to Prague two months later proved decisive in solidifying the fate of my future research interests. As I stood in Wenceslas Square at the end of a free walking tour, my guide imitated with her keys the sounds of that moment in the Velvet Revolution when thousands of Czechoslovaks jingled their keys in the call for freedom.

The emotion of that moment carried me through future visits to Central and Eastern Europe, including a trip to Warsaw in August 2014. Participating in another free walking tour, my guide recounted the experience of being dragged by his parents as a five-year-old to listen to a speech by a visiting Pope John Paul II. Forced to stand for hours while his father recorded the speech, his arm stretched upwards towards a loudspeaker, my guide told us how he hated his parents in that moment, not understanding the significance of the Polish pope's visit to his Communist homeland. It was not until he was an adult, when he visited his parents and found his father listening to that recording with tears in his eyes, that he realized what the pope's visit had meant to him and to Poland. It was this same guide who also told us how his mother, used to not having a passport under Communism, would take her passport out of its sacred storage place a few times a year to make sure it was still safe and sound. To say this experience affected me would be an understatement, for in the short span of a three-hour walking tour, I came to realize how little I knew about the Communist

era, and, perhaps more importantly, how much I took my freedom for granted. Where did I keep my passport when I was not using it? At the bottom of a junk drawer, I was certain.

By August 2016, I found myself at the gates of the Gdańsk Shipyard, feeling as if I had completed a long-dreamt-of pilgrimage, though in reality, it was a mere four years from when I had first come to Poland. Inside the European Solidarity Centre, as I stood before an electronic map detailing the rapid dissolution of the Communist Bloc, I began to contemplate everything I had learned about Communism since my initial trip to the region, filling in the gaps about an area of Europe my American education said woefully little about. Or had I, perhaps, simply not been paying attention in school? This question continued to plague me for years, wondering if other American visitors to former Communist countries felt as unknowledgeable as I had, or, more importantly, felt as moved as I had. This became the starting point for the following study, which examines how museums of Communism represent the era in their respective countries and how foreign visitors – having since expanded beyond the sole focus of Americans – engage with these representations.

It might seem odd to undertake such a study more than three decades after the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern European (CEE), but this is a particularly relevant historical moment in which to investigate such topics. Current world events have shone a renewed light on the legacy of the Communist era in CEE, notably, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the reverberating effects this has had across Europe and beyond. As I will discuss in the following section, forging new, post-Communist identities centred on democratic values began almost immediately after the dissolution of the former Eastern Bloc, with museums and heritage playing an important role in this process. As we enter an era of heightened uncertainty surrounding Russia's influence in the region, it has become even more pressing and timely to investigate contemporary representations of post-Communist identities in museums and other heritage sites. Throughout this thesis, I will show that these institutions can stand at the forefront of how Communism, the transition away from it, and the impact of these on identities are to be perceived, especially amongst visitors unfamiliar with these issues.

Though perhaps it is not so accurate to say "current" world events, as if there was a distinct period in which post-Communist identities in Central and Eastern Europe were settled, only to be upended in recent years. This is, of course, not true. But it is here where I once again bring in my focus on foreign visitors. It is their use of these museums in recent

years and the connections they make to current world events which underscores the continued importance of museums in constructing, reflecting, and reiterating identity even thirty-five years after the transition to democracy. Before understanding the position of foreign tourists at such sites, however, I would like to further contextualize the present study with a brief, albeit important, justification for undertaking this research.

1.2 Context and justification for the research

In light of my personal research interests introduced above, this study examines a number of topics, each of which intersect and diverge in intriguing ways. These include museal representations of Communism, museal representations of post-socialist and post-Communist identity, and visitor studies in the CEE context. As regards the former, the last two decades has seen particularly fruitful discussions, laying the groundwork for investigating the case studies presented in this thesis. How the era has been displayed in the museum has been addressed by scholars in a range of fields and from a number of perspectives. In particular, it has been investigated through the lens of the politics of memory (Berdahl 2008), authenticity (Jones 2011, 2015), the politics of representing the everyday (Arnold-de Simine 2011), everyday objects and defining pastness (Paver 2013), the visuality and tactility of everyday life (Bach 2015a), the binary of terror/the everyday in representing Communism (Bach 2015b), religion (Cristea 2008; Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2008; Levick 2023), forensic archaeology (Mark 2010a), dark heritage (Kuusi 2008), and the manipulation of memory (Apor 2012, 2014).

While it may be axiomatic that there is no one way of approaching museal representations of Communism, the diversity of such discussions is notable. The present study picks up a number of themes previously explored, chiefly the terror/everyday binary, the politics of representation, and authenticity, but it does so in pursuit of understanding how museums of Communism reflect and construct post-Communist identities thirty-five years on from the collapse of the regimes across CEE.

I introduced in the previous section why it is of such importance to investigate this topic today, but it is also equally crucial to acknowledge that there is no one way of representing identity, and that these representations will vary across museums. Indeed, this study is premised on the idea long accepted in museum studies that museum exhibitions are constructions, designed to tell particular stories, for particular audiences. As such, the

research begins from the assumption that the musealization of Communism is deeply rooted in the complex and fractured debates which have surrounded the history and memory and Communism since the 1990s. It is hard to overstate the significance of such contestations, for they ultimately came to define social and political policies after 1989 (Kopeček 2008; Mark 2010b; Mark et al. 2015). Despite the passage of time, these same policies, memories, and understandings about the meaning of the Communist era in CEE remain significant today. Recent research has highlighted the links between anti-Communist sentiments and the rising political right (Dujisin 2021; Popescu and Vesalon 2023) as well as the impact of political interpretations of 20th-century history on political preferences (Schmidtke 2023).

What these studies highlight is the continued relevance and resonance of the social and political circumstances which arose from the transition to democracy in CEE. Moreover, they underscore the long-term effects of identity construction which occurred during that period; or rather, how democratic identities established in the 1990s continue to have an impact today. My thesis is situated within these discussions. It analyses the techniques and tools used by museums of Communism to simultaneously substantiate and construct these divisions.

Addressing these debates from the field of Museum Studies is not a strictly novel idea – indeed, the literature cited at the start of this section touches upon them to varying degrees – but the value of this project is three-fold. The first valuable contribution is that it looks specifically at the role museums can play in constructing and reinforcing identities even many years after a defining and "myth-making" moment. Here, I use Shiela Watson's definition of myth – that is, "a selected telling of a story that has meaning for the present and is constructed and reconstructed to meet the needs of contemporary society" (2021: 82). For my purposes, this moment is the collapse of Communism and the subsequent transition to democracy. Though this occurred over three decades ago, it is imperative that scholars continue to draw attention to how museums can embody and enshrine the values nations hold most dear, including values which indicate a sense of identity amongst a citizenry.

Going hand-in-hand with this is the significance of the study to the current political moment, as referenced above. The ongoing war in Ukraine has prompted urgent discussions about the role of Russia in the geopolitical landscape as well as memories of the Soviet

Union's control over the region (Terrill 2023; Nortio et al. 2022). This has led, in some places, to a strengthening of post-Communist democratic identities, whereby emphasis is being placed on both the independence and democratic ideals of states across CEE (Terrill 2023). Museums are one of the forums in which this can occur, in so far as they make visible the interconnections between Communist history and the present day, or how the Communist past has a direct bearing on our current moment. This study reveals how understandings and memories about the Communist past affect museum narratives, and highlights precisely why the Communist past continues to hold weight for citizens of CEE.

The third value this study has is that it aims to fill the gap in understanding how museums can play a role in helping to promote post-Communist identity to foreign visitors. In this, the present study takes inspiration from claims made at the turn of the millennium by the scholar Duncan Light (2000a, 2000b), who investigated the intersection between identity construction and Communist-era heritage, using Romania as a case study. Light argued that states across the former Eastern Bloc sought to construct "new post-communist national identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking orientation" (2000a: 158) following the collapse of Communism. He highlighted the significant material legacy leftover from the Communist era and investigated how this had to be re-evaluated amidst this shift in identity. This legacy included collections from existing museums that had formerly been housed in state-run museums, elements of the urban landscape, such as statues, buildings, and street signs, and a wide variety of household items that had been replaced as Western products made their way into the East. In Light's (2000b) view, this heritage was "unwanted," in so far as it was remnants of an era these states were trying to distance themselves from.

As regards the place of tourists in relation to this, Light (2000a, 2001) further asserted that this process of re-evaluation and identity construction was being complicated by Western visitors who had been coming to "gaze" upon Communist heritage, giving rise to a debate around the push for decommunization and/or reinterpretation (Rozite and Klepers 2012) of this heritage on the one side, and the economic benefits in keeping and promoting the heritage through tourism on the other. In Light's view, attempts to rebrand post-Communist countries could not "be guaranteed and efforts to project a post-socialist identity can be frustrated if the attention of tourists is directed towards the socialist past" (2001: 1059). While his description of Communist heritage as "unwanted" has proved

influential, his comments about Western tourists as obstacles to identity construction have surprisingly gone unexplored. This is particularly notable as both essays were later republished alongside two dozen leading articles on tourism, heritage and culture (Timothy 2007), re-affirming their contribution to the literature.

Where intersections of identity and Communist heritage are concerned, this has long been examined as a question of how it matters to local visitors – with local referring to visitors coming from CEE. As a result, it has almost always been asked how citizens who lived under Communism, and sometimes post-Communist generations, engage with these exhibitions (Berdahl 2008; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Winkler 2015; Bach 2015a). The limited attention foreign visitors have received has focused exclusively on their inability to inherently "read" the messages of the exhibitions (Petkova-Campbell 2010; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Apor 2014), but we have yet to see a focus on what foreign visitors *are* experiencing in these museums. The present study aims to fill this gap, investigating this outsider touristic position and asking how foreign visitors interpret messages of identity.

For those coming from beyond Eastern Europe, museums of Communism serve as a rich source of information. We know, however, that exhibitions are political constructions which propagate messages for a specific purpose (Whitehead 2016a), as I will discuss in closer detail in the following chapter. As such, museums can use this interest foreigners show in the past and its leftover heritage to promote the identities of their countries and their people. If we are to understand that museums have played a key role in constructing and reinforcing post-Communist identities over the last three and a half decades, and that these identities are becoming even more important in the face of Vladimir Putin's growing efforts to restore Russia's influence in CEE, then we can look to museums as a place of authority regarding how the citizens of these countries want to be perceived by outsiders. That is, are they to be seen as destined to be reintegrated under Russia's sphere of influence (Cooley 2017), or can they be understood on the world stage as democratic and Westward-looking states (Light 2000a)? There are a number of potential museums through which to explore this discussion. While chapter 3 addresses the selection process in greater detail, the following section introduces the case study museums and the context of their establishment.

1.3 Introduction to case study museums

The focus of this study is limited to museums dedicated *entirely* to the history of the Communist period. Therefore, this research does not include institutions within which the era is only one part of a wider exhibition, such as national museums, city history museums, and museums of occupation which also address the years of Nazi rule. Given the significance of foreign visitors to this study, I also sought museums that target those from abroad. This includes through a high prevalence of promotional material and activities aimed at visitors, such as guided tours. Based on these criteria, the Museum of Communism (MoC) in Prague, Czechia, and the Museum of Life Under Communism (PRL Museum, after the museum's Polish name, Muzeum Życia w PRL) in Warsaw, Poland, were chosen as case studies. Both are privately run, non-state museums.

Museums dedicated solely to Communism are sparse in Czechia and Poland. Several institutions do exist that discuss the various facets of Communism. To name but a few, in Czechia, these include the National Museum and Cold War Museum, both of which are in Prague, and the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno; in Poland, there is the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, and City Museum of Wrocław. Those dedicated entirely to the history of the era in either country are hard to find, however. Main (2008), for example, spoke of precisely this when she assessed Poland's difficulties with establishing a permanent museum of Communism. Very little has changed in the intervening 16 years. Indeed, it is this very lacuna that inspired the owners of both museums in this study to open their institutions (Muzeum Życia w PRL, no date; Krupička 2015).

The MoC was founded in late December 2001 by American entrepreneur Glenn Spicker, who opened the museum after noticing that Prague did not have any museums or official heritage sites dedicated to the Communist period (Krupička 2015). Finding himself "tired of the food and restaurant business" (ibid.) he had spent many years investing in, he thought to fill this gap in the market. In a 2015 interview with *Radio Prague*, he explained,

> I came here because I was interested in the politics and history of this region. It wasn't interesting to Czechs – you wanted to get away from it as fast as you could, but I would collect things that people would throw out like a photo of […] Husák in a frame that would be left out near U malého Glena. I would say

hey, great and I would take that because I have a different outlook on the culture, fortunately. So I had an interest in preserving some of the artefacts as well as the politics of the time so it was a Eureka moment where I thought – you know a museum of communism would be a great idea! And it is not something that the Czech people would have thought about, obviously. At that time no one I knew of had thought of it, so I thought let's see how this would work and then when I started looking at it on paper and looking at other concepts in the city and realizing the concentration of tourism I thought – it will work (ibid.).

Spicker's focus on tourism and insistence on Czechs not wanting to engage with their Communist history signals the museum's target audience, that is, visitors from abroad. Though the owner has acknowledged elsewhere that he intended for the museum to be "by and for Czechs" (Rudra 2010), he has also admitted over the years that he has always envisioned foreign tourists being the primary visitors (Rudra 2010; Lazarová 2011; Kopanja 2013; Krupička 2015).

The original museum featured a vast collection of objects Spicker personally amassed from markets and junk shops, and featured short but dense text panels. This arrangement created what Karolina Bukovská described as a "cabinet of communist curiosities" (2020: 2). The museum moved to a new site in 2017, resulting in significant change to the exhibition. While Spicker has not spoken publicly about his reasons for moving the museum since the new site opened, he explained in a 2015 interview that he and his staff were searching for a new location for the museum so they could expand the exhibition, "making it much better and bigger and bringing it up to the modern era" (Krupička 2015). At its new location, only a fifteen-minute walk from Prague's Old Town Square (Fig. 1), the museum shifted from being cluttered, maximalist, and object-dependent to more pristine, slimmed-down, and concise in its displays (see chapter 4 for a more detailed overview of the museum).
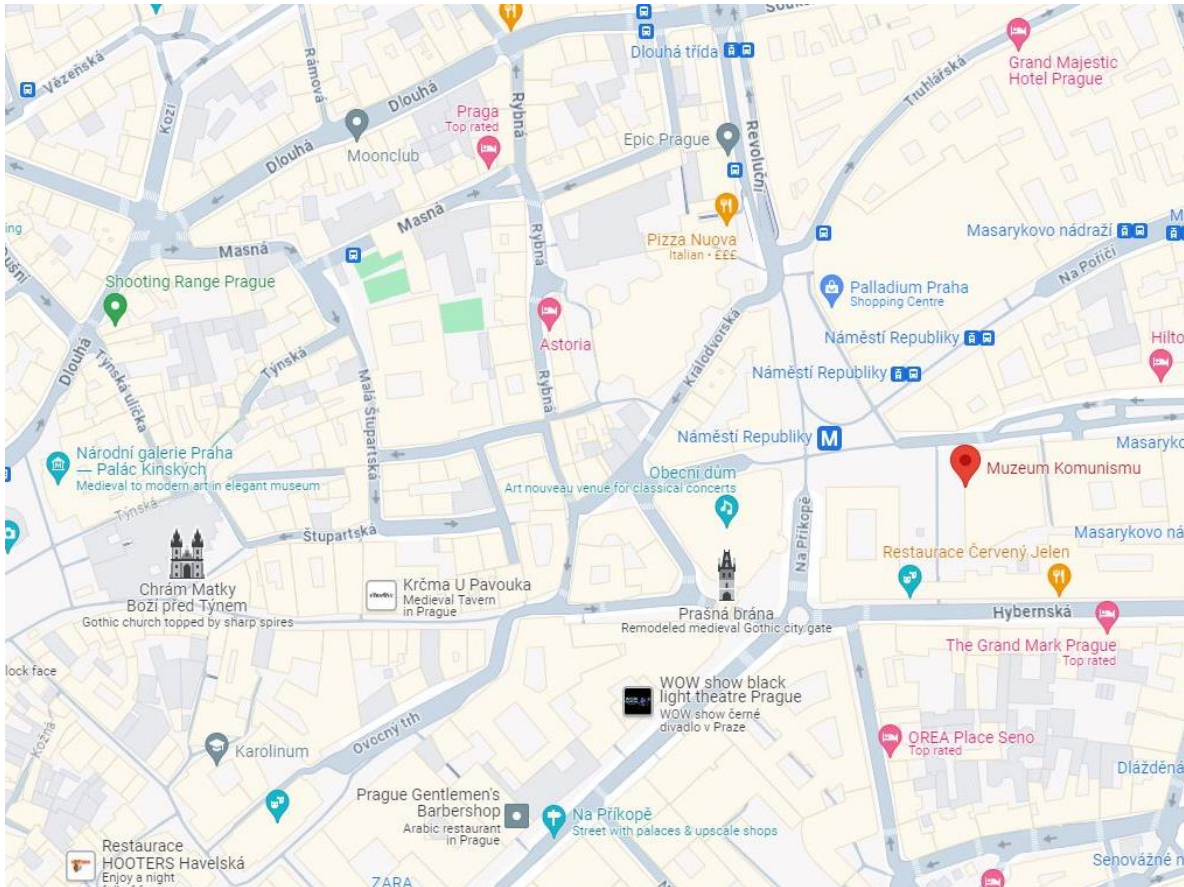
Figure 1 Map of Prague showing the Museum of Communism in relation to the Old Town Square (left side of map)

The PRL Museum in Warsaw was opened in 2013 by Rafał and Marta Patla. Its establishment is linked to the owners' other business, Adventure Warsaw, a tour company which uses Communist-era vehicles to take tourists around the city. They were inspired to open the museum after realizing that the capital "[did] not have its own museum, not to mention a space that could serve as a background to the story of this bygone era" (Muzeum Życia w PRL, no date). Having often ended their tours by showing customers a collection of photo albums and objects from the Communist era, and because there was nowhere they could bring their guests to see what Communism "looked like" (Muzeum Życia w PRL, no date), the Patlas decided to open a formal museum (Webber 2018). The PRL Museum has moved twice since opening its doors, with the most recent being in 2019, when it relocated to Constitution Square, a 15-minute walk from the Palace of Science and Culture and the heart of one of the government's flagship rebuilding projects following the city's destruction in World War II (Fig. 2).
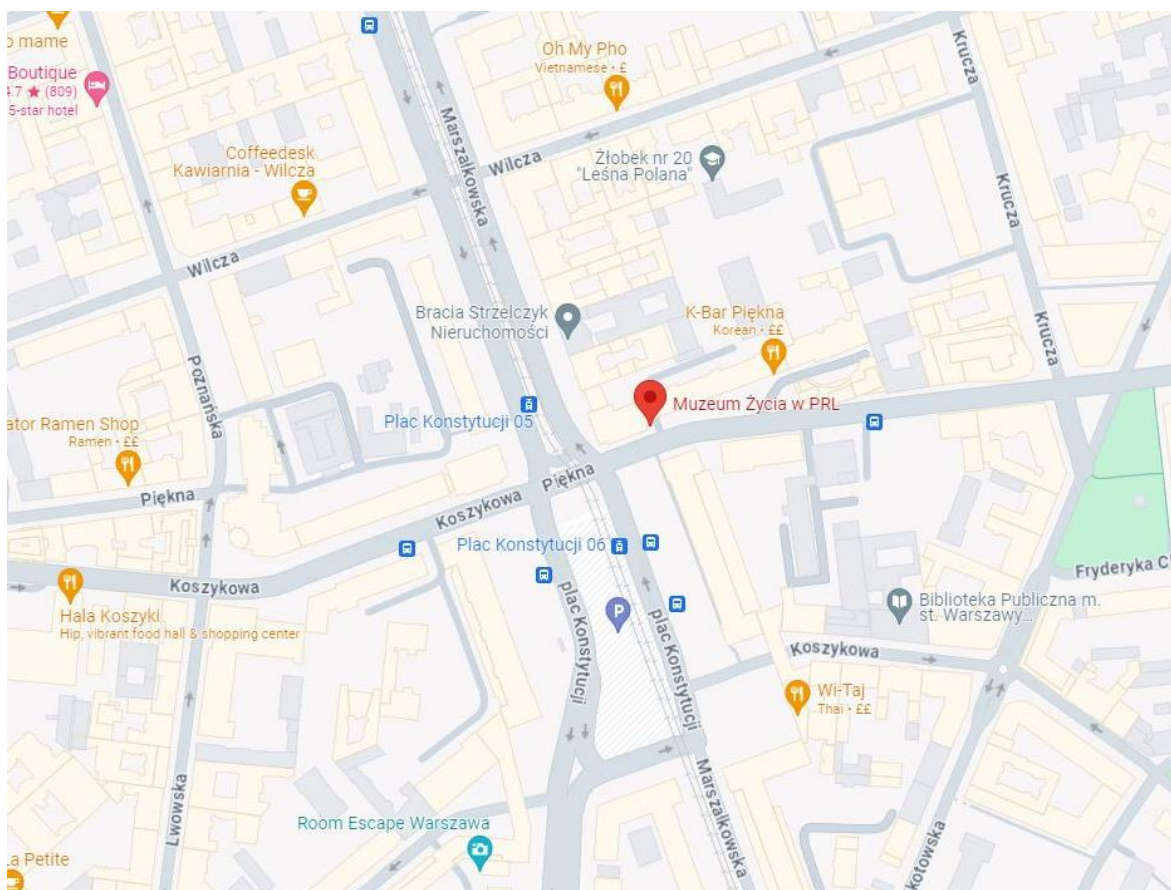
Figure 2 Map of Warsaw showing the Museum of Life Under Communism in relation to Constitution Square (Plac Konstytucji)

The museum was originally founded under the name 'Charm of the PRL' Museum, or Muzeum Czar PRL in Polish ("PRL" is the Polish acronym for the Polish People's Republic, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa). According to Agnieszka Balcerzak (2021), the name was changed to its current iteration in 2019, when the museum moved to its new premises. It is interesting to note the subtle difference in the Polish and English versions of this new name. Whereas the original was a direct translation, the current version in Polish translates to the Museum of Life in the Polish People's Republic, while the official English name is now the Museum of Life Under Communism. For Polish visitors, reference to the PRL will likely invoke an understanding that the museum will be about Poland in the Communist era; for foreign visitors, on the other hand, the topic of a museum about the "Polish People's Republic" may not be as immediately recognizable in comparison to the word "Communism". In deploying such a forthright descriptor in its title, the museum is thus brought in line with many other attractions across the city which target tourists interested in Communist history, particularly the many specialist tours which market this era specifically. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that the name change coincided with the

museum's relocation to its larger and more central premises, as this could also serve the additional purpose of helping it to attract a wider visitor base beyond those brought to the site at the end of their guided tours.

Given the singular nature of both these museums in their respective countries, they find themselves in potentially authoritative positions to construct knowledge about Communist history, particularly as they appear in much of the tourism marketing for Prague and Warsaw. It is clear, then, that they can provide ample opportunity for examining the representation of Czechia and Poland's Communist history in the museum and how this impacts the perception of the era on the part of visitors from beyond Central and Eastern Europe.

1.4 Research question and aims and objectives

There are two separate but overlapping research questions that this study sets out to answer. The first asks how contemporary museums of Communism create, reflect, and reinforce post-1989 identities. As was introduced above, I hold it to be true that a museum exhibition is an actively constructed medium for communicating messages, and that museums of Communism therefore play a role in helping to establish narratives about identities in CEE states after the collapse of Communism. This study examines what some of the dominant trends of museum-based identity-building were in this process and considers how this plays out today, more than three decades later.

The second research question brings the focus onto the foreign visitors referenced in the previous section, asking in what ways they engage with and make sense of the content of these museums. Once again, foreign visitors have rarely been part of conversations regarding Communist history museums, much less any which concern how meaning is made at these sites. The present study seeks to bring this subset of visitors back into the discussion and investigate if they are, as Light (2000a, 2000b) once referred to them as, a hindrance to post-Communist identity construction.

In pursuit of these questions, there are three central aims of this study. They are as follows:

Aim 1: Investigate the role of the museum in the construction of knowledge about Communist history

Objective 1: Critically review theories concerning knowledge construction in the museum so as to establish the tools and techniques employed by the case study museums.

Objective 2: Identify dominant narratives and trends in Communist history museums as presented in the literature with a view to ascertaining how they have been constructed.

Objective 3: Elucidate the development of Communist heritage tourism and museums after 1989 in order to understand where these intersect with post-Communist discussions about the era.

Aim 2: Critically assess the role of Communist history museums as sites for creating identities

Objective 1: Distinguish prominent schools of thought about the relationship between identity construction and museums

Objective 2: Identify key aspects of identity which are prioritized by the case study museums' exhibition techniques.

Objective 3: Examine how display techniques are employed to authenticate identity

Aim 3: Analyze how and in which ways foreign visitors recognize messages of identity in the case study museums

Objective 1: Establish an understanding of the impact of foreign tourism in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 on post-Communist heritage development

Objective 2: Ascertain the role of foreign visitors' prior knowledge about and experiences with Communism in authenticating museum narratives

Objective 3: Elucidate the strategies foreign visitors use to make sense of the content of the case study museums

1.5 Structure of thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 begins by synthesizing the existing literature on the politics of exhibiting, which is central to understanding how the case study museums simultaneously reflect and construct specific messages about Communism. I then provide an evaluation of the key literature concerning museums of

Communism, with an in-depth examination of the main themes and trends which exist within it. This will serve as a background for understanding how Communism has been remembered and musealized over the last three decades. Additionally, I examine some of the leading studies which have addressed the intersection between museums and identity, particularly national identity, which is at the heart of this study. In this section, I also address the role of emotion in the museum and how it is utilized in pursuit of promoting national identity. Next, I present the concept of authenticity, as this emerged as a key element utilized by the case study museums to not only construct their narratives about identity but also authenticate them to the visitor. Lastly, I consider the notion of meaning-making in existing visitor studies literature, which will set out the framework for how the responses made by the study's participants are analyzed in chapter 7.

Chapter 3 then details the methodological framework within which this research was conducted. It starts by situating the study in the social constructionist tradition, establishing the position early on that any truth claims made by the case study museums are constructions which have been created for a purpose and informed by the sociocultural contexts of their authors and of the organisations themselves. I then provide an overview of the methods of data collection as well as those used for data analysis, before offering a brief note on the ethics of this study and my position within it. This chapter also addresses the limitations to the study and fieldwork, specifically those which concern carrying out this research during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 4 presents a more detailed overview of the case study museums in order to set the scene and give context to references made to the exhibitions throughout this thesis.

Chapters 5-7 comprise the detail of the analysis, the organization of which was informed by Yin's "[e]xplanation as a type of interpretation". Simply put, this is when the "whole interpretation is dedicated to *explaining how or why things happened, or alternatively how or why people said what they did*" (Yin 2016: 231; original emphasis). In Yin's view, this type of interpretation enables the researcher to organize the final text in such a way that each chapter "adds a piece of explanation or adds information about contextually relevant conditions" (2016: 233). This structure has allowed for chapters 5-7 to be arranged in such a way that each one provides a different yet complementing lens through which to investigate the main research question. They are as follows: chapter 5 examines the concept of authenticity and how authenticity is used by the museums to lend

authenticating power to the key display components found in the case study museums. This is explored through examples from both exhibitions, illustrating where the components are brought together to create authentic representations which, in turn, authenticate their respective approaches to Communist history.

Chapter 6 shifts focus to questions of identity, specifically national identity, using work on identity-building by Michael Billig (1995), Shiela Watson (2021), and Marzia Varutti (2023) as a framework for examining this process in the case study museums. More specifically, I investigate the mobilization of national heroes in the pursuit of self-definition. In engaging in such a practice, the museums create a boundary around their identity which differentiates them from other nations, most notably the former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. I then examine how the case studies construct identity on the mundane level, in particular by tapping into different aspects of everyday life. The chapter ends by exploring the place of emotion in these processes of national identity construction. To this end, it proposes that the case study museums use narratives of struggle, perseverance, and pride to encourage certain perceptions and emotional responses from visitors which may allow for a deeper sense of understanding the museums' messages about national identity.

Chapter 7 focuses on foreign visitors. This chapter is broken down into three sections, with the first examining participants' reflections on how they experienced the Communist past, both inside and outside the museum, which enabled them to authenticate the narratives presented by the case studies they visited. This section draws on work by authors such as Dean MacCannell (1973) and Ning Wang (1999) to investigate the intersection between authenticity and the visitor experience. In the second section, I dive deeper into the links the participants made between the museums' exhibitions and both personal experiences and ongoing world events. In the final section, I address the question of how foreign visitors read the museums' messages, focusing on their personal contexts as a guide for understanding this. In doing so, I answer Light's recent call to interrogate the ways in which tourists to heritage sites can be active creators of meaning (2015: 156) through a re-examination the author's earlier claim (2000a, 2000b) that foreign visitors are a hindrance to forging identities in CEE. Finally, chapter 8 presents a summary of my main findings, as well as a reflection on my aims and objectives, methodology, and research limitations, before concluding with suggestions for future avenues for the research.

Chapter 2: Encoding and Decoding the Museum

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically analyzes the literature in relation to the main fields and concepts that have informed this thesis. The present study adheres to the view that exhibitions are not mere reflections of the world but are actively constructed for a purpose (see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1994, 2000; Ferguson 1996; Lidchi 1997; Macdonald 1998; Whitehead 2016a, 2016b). As such, the chapter opens with an analysis of Henrietta Lidchi's conceptualization of the poetics and politics of exhibiting (1997). This lays the groundwork for understanding how museums can be sites in which the enduring debates over how the Communist past is to be remembered, memorialized, and represented can take place. In the second section, I synthesize the literature on museums of Communism. In particular, I highlight the prevailing themes and narratives that are at the heart of museal representations, including a suggested focus on terror and oppression on the one side and the everyday on the other. In doing so, I seek to establish where the case study museums fit within this landscape.

In pursuit of one of the main research aims concerning how contemporary museums of Communism construct identities after 1989, I then evaluate what has been written about the creation of identity, especially national identity, in the museum. While most of this literature exists in relation to national museums, which the case studies analyzed here are not, drawing on this work allows me to frame my analysis of the case studies and support my argument that they present similar processes of identity-building. In the penultimate section, I examine the role of different forms of authenticity in both museum exhibitions as well as visitor meaning-making to establish the definitions of authenticity to be used in this thesis. These centre most prominently on notions of the genuine, negotiation, and visitor perceptions. Lastly, the final section evaluate existing studies on the concept of meaning-making within the field of visitor studies, building on the position of visitors in negotiating authenticity, but also how their agency and personal contexts impact museum visits.

In bringing together literature on museums of Communism, national identity, authenticity, and visitor meaning-making, this chapter creates a framework for understanding how the case study museums continue to play a role in constructing and

reinforcing post-Communist identity in Poland and Czechia, and, secondly, what place foreign visitors can have in the process of identity construction. I conclude by demonstrating how this focus is different to work that has already been done on my case study museums.

2.2 Constructing narratives: the poetics and politics of exhibiting

This study takes the view that museal representations of Communist history are rooted in political curatorial choices. I begin, then, with Christopher Whitehead, Susannah Eckersley and Rhiannon Mason's definition of museum display as a "technology for constructing knowledge" (2012: 48), for this creates the space for differing messages about the same topic to occur. The implication for constructing knowledge within an authoritative institution like the museum is that such institutions can be used by producers to "naturalize contentions and positions as singular truths" (Whitehead 2016a: 3). In his essay on why museum displays are open to analysis, Whitehead expanded on this position, explaining:

> If we assume […] that museum representations have some kind of effect on the hearts and minds of visitors who tend to trust in their singular truth and authority, then the ability to decode, deconstruct and denaturalize museum communication becomes paramount (2016a: 3).

Whitehead built upon on a rich body of literature that examines the processes behind exhibition development and the ways researchers can go about interrogating them. This includes a notable amount of research published in the 1990s by influential scholars such as Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp (1991), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 1994, 2000), Bruce W. Ferguson (1996), Henrietta Lidchi (1997), and Sharon Macdonald (1998, 2002). Macdonald, for example, asserted that creating museum exhibitions "inevitably also entails inscribing certain cultural visions of, in particular, science, material culture (objects), professional expertise, and visitors" (2002: 70). Writing only a few years later, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) argued that the choices staff make in selecting (and not selecting) objects for display and how they assemble the objects in the exhibition space produce narratives, which are in turn shaped by ideas and values deemed significant to its creators (2000: 3).

Ferguson had similarly advocated for investigating curatorial choices behind exhibitions and the ascribing of value, because exhibitions are, at their heart, "a strategic

system of representations" (1996: 178). He demonstrates his argument through this powerful summation of curatorial choices in the communicative process:

> The system of an exhibition organizes its representations to best utilize everything, from its architecture which is always political, to its wall colorings which are always psychologically meaningful, to its labels which are always didactic (even, or especially, in their silences), to its artistic exclusions which are always powerfully ideological and structural in their limited admissions, to its lighting which is always dramatic (and therefore an important aspect of narrativity and the staging of desire), to its security systems which are always a form of social collateral (the choice between guards and video surveillance, for example), to its curatorial premises which are always professionally dogmatic, to its brochures and catalogues and videos which are always literacy-specific and pedagogically directional, to its aesthetics which are always historically specific to that site of presentation rather than to individual artwork's moments of production. In other words, there is a plan to all exhibitions, a will, or teleological hierarchy of significances, which is its dynamic undercurrent (1996: 178-179).

In essence, these elements work together to construct certain representations of knowledge, influencing how visitors move through the museum and guiding their attention to specific points in the display space over others. This is not to say this series of elements are inherently or continually static. Every choice behind them is strategic and politically driven, but it is also negotiated and dynamic, open to potential change even after they have been placed within the exhibition space. Indeed, this was one of the central points Macdonald was arguing in her seminal 2002 book, *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*. In it, she observed the dynamic and negotiated processes of exhibition development over the course of her extensive fieldwork carried out during the restructuring of the Science Museum in London. Her work thus demonstrated the political and iterative procedures involved in crafting representations and knowledge of a particular topic. The arguments put forth by Hooper-Greenhill (2000), Ferguson (1996), and Macdonald (1998) provide a good framework for analyzing Communist history museums, rooted as the

institutions are in highly contested viewpoints about how the era should be remembered and what narratives should be prioritized.

The present study does not, however, examine the exact curatorial choices that went into creating the case study exhibitions. Instead, it answers Whitehead's (2016: 3) call to decode the elements described by Ferguson and understand the "hierarchy of significances" that exist within them. In this, I turn to Lidchi's (1997) work on the poetics and politics of exhibiting. The latter overlaps significantly with the arguments put forth by her contemporaries Ferguson (1996), Macdonald (1998), and Hooper-Greenhill (2000), as well as later scholars such as Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason (2012) and Whitehead (2009, 2016a, 2016b), in so far as Lidchi defined this as "the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of *social knowledge*" (1997: 185; original emphasis). An argument that addresses the politics of exhibiting, she contended, "advances the view that museums *appropriate* and *display* objects for certain ends" (1997: 198; original emphasis). Applying this concept to the case study museums enables me to investigate the epistemological positions taken by each institution, particularly as it regards putting forth particular truths about Czech and Polish (national) identity.

Alongside this, there is the poetics of exhibiting, which Lidchi identified as the "the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition" (1997: 168), creating a "complex web of signification" (1997: 204). This lies at the heart of what is presented in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, where I analyze the meanings that are produced through the selection and arrangement of the individual display components, before linking it to my view of the overarching ends for which this was done. Lidchi's work has influenced many scholars over the decades, including Bella Dicks (2004), Rhiannon Mason (2005, 2008, 2011), Whitehead (2009, 2016b), Andrea Witcomb (2015), and Rhiannon Mason, Alistair Robinson, and Emma Coffield (2017), among others. The politics of exhibiting have been particularly central to research on ethnographic museums and the displaying of other cultures, such as that of Dicks (2004) and Witcomb (2015), as they provide a space for considering the role of power in this practice. The poetics of exhibiting has, however, also been explored in all manner of museum analysis because it foregrounds the strategic choices behind the dynamic and negotiated process of developing exhibitions.

However, Lidchi (1997) herself also cautioned against depending too much on the poetics and politics of exhibiting as a lens through which to analyze exhibitions. In her view, they cannot "account for the complexity of the exhibiting process or the position of present-day museums" (1997: 199). As such, a focus on the former "runs the risk of wishing to fix meaning to the exclusion of the 'hidden history' of production," while the latter "may produce an over-deterministic account revolving around social control" (ibid.). Whilst attending to these risks, I nonetheless found Lidchi's concepts useful for analyzing the case study museums, as they enabled me to approach the analysis in manageable components whilst continually questioning the ideological positions of the exhibitions' creators (Mason 2008: 20).

As I will show in the next section, museums of Communism emerged at a time of divisive debates regarding the meaning of the Communist era and how it should be remembered. It makes sense, then, that they would both reflect and reinforce this disparate landscape of memories and attitudes. By starting from the basic understanding that the museums are thus constructed entities, designed to direct visitors to certain aspects and information, the first step in analysis must be identifying how these memories and attitudes have been represented in the museum. Doing so will thus allow me to situate the case study museums within the existing landscape of Communist history museums. In the following section, I assess the key literature that has been written about these institutions to date and identify some of the principal debates behind the polarization in approaches to representing Communism.

2.3 Representational approaches in Communist history museums

In 2017, Claudia Sima published what remains, to date, the most comprehensive review of representations of Communist heritage. Through her analysis of different stakeholders in Romania's tourism industry, Sima determined that deeply complex feelings remain around the legacy of Communism which have, in turn, resulted in the coexistence of "official" government-led representations of Communism alongside "unofficial" representations by industry, media and tourists (2017: 210). Sima's conclusions are important because they are largely reflected in the literature on Communist history museums, a key area within the heritage field in CEE. Three areas of scholarly focus in particular emerge out of these studies, underscoring how contested the memory and

representation of Communism is in CEE: 1. museums which represent Communism as an era of terror, state surveillance, resistance, and propaganda, 2. Museums which represent Communism through the lens of the everyday, and 3. Those texts which thematise an absence of representation of these difficult heritages.

The research detailed in this literature is dedicated to museums across CEE, though they focus most prominently on Germany (Berdahl 2008; Jones 2011, 2015; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Bach 2015a, 2015b), Hungary (Apor 2012, 2014; Jones 2015; Ziębińska-Witek 2020), Romania (Cristea 2008; Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2008; Mark 2010a; Levick 2023), and the Baltics (Kuusi 2008; Mark 2008, 2010a; Ziębińska-Witek 2020; Kannike and Reidla 2021). As regards the *absence* of Communist heritage sites available for touristic consumption, particularly museums, these studies are found to focus on Bulgaria (Vukov 2008; Petkova-Campbell 2010), as well as Poland to a smaller extent (Main 2008). This excludes, of course, those museums which did not exist in Bulgaria and Poland at the time Vukov (2008), Petkova-Campbell (2010), and Main (2008) were writing.

As can be seen from the dates of these studies, research on Communist history museums tend to coalesce around the half-decade and decade anniversaries of 1989, with few exceptions. A notable piece of relatively recent work is the 2020 volume edited by Stephan M. Norris. The book brought together research by fourteen scholars on museums from across the former Soviet Bloc to examine how the Communist experience has been interpreted, commemorated, and drawn upon to come to terms with the past. The following year, Constantin Iordachi and Péter Apor (2021) published their edited volume on the representation of occupation and Communism in Eastern European museums, offering a multifaceted investigation into the ways in which museums have validated ideological divisions regarding the memory of the Communist past as well as shaped the image of that past in the eyes of the public. In the two sections that follow, I explore how the impact of these divisions on museal representations of Communism – notably the emergence of representations of terror, state surveillance, and oppression on the one side and the everyday on the other – have been addressed in other studies.

2.3.1 Terror, state surveillance, and oppression

Attempts to musealize the Communist era began almost immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The first museums to open were in Vilnius, Lithuania (1992), in Riga,

Latvia (1993), and in Sighetu Marmaţiei, Romania (also 1993), whose exhibitions were characterized by a focus on themes of terror and oppression, aimed at highlighting the suffering of their respective citizens (Zombory 2017). This soon became a standard framework for displays in museums of Communism. A number of authors have examined this framework of terror and oppression, particularly in the years surrounding the 20th anniversary of the revolutions. Much of this scholarship has centred on museums in the Baltic states, Hungary, and Romania.

In each of the institutions examined, a strong national character has been identified in their overall messaging in the academic literature. For example, Hanna Kuusi described the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius (known as the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights since 2018) as aiming to "inform the public about the sufferings it endured during the years of the occupation, about the resistance, about perpetrators of the reprisals and about the methods they resorted to" (2008: 106). Similarly, Gabriela Cristea and Simina Radu-Bucurenci contended that the Sighet Memorial Museum affirms "a single victimizing version of the past: suffering and death on the altar of the Nation […] The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of Resistance is a memorial for those who fought the Communist system and who became its victims" (2008: 301). Writing more recently about the Sighet Memorial Museum, Carmen Levick argued that the institution, "signalled attempts to give material form to a national process of memory-making that would reinforce the anti-communist narrative at the basis of Romania's new national identity […] shaped through a vocabulary of nationalism and Christianity" which associates "the victims of communism with Christian martyrs" (2023: 150-151). And at the House of Terror in Budapest, Hungary, Péter Apor argued that the Fidesz-founded museum positioned Hungary as the fateful "battleground" of the "violent clash of two equally barbarous but opposing ideologies"; that is, "Germany and Russia, the exemplars of totalitarian fascism and communism" (2010: 242). Hungarians, Apor wrote, are thus framed as "suffering subjects and victims of the war" (2010: 243).

In each of these examples, the authors found that the overlapping of nationalist messages and themes of terror and oppression is done for an explicit purpose. That is, it draws a boundary around the Communist past that would limit the culpability of citizens. Apor summarized this narrative technique well in his discussion about the display of violence in various Eastern European museums which address Communism, writing:

The intention is not simply to demonstrate the brutality and barbarity of communist rule in these countries, rather the demonstration of terror represents the regimes as if they had been founded and maintained exclusively by force and profound systems of coercion. The rule of the communist parties thus appears alien to these societies, a result of outside or foreign forces for which the respective nations bear no responsibility. It follows that the dictatorships contradicted the true spirit of these nations since the regimes were imposed on them by means that were impossible to resist (2012: 572).

In Apor's view, these museums lay culpability in upholding the Communist regime squarely at the feet of Party members across the Bloc, as well as the Soviets, rather than the citizens themselves. In this way, citizens of the former Eastern Bloc appear to have been ready and willing to take on the transition to democracy because that is what they wanted all along. To understand the purpose of intertwining these two elements of nationalism and suffering, I draw on the work of James Mark (2010) and Máté Zombory (2017, 2020), who offered overlapping yet at times contradicting arguments about where the impetus to construct a narrative of suffering came from. Examining their positions side-by-side helps to construct a lens through which to examine the museal representation in my case study museums.

In his 2010 book *Unfinished Revolution*, Mark (2010b) examined the shifting attitudes towards the revolutions of 1989 throughout the 1990s and 2000s, from first believing them to have been successful to, by the mid-1990s, regarding Communism as not fully overcome. According to Mark (2010b), people across Central and Eastern Europe were beginning to see the 1989 revolutions as unfinished only a few years on, and in order to transition fully and successfully into democracy, there was a need to "confront and weaken [Communism's] continuing hold on the present" (2010b: xiv). Driven by the "impulse to remember" (Mark 2010b: xiii), memorializing and musealizing the Communist era became one such way in which this could be accomplished (Mark 2010b: xii, xxii; see also, 61-92 in this same book). According to Mark, anti-Communists who felt that the post-Communist political system had failed to acknowledge their suffering:

[…] envisaged memorials and museums as spaces where the former system could be put on 'cultural trial' and condemned. Moreover, these sites sought to instrumentalize stories of individual suffering in order to construct a new, broader 'imagined community' of national victims of Communism, whose status as heroic martyrs who had stoically endured the trials of dictatorship imbued them with a moral force that could be galvanized in the continuing struggle against the remnants of Communism in the present (2010: 61-62).

Zombory (2017, 2020) took a different perspective. While arguing that themes of terror and oppression were part of a wider issue of historical revisionism led by governments and private individuals alike, he claimed that concretizing these themes through, for example, memorial museums, had more to do with imperatives dictated by pan-European values than anything particularly felt within Central and Eastern Europe's borders, in direct contrast to views held by Mark (2010b). That is, according to Zombory, the impetus to view Communism in this manner related primarily to the desire of former Soviet satellite states to join the European Union, thereby "returning to Europe" and acquiring legitimacy for their post-Communist democratic identities (2017: 1029).

In Zombory's view, "Communism as the Eastern experience of Europe was born *in relation to* the universal memory of the Holocaust, perceived by the actors as Western" (2017: 1030; my emphasis). He asserted that Holocaust discourse became the "*par excellence* European historical experience" by the end of the 1990s (2017: 1029; emphasis in original), the result of which was that recognizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust and Nazism as a totalitarian regime ultimately became a "soft membership criterion" (ibid.) for ascension into the European Union. In short, ex-Communist countries "had to prove that they shared European norms and values and were thus mature enough to enter its political institutions" (ibid.). According to Zombory, to achieve this, state-sponsored institutions channelled "an already existing pan-European scholarly discourse of historical revisionism aimed at condemning communism […] by juxtaposing it with Nazism, and identifying it […] with crime, terror and repression" (2020: 42). At the same time, private individuals – whom Zombory described as "anti-communist expatriates and domestic dissidents" (2017: 1035) – established memorial museums that adhered to the same comparative representations.

Zombory is convincing in some respects, such as his claim that Eastern European states sought to legitimize their place with Europe and their post-Communist identities as democratic (this has particular resonance in the case study museum located in Prague, as I will address in chapter 6). What is lacking, however, is a recognition for the home-grown impetus to remember and memorialize Communism from the perspective of crime, terror, and repression which Mark (2010b) examined. Mark himself asserted that anti-Communists selectively appropriated "Western templates" intended to "remember and invoke the past in appropriate ways," while others in CEE saw this as an "imposition of a colonial ideology on eastern European countries" (2010b: xvii), whereby Western Europeans failed "to reciprocate with an understanding of the brutality of Communism in the construction of a 'common European memory'" (ibid.).

This study draws on both Zombory (2017, 2020) and Mark's (2010) respective positions, seeing them as diverging yet complementary. Zombory's emphasis on a historical revisionism that defined CEE's "return to Europe" is a useful tool for engaging in my analysis of the case study exhibitions, as is Mark's argument that museums can instrumentalize stories of individual suffering to build an "imagined community" of victims of Communism (2010: 61).

Given the prevalence of themes of terror, oppression, and repression which are foregrounded in museums of Communism, it is also important to acknowledge their potential place in the wider academic field of dark heritage, or dark tourism. This thesis takes the position that museums of Communism are not per se to be considered dark tourist sites. Underpinning this position in the idea that "darkness" is socially constructed and subjective, both on the part of the visitor as well as scholars working in the field of dark tourism. As concerns the latter, Crispin Dale and Neil Robinson (2011) highlighted how subjective classifications of dark tourism can be. They took particular aim at Stone's famous "dark tourism spectrum," in which the latter established a "darkest-lightest" framework for categorizing dark heritage sites (Stone 2006: 151). According to Stone, the darkest among these were sites of death and suffering, and characterized by being education-oriented, dedicated to commemoration and conservation, perceived as authentic, found in "authentic" locations, shorter in time scale to the event it represents, not originally intended to attract visitors, and low in tourism infrastructure. Sites on the lightest end of the spectrum are only *associated* with death and suffering. In contrast to their darker

counterparts, these are entertainment oriented, commercial, perceived as being inauthentic, *not* found in a place where the event it represents occurred, longer in time scale, purposefully aimed at tourism, and characterized by high tourism infrastructure (ibid.). Dale and Robinson (2011) argued that, despite Stone's spectrum having some usefulness, in their attempts over the years to categorize sites through this framework, scholars have failed to make explicit the methodological tools which have underpinned these efforts – i.e. "the criteria used, such as visitor numbers, tourist spend, death count at site, level of authenticity, gore value" (Dale and Robinson 2011: 206).

In a similar vein, G.J. Ashworth and Rami K. Isaac (2015) disagreed with attempts to categorize dark sites in the first place. In their view, such classifications contain a "fatal flaw," which is that "the same site evokes different experiences for different visitors – simply, what one visitor finds dark, another does not. Therefore, no site is intrinsically, automatically and universally dark. Sites labelled as dark may not always be experienced as dark by every visitor" (Ashworth and Isaac 2015: 3). I take the position, then, that labelling sites as dark is dependent on factors beyond those of a site itself, namely the feelings individual visitors have towards the site. I am not arguing that all museums of Communism are not dark sites, but that this cannot be determined by me as the researcher. Some visitors may indeed visit museums of Communism because of their association with terror and oppression, but this further emphasizes the view that darkness is socially constructed. In short, meaning and motivation can vary widely amongst visitors to the same site (Ashworth and Isaac 2015).

The existing research on museums of Communism discussed above, though centred on the themes of terror and oppression, is not positioned within the models set out in dark heritage studies, with the exception of Kuusi (2008). Similarly, I do not find it to be a useful framing for investigating the case studies chosen for this thesis, not least because of the socially constructed and subjective nature of both their representations of Communism and the reception of these.

Whether or not one describes museums of Communism as belonging to dark tourism, terror and oppression are not, however, the only way museums in former Eastern Bloc states have interpreted their past. On the other end of the spectrum sits a material legacy interpreted in a wholly different manner, often under the purview of individuals who do not subscribe simply to the model of the suffering citizen presented in primarily state-run

institutions (Berdahl 2008; Jones 2011, 2015; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; and Bach 2015a, 2015b). In the following section, I turn to some of the key texts which investigate what I define as museums of the everyday.

2.3.2 The everyday

One consequence of terror and oppression emerging as the prevailing discourse in these early museums is that it ignored the more mundane aspects of everyday life. According to Jonathan Bach, who wrote of post-socialist representations of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), "the everyday was initially sidestepped in most museal exhibits and historical dialogues, and was not part of the standard repertoire of working through the socialist past" (2015b: 138). This was felt particularly strongly in the former East Germany, where many believed that their experiences had been disregarded when the country was legally unified with its western counterpart (Arnold-de Simine 2011). It was not until the early 2000s that such a focus began to emerge in museums (Arnold-de Simine 2011; Bach 2015a, 2015b, 2017). This was especially the case in eastern Germany, where privately-owned museums of the everyday, known as *Alltag* museums, were opened to "expand, subvert, supplement, and sometimes openly oppose what they perceive as dominant state narratives about East Germany as expressed in the few state-sponsored museums dedicated to recent history" (Bach 2015a: 124).

Research into the use of the everyday to tell the history of Communism has been approached in a number of ways over the last two decades, almost all of which have been conducted through the lens of German museums. These include how the everyday is used to show how "ordinary" people experienced "extraordinary" state control (Jones 2015: 122), the attitudes towards and application of nostalgia in museums of everyday life, particularly *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the German Democratic Republic (Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013); the mediatisation of the niche (Mueller 2013), risks of trivialization (Arnold-de Simine 2011; Mueller 2013; Jones 2015), the intersection between memory and material culture (Betts 2000), authenticity in private museums showcasing everyday life (Bach 2015a, 2015b), and, perhaps most pertinent for the present study, the role of identity in the emergence of *Alltag* museums (Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Bach 2015a; Winkler 2015). These latter two foci were especially influential in how I approached the analysis of

the case study museums, for the authors drew on authenticity, the notion of identity preservation, and the role of objects.

It is crucial to note how integral objects were in the emergence of the everyday as a way to represent Communism in eastern Germany. Indeed, scholars like Bach contended that pre-1989 material culture was seen as reflection of the frustration felt by many that their life experiences had been disregarded in the rush to merge with the West after the transition to democracy, and soon became the dominant way in which narratives of terror and oppression were expanded, subverted, supplemented, and openly opposed (Bach 2015a: 124). Silke Arnold-de Simine similarly addressed this in her analysis of the link between *Ostalgie* and GDR consumer products, writing, "[…] in its favouring of former GDR goods, it is not least a veiled critique of a capitalist system that has failed to address the implications of the social, economic, and cultural challenges of German unification" (2011: 108). Central to Arnold-de Simine's argument was the observation that in a society where production was a key component of the lived experience, to see that production left out of the museum narratives undermined many people's experiences as well as identities.

In her analysis of visitor book comments at the Museum for East German Everyday Life Culture in Eisenhüttenstadt, Berdahl equally noted the emergence of what she describes as "a highly complicated relationship between personal histories, disadvantages, dispossession, the betrayal of promises, and the social worlds of production and consumption" (2008: 359). Of the museum's focus on goods production, she concluded that "In a society where productive labor was a key aspect of state ideology and where the workplace was a central site for social life, the high incidence of unemployment throughout eastern Germany has undermined profoundly many people's sense of self and identity" (Berdahl 2008: 360).

Berdahl's argument was built upon by Anne Winkler (2015), who also analyzed guestbooks at various amateur GDR museums in the early 2010s. What she concluded was that these museums functioned as sites of memory which evoke processes of identity affirmation (Winkler 2015: 108). In Winkler's view, what was central to German *Alltag* museums was the relationship between past and present. Like Arnold-de Simine's (2011) position only a few years earlier, Winkler argued that such museums are a site for historical knowledge and cultural memory of Communism to become "entangled with contemporary realities of post-socialism, which social, economic, cultural, and political differences and

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inequalities between eastern and western Germany partially define" (2015: 117). As such, museums of the everyday became, for East Germans, a venue in which they are able to make sense of their lives after abruptly transitioning from socialism to capitalism. Their existence, according to scholars like Berdahl (2008) and Winkler (2015), thus provide an opportunity to break free of the institutionally-sanctioned silencing of citizens' positive memories, allowing them to find value and validation.

This study does not attempt to equate the social, political, and economic circumstances of post-unification Germany with those of post-Communist Poland and Czechia, nor do I make claims about any potential disillusionment the owners of the case study museums might feel about a democratic Poland and Czechia. But where these arguments are particularly enlightening is how they address the manner in which consumer goods have the potential to validate a pre-1989 way of life. While terror-focused museums can be seen as promoting new identities based on suffering and innocence, museums of the everyday have the potential to validate Communist-era experiences that defined citizens' identity.

The concept of authenticity is intimately linked with this, in so far as museums of the everyday depend on it to enact their authority and visitors depend on it to create a sense of validation. I explore authenticity in more depth in section 2.5 below but, as it relates to museums of everyday Communist history, I still draw on the work of Berdahl (2008), Bach (2015a, 2015b), and Winkler (2015). Berdahl (2008) and Winkler (2015) have both spoken about the tendency for owners of private *Alltag* museums in eastern Germany to make use of authentic objects, stripped largely of their interpretation, which speak to the feelings and experiences of those who lived in East Germany. In Berdahl's analysis of the Museum for East German Everyday Life Culture's "Zeitzeugen Ostalgie" project (or, Ostalgie Witnesses to History, according to the author), she described the exhibition as aiming for reactions which connect "personal biographies to collective memory as visitors recognize and tell stories about familiar but forgotten cultural objects" (2008: 356). Winkler (2015)'s analysis of GDR museums posited that the dearth of textual information found in these museums could be because the things on display were clear to visitors; "their significance appears self-evident," she wrote (2015: 111). Berdahl (2008) and Winkler (2015) thus highlighted the potential for museums to claim to authentically represent Communist history by tapping into the familiarity of the visitors, who remember the objects from their youth and thus may

understand the meaning behind the choice to put them on display. Indeed, Winkler thought of this familiarity as an "intimate relationship between the museums and their publics" (2015: 120), referring to the meeting of the two as a "sensuous encounter with the past" (ibid.). She described the eliciting of this moment as a "strategy of authenticity," borrowing from Bach's (2015a) exploration of intimacy and tactility as markers of authenticity.

Bach (2015b) argued that these museums do not need to go through the usual "practices of authentication" that publicly funded museums in Germany do, such as certifying, cataloguing and explanations, because they lay claim to authenticity in other ways (2015b: 140). In addition to offering informal displays which promote tactility and intimacy (Bach 2015a), he contended that "private museums assert authenticity not through provenance or expert interpretation, but through a re-embedding of the objects in an informal and apolitical context. Before the visitor even arrives, the objects are framed as nonpolitical, and thus implicitly more trustworthy than exhibits in state-funded museums" (Bach 2015b: 140).

Bach's (2015a, 2015b) analysis is compelling. If we are to assume that all choices behind an exhibition's development are, in fact, political (Ferguson 1996; Lidchi 1997; Whitehead 2016a), motivated as they are by a "hierarchy of significances" (Ferguson 1996; see also Hooper-Greenhill 2000), Bach offers an excellent framework for which to investigate my own case studies. This study thus analyses the case study museums – particularly the Polish museum, where the everyday is given much greater focus – with an eye towards how they lay claim to authenticity through the notion of representing life "as it was", the use of multiple objects and tapping into familiarity, whilst also analyzing the objects on display with the assumption that they are indeed politically (re)presented, despite their limited textual interpretation.

Thirty years on from the foundation of the first Communist history museum, these two approaches – terror and oppression on one side and the everyday on the other – have, according to the literature reviewed here, come to define how Communism is represented in the museum. It is nevertheless important to emphasize that this division is not always a strict one, and there do indeed exist museums that combine elements of the two. On the whole, though, they still define the prevailing framework against which these museums can be analyzed (see, for example, Norris 2020 and Iordachi and Apor 2021).

With regards to the specific focus of this research, what I have shown up to now is how issues of identity construction, representation, and preservation are present regardless of which side of the debates the museums sit on. That is, museums dedicated to terror and oppression can serve to promote a narrative of suffering and distancing of culpability while museums showcasing everyday life might validate citizens' pre-1989 experiences which shaped their identities. In the following section, I assess some of the key literature surrounding national identity and museums before examining how this overlaps with literature on museums of Communism and identity more specifically.

2.4 National identity and the museum

In his work on "unwanted" Communist heritage, Light (2000a) observed the rapid pace at which "senses of national identity" (2000a: 157) were redefined following the collapse of Communism in CEE, with history "being re-written and re-worked to forge and reinforce new national identities" (2000a: 158). His argument was that heritage sites and museums were one of the spaces in which this could take place. To understand how this process occurred – and continues to occur – it is necessary to examine the prevailing academic literature about national identity and how it comes to be. To write about national identity is to grapple with the decades – if not centuries – of work dedicated to defining, understanding, and analyzing concepts like the nation, nationality, nationalism, and identity, which can and do mean different things across different fields of study. Forty years ago, Benedict Anderson acknowledged the "notorious" difficulty in doing this (1983: 3), whilst also attempting to address the topic from an anthropological standpoint. To this end, he coined the influential concept "imagined community," arguing that nations are not natural or pre-existing entities, nor are they fixed, but are socially constructed and dynamic, sustained through shared beliefs and a sense of belonging amongst its members (Anderson 1983). In Anderson's view, it is the print media which underpins imagined communities, for it serves to spread national consciousness (1983: 37-46).

Writing alongside Anderson was Eric Hobsbawm (1983), who introduced the equally influential concept of "invented traditions". He defined these as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). It can be argued that these (invented) traditions

are the very shared beliefs in Anderson's imagined community, offering all citizens of a given nation something to believe in. But whereas Anderson understood states to be socially constructed, Hobsbawm's invented traditions are, by their nature, "unchanging and invariant" (1983: 2), in so far as they are "responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (ibid.).

Further shaping this analysis of national identity is another of Hobsbawm and Anderson's contemporaries, Anthony D. Smith, whose book examining the nature, causes and consequences of national identity (1991: vii) offers valuable insight into those elements that could help to sustain a sense of belonging amongst citizens of a given nation. Smith was of the belief that nationalism creates national identity, but that the impact of nationalism on the latter could not be understood "without exploring its social and cultural matrix" (1991: 71). In this, he looked at the "expressive ceremonials and symbols" (ibid.: 77) that help maintain the autonomy, unity, and identity of a nation (ibid.: 74). These ceremonials and symbols, he argued, were both explicit ("flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, oaths, folk costumes, museums of folklore, war memorials, ceremonies of remembrance for the national dead, passports, frontiers") and hidden ("national recreations, the countryside, popular heroes and heroines, fairy tales, forms of etiquette, styles of architecture, arts and crafts, modes of town planning, legal procedures, educational practices and military codes") (ibid.: 77), but all of them "embody [nationalism's] basic concepts, making them visible and distinct for every member, communicating the tenets of an abstract ideology in palpable, concrete terms that evoke instant emotional responses from all strata of the community" (ibid.).

The arguments put forth by Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm (1983), and Smith (1991) have not been without critique over the last forty years, however (Chatterjee 1996, 2004; Beiner 2001; Edensor 2002; Marx 2003; Plant 2008). Some have taken issue with Anderson's narrow focus on the role of the printing press in fostering imagined communities, such as Anthony W. Marx (2003), who argued that Anderson overestimated the power of mass communication to bridge divides in Europe. In Marx's view, "[T]he diversity of language within those emergent states meant that spreading verbal communication or literacy could have had the opposite effect, reinforcing local or ethnic differences" (2003: 15-16). Tim Edensor, on the other hand, saw Anderson's argument as too reductive, contending that it

overlooks myriad other ways "the nation is imagined in," such as theatre, popular music, fashion, television, film, and many more (2002: 7). The lack of attention to the popular and the vernacular was of particular concern for Edensor, who found this issue in each of these authors' works. He summarized this critique as follows:

> [...] they are all guilty of several reductive assumptions about culture and its relationship with national identity. First of all, culture cannot be subsumed by that which is consciously wielded as symbolic, for it is ingrained in unreflexive patterns of social life, stitched into the experience and the assumptions of the everyday. There is an overwhelming emphasis on the spectacular and the historic. Secondly, the only kind of popular culture discussed is that identified as 'folk' culture – that is, pre-modern – and often considered as worthy in contradistinction to mass culture. Instead, 'high' and 'official' culture is assumed to be triumphant, and is uncritically absorbed by the masses. These national cultural values organised by a national elite, cultural guardians who alone delineate what is national, propose a top-down view of culture and wholly ignore popular and vernacular cultural forms and practices. There is little sense of contestation, alternative constructions and cultural dynamism. Thirdly, the accounts are far too historicist, generalising about national identity and disregarding contemporary formulations (2002: 10-11).

Aspects of Edensor's assessment is shared by others, including Beiner (2001), who highlighted the dynamic nature of tradition when he challenged Hobsbawm's assertion that invented traditions are unchanging. Assessing the linguistic roots of the word "tradition," Beiner concluded that tradition is, by its very definition, adaptable, and thus it can be modified to "changing historical circumstances so as to maintain relevance and vitality" (2001: 3). For Beiner – and Edensor (2002) a year later – the assertions that traditions are invariant thus presented a critical flaw in his argument.

Despite these critiques, the concepts introduced by Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm (1983), and Smith (1991) have proven instrumental in understanding the intersection between museums, conceptualisations of the nation, and national identity. Anderson himself wrote about museums as institutions with the power to shape a state, concentrating

in particular on colonial states and how they imagined their dominions (2006: 164). Much of the literature linking national identity and museums centres on national history museums (Bradburne 2000; Mason 2004; Knell, Aronsson, and Amundsen 2011; Watson 2021), for as Mason wrote, establishing a national museum can be considered, "a gesture designed to claim recognition for that identity and an attempt to translate a set of intangible beliefs about the special quality of a certain cultural group into an identifiable, material and visible presence" (2004: 18). To do so, museums have employed what Watson (2021) described as the "unifying force" of narratives. These, Watson wrote, "are needed to remind their citizens of what they have in common" (2021: 73). A number of narrative techniques are thus made use of.

Firstly, Macdonald (2005) identified the tendency to place peoples in opposition to one another in the effort to relationally produce collective identities. This results in an "us vs them" narrative aimed at highlighting the distinctiveness of the nation. Macdonald further distinguished between externally and internally oriented oppositional processes. Through the former, self-definition develops in opposition to other nations, whereas the latter seeks out the "other" within the nation's borders, effectively creating "'outgroups' within, which serves to foster and maintain a majority identity in relation to the minority" (Macdonald 2005: 49).

Secondly, in defining such groups, certain elements of nationality are drawn upon, ranging from well-known national heroes to the more mundane aspects of the everyday. Edensor summarized these as "reified notions of history and roots, cultural traditions, […] popular symbolic images, rituals, sites and objects" (2002: 25). Tapping into these creates a sense of cohesion and community amongst a nation's peoples, even if individuals may interpret them in a highly heterogeneous manner (Edensor 2002). Given the constructed nature of museum exhibitions, there is an argument to be made that the reified notions, traditions, and symbols Edensor speaks of have an impact on the decision-making, both conscious and unconscious, that go into planning and developing them. This includes not only the objects and other components chosen for display but also the curators' intended messages.

This speaks to one of the goals of this study, which is to examine how these identities are represented through the use of "symbolic images, rituals, sites and objects" and how these construct narratives of a distinct national identity to be communicated to

museum visitors. The contents of these narratives are a third trope, which Watson summarized as the following:

> Nations require distinguished pasts to legitimise their present and future. [...] In so doing they adopt grand narratives to link past to present. Many of these narratives stress the idea of a group of people belonging to a location, in particular a national homeland, having some form of cohesion, and struggling to overcome difficulties, but triumphing in spite of adversity (Watson 2021: 25).

There are, of course, echoes of Anderson (1983), Hobsbwam (1983), and Smith (1991) in Watson's claims. Indeed, the latter drew on the work of the three scholars in various ways in her examination of national museums. In particular, she examined how beliefs in what makes and sustains a nation feed into how one understands a museum's place in the process of constructing national identity. Where Watson's recent work – as well as earlier writings by Macdonald (2005) and Edensor (2002) – becomes relevant is in how it helps to explain the role of Communist history museums in creating post-Communist identities after 1989. I pick this up in chapter 6, where I present an analysis of the very narratives Watson (2021) described in the excerpt above.

It bears noting, however, that the research carried out by Watson (2021) and others (including the aforementioned Bradburne 2000; Mason 2004; and Knell, Aronsson, and Amundsen 2011) has kept its focus strictly on national museums, which my case studies are not. Though less extensive in number, research pertaining to non-national institutions is also helpful for understanding the state of identity creation in museums. The last decade has seen a handful of studies which explored issues of national identity at private and local museums. These concern a variety of geographical contexts, including Greece, the Balkans, Latin America, the United States, Eastern Europe, Australia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, and examine issues such as myths of suffering and surviving (Żychlińska and Fontana 2016; Kennedy and Graefenstein 2019; Damjanovic and Mason 2023), place and landscape (Dimache, Wondirad, and Agyeiwaah 2017), language (Young 2005; Kashchenko et al. 2021), the legacies of colonization (Cummins, Farmer, and Russell [eds.] 2013; Mason and Amparo Santiago 2023), the framing of heroic citizens in an era of terrorism

(Whittenburg 2021), the use of history in building group identity (Mukherjee, Salter, and Molina 2015; von Puttkame 2016), collective memory and commemoration (Bogumił et al. 2015; Moschou 2023), the political production of national identity (Smith 2022), and co-opting Jewish heritage for national purposes (Waligórska 2016).

In their 2015 book *The Enemy on Display*, Bogumił et al. investigated a range of these issues as they relate to World War II in Eastern European museums, specifically St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and Dresden. The authors brought together discussions concerning commemoration and musealization of narratives of suffering in local spaces, and how these can promote themes of heroism, martyrdom, and imagined communities (Anderson 1983). There is a degree of overlap here with some of the work carried out in national museums more specifically, including Macdonald's (2005) "us vs them" distinction. In defining the titular "enemy," Bogumił et al. wrote that it is an enemy which,

> helps to tighten community relationships. The enemy's world is perceived as the reverse of the community's own culture, and its attributes are contrasted with the community's own features. The stronger the image of the enemy and the more intense the emotion it provokes, the better is group consolidation and self-definition. The feeling of real 'community' helps to overcome periods of crisis and insecurity. The existence of the opposed systems of values (the enemy's values versus our own) enforces internal consensus and discipline upon a society, which can then be used by the government for its own aims (2015: 10).

Interestingly, Bogumił et al.'s book strove to understand the execution of the "us vs them" narrative and whether the enemy can be "denationalized" (ibid. 11). They did this by drawing on Macdonald's (1996) position that exhibitions say more about the moment of their creation than they do about the historical period which they exhibit (ibid.). Bogumił et al. framed their analysis with an eye towards discerning *who* the enemy was, how it was communicated through historical sources and iconography, and what such representations might mean for the present day. In so doing, they concluded that while their Russian and Polish case studies were influenced in large part by wartime tropes of anti-German sentiment, the German museum pointed to an enemy "within," i.e. the Nazi party and those

who voted them into power, thereby rooting their representations in "contemporary memory discourses of the Second World War" (Bogumił et al. 2015: 133-134).

Their argument is relevant to this study for two reasons. The first is that it demonstrates how non-national museums can adhere to similar nation-building tropes as those outlined above. This thus indicates that identity construction in local institutions, carried out through local histories, can reflect and contribute to national trends. As both case study museums at the centre of this thesis are private entities which situate the history of Communism in Poland and Czechoslovakia within their local contexts, Bogumił et al.'s work is influential for understanding how my case studies can fit into wider discussions about museums and their role in building and promoting national identity. The second way Bogumił et al.'s argument is significant is that it indicates the relevance of contemporary memory discourses in exhibition creation. This is of particular importance when considering the role museums of Communism can play in framing one's understanding of post-Communist identity construction.

In addition to Bogumił et al., Żychlińska and Fontana (2016) examined myths of suffering and surviving, local histories, commemoration, and group identity in their research on the Warsaw Rising Museum. Similar to the argument made by Macdonald (1996) which Bogumił et al. drew on in their book, Żychlińska and Fontana took inspiration from Maurice Halbwachs's view that "representations of the past are shaped by the conditions of the present as they reflect the contemporary society's norms and values" (2016: 237). As such, the authors traced the roots of the museum to an era of "symbolic construction of the Polish state and national Polish identity" (2016: 245) ten years on from the collapse of Communism, when, Żychlińska and Fontana contended, the openness with which historical events such as the Warsaw Uprising could finally be discussed reached its peak. In their analysis of the museum, the authors addressed both the poetics and politics of its exhibition (Lidchi 1997) through an examination of not only the displays themselves but also the institutions' statutory documents and media coverage of the museum. In so doing, they concluded that the political dimension of the museum "manifests itself in the power of refiguring traumatic past experiences and reshaping contemporary Polish collective identity" (Żychlińska and Fontana 2016: 254), and that the poetic dimension "is apparent from the ways the museum fosters emotional identification with a community, and its

capacity to sacralize spaces and artefacts and, through them, the narratives they convey" (ibid.).

Whilst highlighting the criticisms aimed at the Warsaw Rising Museum for its heroizing narrative with little attention to nuance, Żychlińska and Fontana (2016) attended surprisingly little to the ideological context of its creation, most notably the links between the museum and the conservative Law and Justice Party – who then governed the city of Warsaw – and the rush to open the museum ahead of the 60th anniversary of the Uprising. Doing so could have added additional insight into the patriotic narratives written into the exhibition and offered a richer discussion of both the politics and poetics they identified in their analysis. That said, their conclusions are still fruitful for understanding how exhibitions can shape national identity on a local scale. More specifically, they drew attention to the founding ideals of the museum when they identified in the archival documents descriptions of the Warsaw Uprising as "an exceptional event not only within the history of Poland but also within human history generally" and "a moral phenomenon on a great scale," with Warsaw referred to as "the Capital of Freedom" (Żychlińska and Fontana 2016: 248). Furthermore, their investigation of the museum showed that the exhibition is "built around national emblems" (ibid. 257). We can thus see how the Uprising – a specific and geographically-located event – is represented to be meaningful beyond the boundaries of Warsaw, and that it is the narrative of heroism, problematic though it may be, which taps into to feelings of patriotism for Polish visitors. This example is especially useful for the Polish case study presented in this thesis, as the stories of Varsovian life it, too, presents are made to stand for something greater which speaks to the collective Polish experience.

As a final note, I would like to call attention to one of the main tools Żychlińska and Fontana (2016) identified in their analysis of the displays as helping to shape national identity. This is best summarized in their conclusion, when they stated that by

emphasizing the poetical as well as the political dimensions of the museum, we have shown how this linking of past and present, and encouragement for contemporary people to identify with the past, is accomplished not only through the use of familiar symbols but through the production of *emotion* in visitors as well […] the persuasive power of the museum lies in its ability to

appeal to the emotions of the audience (Żychlińska and Fontana 2016: 262; original emphasis).

The authors' focus on the emotional appeal of the exhibition at the Warsaw Rising Museum is of particular interest because it aligns with one of the key elements which underpin national identity construction. From Smith's (1991) symbols and ceremonials evoking emotional responses amongst a community to Watson's (2021) comments on narratives of struggle and adversity in national museums, emotion is critical for understanding how identity is shaped. In the following section, I contextualize the use of emotion by museums, returning first to Watson (2021) before synthesizing recent literature regarding the rise of "affective curatorship" (Varutti 2023).

2.4.1 Identity, emotion, and the museum

Watson (2015, 2019, 2021) has written extensively of the emotional pull of nationalist narratives not only as they can be found in national history museums, but also in museums more broadly. As concerns the former, any story about the rise and survival of a nation is bound to be emotional because they draw on struggles, overcoming difficulty, national heroes, sacrifice, and the common needs of the nation (Watson 2021: 78). Others have identified similar narratives in relation to nationalism and national identity, including Ernest Renan, who asserted as far back as the late 19th century that "suffering in common unites more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grief is of more value than triumphs, for it imposes duties, it requires a common effort. A nation is therefore a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make" (2018: 261).

Much more recently, Margaret Wetherell, Laurajane Smith, and Gary Campbell (2018) argued for understanding heritage as an affective practice. In their view, we must consider the *use* of heritage for society, particularly its ability to meet the needs and aspirations of a community. More specifically, they posited that heritage "draws heavily on affect/emotion to legitimate the meanings and narratives that are produced and propagated. Heritage's emotional force is part and parcel of the power of heritage to stand in for and legitimate claims to inclusion or exclusion on the basis of identity, nation and citizenship" (Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018: 10). Smith (2021) later expanded on this

position in her book, *Emotional Heritage: Visitor Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites*, where she posited that emotions are socially contextualized and mediated. The consequences of this, Smith wrote, are two-fold: "First, it means that affect/emotion not only invigorates the legitimacy of the meanings of the past for the present that individuals and groups construct, it also secondly, actively frames and manages those heritage meanings and the social and political consequences they have" (2021: 60). The points put forth by Smith, as well as Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell (2018) are relevant for discussions of national identity construction in museums, as they help us to understand how emotion can be utilized by curators to attempt to elicit specific understandings of identity.

In her analysis of the link between myth and emotions, Watson (2021) made a persuasive argument in this regard that acknowledges a number of themes touched upon in the previous sections, namely, the politics of constructing museum exhibitions, the emotive power of survival, and the ceremonials and symbols (Smith 1991) of a nation.

> Clearly, narrative structures encourage emotional responses. National museum collections and interpretative strategies provide visitors with stories that appeal on an emotional level and offer their nation status and character. These stories are rooted in history and archaeology but achieve an emotional and subjective appeal to citizens […] something often brought about by judicious rearranging of the evidence to produce a coherent narrative out of the chaos and confusion of everyday life. Such narratives often identify a struggle and demonstrate how the nation overcame this difficulty. They elevate heroes. They identify victims and perpetrators in a simplistic way, for they applaud sacrifice and make honourable some of the worst atrocities people ever can commit against each other in the name of the needs of the nation. All this they do within the context of a scholarly, often apparently dispassionate interpretation of the past, judiciously selecting a mix of accepted factual information, objects, stories rooted in objective evidence, personal testimonies and romantic imagination, thus creating powerful myths of origin and survival where the sum is more than the parts (Watson 2021: 78).

Her view that these stories are presented as a "scholarly, often apparently dispassionate interpretation" is interesting to note, for it overlaps with recent discussions regarding the role of emotion in the museum and heritage sectors more widely, or rather, the historical disavowal of it.

In their work on emotion in the museum and heritage sectors, scholars such as Smith and Campbell (2015), Campbell, Smith, and Wetherell (2017), Wetherell, Smith and Campbell (2018), Candice P. Boyd and Rachel Hughes (2020), Smith (2022), and Marzia Varutti (2022, 2023) have explored the long-held privileging of historical and technical expertise as the hallmark of an effective museum experience. Smith's concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), coined in her 2006 book *Uses of Heritage*, is helpful for understanding this position on emotion. According to Smith, the AHD is concerned with "aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes" which must be protected for future generations, and which contribute to creating a sense of common identity (2006: 29). The issue at its core is who gets to define what is included in this heritage, which she stated often fell to the purview of experts like archaeologists, architects, and historians, for "it is only they who have the abilities, knowledge and understanding to identify the innate value and knowledge contained at and within historically important sites and places" (Smith 2006: 28-29).

Writing a decade later, Smith and Campbell contended that the AHD played a critical part in upholding the negative attitude towards emotions within the heritage sector, the latter of which were seen as "somehow 'dangerous' to achieving a balanced understanding of the importance of the past in the present" (2015: 447). Smith and Campbell argued for more recognition of affect and emotion as "essential constitutive elements of heritage making" (2015: 444). Where emotion has been addressed in the research, it has often focused on the visitor experience rather than curatorial practices (Bagnall 2003; Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Schorch 2014; Savenije and de Bruijn 2017; Smith and Campbell 2017; Mason et al. 2018; Zembylas 2018; Markham 2019; Bozoğlu 2020; Smith 2021, 2022; Weller 2022, to name but a few), though exceptions do exist (for example, Forrest 2013; Radywyl et al. 2015; Munroe 2017; Kidd 2018; Perry 2019; Varutti 2022, 2023). Regardless of the focus, the rise in research dedicated to affect and emotion has been seen as part of the larger "emotional turn" (Watson 2018), or "affective turn" (Varutti 2023), occurring across a range of disciplines (Watson 2018). It is worth clarifying that extensive commentary has

taken place across the research as to the differences between emotions and affect. While the consensus appears to be that affect refers to the "embodied state and the initial registering of events" and emotion, the "packaging of affect in familiar cultural categories" (Wetherell, Smith and Campbell 2018), I adhere to Varutti's position that affect encompasses emotion (2023: 62), and it is the latter which is of primary focus in this study.

Varutti (2022, 2023) is one such scholar who has taken up Smith and Campbell's call, with her focus on what she has referred to as a "paradigm shift which places affect and emotions at the core of curatorial work" (2023: 63). To explain this shift, Varutti (2023) coined the term "affective curatorship," or, the purposefulness with which emotion is being leveraged in museums. In particular, it allows for the space to consider how the "experience of memorable affective encounters in the curated environment of museums is often (though not necessarily) the result of careful, precise curatorial intervention" (2023: 64). This naturally links to the earlier discussion about the politics of exhibiting (Lidchi 1997) outlined in section 2.2, and is thus an important framework for evaluating the way emotion is intentionally elicited by my case study museums. Varutti herself was building on a decade's worth of work which examined this paradigmatic shift (2023: 63), highlighting how such a focus on the role of emotion in exhibition development is not only new in museums themselves but in museum research as well. But what is most interesting is Varutti's assertion that affect and emotion has *always* factored into museum work. She drew a link from the "wonder, surprise and awe" (ibid.: 64) aroused by *Wunderkammer* during the Renaissance to the nationalistic rhetoric of 19th-century national museums in Europe to the controversies around display of human remains in contemporary museums.

Examined alongside Watson's work on national museums, Varutti's position is all the more convincing. Indeed, the latter contended that by understanding how emotion is a natural part of curatorial work it is therefore possible to "examine how historically museums (*particularly national museums*) have aimed to engender affective responses that were and are embedded in major socio-cultural transformations of collective values and norms" (Varutti 2023: 64; my emphasis). As stated, the case study museums analyzed in this study are not national museums, but the idea of socio-cultural transformation of collective values and norms are inextricably linked to the work of Communist history museums, founded precisely in response to the new values and norms adopted following the collapse of the regimes across CEE.

To return to Varutti's notion of affective curatorship, she offered three interconnected and sometimes overlapping models for how emotions can be elicited through exhibitions. The first pertains to emotions as the explicit focus of an exhibition's theme or subject matter; the second is when emotions are implicitly activated through the design and architecture of an exhibition; and the third concerns activities within museums that draw out emotional responses. It is the second perspective that is most pertinent to this study, which examines how the case study museums use exhibition tools and techniques to engender emotional responses. In defining what constitutes "emotion by design" (2023: 65), Varutti wrote that this includes the "sapient use of display elements such as light, sound, scents, textured materials, room temperature, space organization and visual perspectives" (ibid.: 66). There is, once again, an immediate link here to Lidchi's (1997) seminal work, specifically her poetics of exhibiting; that is, the ordering and bringing together of exhibition components to create meaning. Even in those studies where emotion is examined through the lens of the visitors, particular attention is paid to the design elements within museums which elicit emotions (Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Watson 2015, 2019; Mannergren Selimovic 2022). For example, in their research on museum visitors' responses to histories of migration, Mason et al. identified the "audio and visual interpretive techniques which used first-person narration and personalisation techniques (film, digital storytelling, large-scale photographic portraits)" (2018: 135) as powerful factors in getting the exhibition's message across.

Similarly, Boyd and Hughes argued that history and knowledge can be brought together to create genuine visitor engagement through the combining of display methods such as "text panels, video, audio clips through headphones, touch screens, and even complex digital simulations or installations such as touch-sensitive surfaces or dynamic video displays" (2020: 13), as well as through "the careful selection of artefacts from museum archives that have some sort of intimate, personal story behind them that embody the narrator's memory" (ibid.). Bozoğlu referred to these as "emotional prompts" in her research on museums, emotion, and memory culture in Turkish museums, in which she explored the use of "'metatechniques' of emotional elicitation" (2020: 46), such as iconic narrative scenes, objects as auratic "connectors" to the past, the presence of heroes, dialogue projection, and glorifying rhetoric (ibid.). What these brief examples demonstrate is how important the design of exhibitions can be in eliciting emotion, in line with Varutti's

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(2023) push for affective curatorship. Emotional elicitation as it pertains to national identity is a central theme in chapter 6, where I draw on the work of Varutti (2023) and others to make a case for placing emotion at the heart of exhibition analysis, especially as it pertains to themes of national identity.

Emotion is not, however, the sole means by which narratives are produced in the museum. I return here to the concept of authenticity, which I explored above in relation to museums of the everyday, particularly *Alltag* museums in the east of Germany. I drew on the work of Berdahl (2008), Bach (2015a, 2015b), and Winkler (2015), who investigated how authenticity is used in these museums to validate the sites' authority. In the following section, I explore the notion of authenticity in greater depth, summarizing the many definitions that have emerged over the last half-century and setting out the framework for how authenticity is employed throughout this thesis.

2.5 The role of authenticity

Scholars have written extensively about authenticity in museums as well as in the adjacent fields of heritage and tourism studies. These discussions have encompassed a wide scope, including issues of museum legitimacy and authority (Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason 2012; Jones 2014), the objectivity of objects (Wang 1999; Jones 2010), its relationship to curatorial mediation (van Mensch 2003; Gable and Handler 2019; Jones 2014; Cristache 2021; Kannike and Reidla 202; Doyle 2019), the question of knowledge versus feeling (Selwyn 1996, Stach 2021; Balcerzak 2021), whether judgement must be left to the visitor (Jones 2014; Stach 2021), and the argument that it is an ineffective goal altogether (Sharpley and Stone 2009). This study takes up a number of these discussions, notably debates about the objectivity of objects (and other elements of the exhibition experience such as video testimonies, photographs, and tour guides), the role of curatorial mediation, and the role of the visitor in determining authenticity.

A useful starting point for understanding the usage of the term authenticity in this study is Dean MacCannell and his seminal 1973 work "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings". Written more than half a century ago, MacCannell's exploration of authenticity in tourism has influenced future scholars across a range of fields. His work is particularly useful for laying the groundwork on how authenticity is utilized within my case study museums, even if later scholars have cast doubt on some of the core

features of his argument, as I will discuss further on. MacCannell asserted that travellers demand authenticity when touring a foreign land, and therefore actively seek out experiences that will allow them to peek behind the curtain to gain an intimate look at what life is truly like in a given place. In doing so, they participate in tours that reveal the inner workings of some aspect a community (1973: 595). Here, MacCannell borrows Erving Goffman's (1959) terminology of the "front" and "back" regions.

Briefly, Goffman (1959) was writing about the presentation of self, which he addressed through the lens of performance. For him, the "front" region is, simply, "the place where the performance is given" (Goffman 1959: 107); it is the setting in which one engages with others, maintaining a sense of decorum. The latter is "the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (ibid.: 113). In both instances, performer and audience are bound "to some degree by barriers to perception" (ibid.: 106). These are, in turn, rooted in an individual's group or social status, which define how they communicate, express themselves, and impress information upon others. MacCannell (1973) later adapted the notion of front and back regions to the field of tourism, putting forth the view that the back region in Goffman's argument – that space where "the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (Goffman 1959: 112) – is shrouded in a sense of intimacy and therefore authenticity that tourists seek to access (MacCannell 1973: 589).

In applying to tourism the notion of front and back regions, and the performances enacted in both, MacCannell (1973) also drew on his predecessor's argument that the restrictions between the two regions can generate and sustain a "we" amongst an audience (Goffman 1959: 67). That is, MacCannell argued that

> A back region, closed to audiences and outsiders, allows concealment of props and activities that might discredit the performance out front. In other words, sustaining a firm sense of social reality requires some mystification. Social reality that is sustained through mystification may be a "false" reality, as occurs in conning. Equally interesting is the case wherein mystification is required to create a sense of "real" reality (1973: 590-591).

This mystification is, in MacCannell's view, what makes it difficult for tourists to understand if they are, in fact, achieving the intimacy and authenticity they seek. To support his point, he expanded on Goffman's (1959) dichotomy, which he saw as too limiting, and created a six-stage continuum of tourist settings. This continuum ranges from the genuine front region, the social space where tourists meet hosts, to the genuine back region, which is where the hosts go about their lives, out of view of the tourist. It is this final space which the tourist sees as being the most authentic and true to local life. In between are 1) a front region decorated to appear like a back region, 2) a front region entirely designed to look like a back region, 3) a back region accessible to outsiders, and 4) "A back region that may be cleaned up or altered a bit because tourists are permitted an occasional glimpse in" (1973: 598). According to MacCannell, as the tourist proceeds towards the authentic back region, he or she "may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to tell for sure if the experience is authentic" (1973: 597). In other words, have they reached the back region or are they instead experiencing a space whose appearance is being sustained through mystification, "designed to generate a sense of real reality" (MacCannell 1973: 591)? This is, in short, what MacCannell calls "staged authenticity" (ibid.).

What MacCannell is not arguing is that these staged settings are in anyway a detriment to the tourist experience. On the contrary, he states that tourists do not mind the charade: "exposure of back regions is a casual part of their touristic experience. What they see in the back is only another show: it does not shock, trick, or anger them, and they do not express any feelings of having been made less pure by their discovery" (1973: 601). They can be, it seems, wholly aware of the trickery before them, but are unbothered by it. This becomes an important point with regard to visitor reactions to some of the case study museums' mock spaces, which will be addressed in chapter 7.

Interestingly, MacCannell's position here came close to addressing some of the greatest criticisms levelled at his own argument, namely the idea that tourists have a say in determining whether something is authentic, or rather, the negotiability of authenticity (Cohen 1988). But instead of taking this stance, he concludes that tourists are happy to acknowledge the inauthenticity of a setting or an experience, even if this defeats the intention of their journey. MacCannell's adherence to the fixed dichotomy of authentic/inauthentic has been challenged by later scholars, such as Erik Cohen (1988), who became a leading voice in the perspective that authenticity is negotiable. He argued that

"'authenticity' is a dynamic, emergent phenomenon rather than a static one - and, hence, today's 'staged' attractions may turn into 'authentic' ones tomorrow. 'Authenticity' is thus shown not to be a given, unchanging quality, as implicit in the usage of MacCannell […] but rather a 'negotiable' quality of objects or attractions" (1988: 36-37). This view was later supported by Ning Wang (1999), who, writing from a postmodernist perspective, stated that MacCannell was too rigid in his view of authenticity.

According to Wang, when MacCannell wrote about staged authenticity, he was using a "museum-linked and objectivist conception" of the term (1999: 353). As such, the "[t]ouristic search for authentic experiences is thus no more than an epistemological experience of toured objects which are found to be authentic" (ibid.). Wang expanded on Cohen's views on authenticity being negotiable in his work on touristic experiences, arguing that it is also contextually determined and ideological. He introduced the notion of "constructive authenticity," which he defined as the result of social construction: "Things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers" (1999: 351).

This understanding of authenticity is useful in the field of heritage studies, and in museum research more specifically, where such perspectives are strongly embedded. In her research on museum objects, Siân Jones (2010) defined authenticity as "a quality that is culturally constructed and varies according to who is observing the object and in what context" (2010: 182). It is, in essence, negotiated, similar to the arguments put forth by Cohen (1988) and Wang (1999). This is not to say, however, that museum research ignores debates about the material authenticity of collections, especially objects. Jones (2010) herself asserted that understandings of authenticity within the field have in fact historically been materialist in nature, whereby authenticity is considered measurable and inherent to the object. Of concern here is the definition of object authenticity in its simplest form; that is, objects that are "real, original, truthful, or genuine" (Jones 2010: 181). Jones (2010) draws on this tension in her work, combining elements of both sides of the debate.

The author argued that the either side of this dichotomy does not often give credence to the other. That is, those who adhere to authenticity as measurable and inherent do not consider that authenticity can in fact be negotiated, and those who view authenticity as something negotiated tend to have "little concern with materiality" (Jones 2010: 182). For the latter, "it is as if layers of authenticity can be simply wrapped around any

object irrespective of its unique history and materiality" (ibid.: 183). Where Jones brings the two together is by questioning if and how the negotiated sense of authenticity is linked to an object's "physical state and material substance" (ibid.). Jones's argument is especially compelling for the present study, as most of the collections in the case study museums are materially authentic, which was an important factor for authenticating their respective narratives.

This speaks to the authenticating power materially authentic objects can have when placed within an exhibition. A newspaper announcing the death of Stalin, or another declaring the imposition of Martial Law, yellowing and torn and framed for their protection, represents a direct link to these historical moments. They close the temporal distance between these famous events and ourselves in the present-day. They "provide evidence about and act as 'witnesses' to events from times or places out of sight or out of mind, and begin to make stories about them powerful and palpable" (Mason, Robinson, and Coffield 2017: 190). At the same time, however, their material authenticity is by no means the sole factor at play in constructing authentic narratives. They may build a temporal bridge to the past for us to traverse, but they do not speak about the social, political, and historical contexts of their production and original usage. It is their museal arrangements that do this.

There are two very important concepts which help to explain this. The first relates to the interplay between museum authority and authenticity, and the second to the networks which are developed inside and outside the museum. As regards the former, the research of Steffi de Jong (2018) has been particularly impactful. In her work on the dialectic characteristic of museum objects (2018: 119), de Jong claimed that the "originality of museum objects is authenticated through exhibition techniques" (ibid.). Going further she asserted that these techniques "serve to authenticate the *historical narrative* of the particular museum" (de Jong 2018: 120; my emphasis). To put it another way, "museums not only authenticate the objects as originals, pointing out the history that they were involved in, they also authenticate them as adequate representatives of this history, while the objects in turn are meant to authenticate the museums' narratives as genuine" (2018: 120). De Jong's words hint at one of the central understandings of this thesis, which is that the use of genuine objects is not enough to create and authenticate a narrative. A great deal is at play because exhibitions are constructions, as discussed earlier (Whitehead 2009, 2016a, 2016b). Once again, this is evident in the diverging representations of Communism.

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Authentic display components are used to varying degrees across all museums of Communism, yet in very different ways.

For the second concept, that of networks, I return to the work of Jones (2010). In her summary on the varied views on authenticity in the fields of heritage conservation and management, she drew attention to the long-held view that there is a link between an object's authenticity and its personal history, citing the beliefs which circulated within the Victorian anti-restoration movements as an example. Moving into the 20th century, she borrowed from Walter Benjamin, who pioneered the study of aura and its loss thereof through continual reproductions and refashioning of its original nature. In his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin wrote that the "authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (1968: 221). Jones brought this concept into the field of heritage, arguing that "the authenticity of heritage objects is bound up in the intrinsic and ineffable qualities, not just of past owners but of all the past experiences, people and places with which they have been connected" (2010: 190). As such, she makes a case for investigating the "networks of relationships between people, places and things" when looking at how authenticity is experienced and negotiated through objects, for these networks are what "appear to be central, not the things in and of themselves" (2010: 189).

The encounter between object and museum visitor constitutes one part of this network. On the museum's side is the curatorial mediation of objects (and other display components). This inevitably has a central role in authenticating the objects themselves as well as the museum's intended messages. This returns us to de Jong's (2018) observation of the cyclical nature of museums authenticating objects and objects authenticating museums. On the visitors' side, there is a world of personal histories that needs to be considered. As Wang stated, authenticity "can be the projection of one's dreams, stereotyped images, and expectations onto toured objects" (1999: 351). Part of what makes this declaration of authenticity valid, regardless of whether or not an object is materially authentic, is thus what the visitor brings to this negotiation of authenticity (Jones 2010). As will be explored in section 2.6 below, the museum does not have complete control over the messages visitors take away because the experiences people bring to their encounters with the exhibition play a part in determining the perception of authenticity.

In his work on visitor motivation, Kevin Coffee wrote that, "[…] every act of museum use proceeds within complex – extensive and diverse – cultural matrices created by and comprising the users' social practices […] our actions and thoughts are not devised in isolation, but are enacted in response to, and within, sociocultural contexts as components of various social relationships" (2007: 377). I borrow from Coffee here to consider "museum use" not solely the act of visiting, but rather the varied ways in which a visitor makes use of the museum throughout their visit, including in his or her engagement with objects and their negotiated understandings of the objects' authenticity. It is precisely the idea that visitors' thoughts are devised as both a response to and within sociocultural contexts that makes the question of authenticity in the museum so crucial to the institution's work.

So far, I have shown a kind of three-pronged understanding of authenticity in museums: authentic display components, authentic narratives, and the position of visitors in relation to both of these. Consideration of the latter of these has been the focus of immense research over the last three and a half decades, not only with regards to their perception of authenticity, but to the wider realm of meaning-making more generally. The following section explores some of the main concepts that have emerged from this research, particularly the shift from visitors as recipients of knowledge to negotiators of meaning.

2.6 Negotiating the museum experience

Throughout this chapter, focus has largely been on the literature about the role of *museums* in the museum experience. I have highlighted some of the leading voices in the perspective that exhibitions and their narratives are in fact constructed and political; that the very choices behind exhibition creation have led to differing approaches to representing Communist history, embedded in and elevated by the "history and roots, cultural traditions, […] popular symbolic images, rituals, sites and objects" (Edensor 2002: 25) of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983); and that the authenticity of these things is made believable through authenticating practices deployed by the museum. But as referenced in the previous section, the visitor is an integral component of the museum experience. Consideration of the visitor came to the fore in Anglophone museum research in the late 1980s, gaining ground following the publication of Peter Vergo's seminal book *The New Museology* in 1989.

More broadly, this approach has been defined by the re-examination of the role of museums in society. That is, it brings into question traditional understandings of museum work around issues such as power, authority, meaning-making, and the assigning of value (Stam 2005: 58). Where museums were once viewed as conservers of cultural heritage with the authority to define the meaning and value of its collections, emphasis is now placed on a more democratic understanding of museums. With regards to the position of visitors in this paradigm shift, Philip Wright's contribution to Vergo's book provided an early example of this. In particular, he called on London's art museums to prioritize the "increasingly fragmented publics who want to learn and do different things at different speeds" (Wight 1989: 119) rather than operate as if the quality of the artwork in their collections "is self-evident and, ipso facto, synonymous with the quality of the experience that can be derived from contemplating such works" (ibid.: 120).

This marked a sea change in how visitors have been considered in museums (and museum research) over the last three and a half decades, as can be seen in a significant amount of literature in the field of visitor studies. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill addressed these changes only a few years after Vergo's (1989) book, writing that museums had begun shifting from "being static storehouses for artefacts into active learning environments for people" (1994: 1). Writing a decade later, Hooper-Greenhill also noted that there had indeed been a shift in "thinking about visitors as an undifferentiated mass public to beginning to accept visitors as active interpreters and performers of meaning-making practices" (2006: 362). In other words, as Mason (2005) argued, gone were the days of the "transmission model," whereby fixed messages are communicated by the museum and received unquestioningly by the visitor. Instead, meanings are viewed as a co-construction between the museums and their visitors. The emphasis on visitors as active interpreters in the museum experience is central to this study, as is the idea that they are as integral to meaning-making as the exhibition itself.

Sophia Diamantopoulou, Eva Insulander, and Fredrik Lindstrand (2012) approached this through the lens of agency. They acknowledged the function of curatorial decisions and exhibition design in aiming to shape visitor experiences and meaning-making – with certain aspects of an exhibition framed as prompts (2012: 12) – but argued that how visitors respond to these prompts will not always fall in line with museum's intent. This is because visitors possess the agency to focus their attention on particular aspects of the exhibition;

that is, "[d]ifferent interest produces different sequences of attention, framing, selection and transformation" (2012: 23). Though not acknowledged by the authors themselves, their argument has echoes of Macdonald's visitor research during her time at the Science Museum in London throughout the 1990s. Indeed, Macdonald's interviews with visitors found that what they focused on was driven by the "outside" information they brought with them (1998: 225), with the exhibits they engaged with becoming "props for personalised, often nostalgic, accounts" (ibid.).

What neither Macdonald (1998), nor Diamantopoulou, Insulander, and Lindstrand (2012) addressed, however, is where these interests come from and/or what has shaped them. Mason touched upon this when she wrote that meaning changes "according to different contexts, whether historical, geographical or cultural" (2005: 224). Mason's focus on the particular contexts which influence how meanings are made – and what experiences one has in museums – is a key part of this larger shift in visitor studies. In fact, Hooper-Greenhill noted as far back as 1994 that greater attention would need to be paid to the ways in which socio-cultural factors influenced the museum experience and the resulting meaning-making (see, also, Coffee 2007).

There are two particularly useful frameworks for understanding visitor experience in this respect, the first of which is Zahava D. Doering's (1999) concept of entrance narratives, and the second, John Falk and Lynn Dierking's (2000, 2013) Contextual Model of Learning. With regards to the former, Doering defined the entrance narrative as:

- A basic framework, that is, the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world;
- Information about a subject matter or topic, organized according to that basic framework;
- Personal experiences, emotions, and memories that verify and support this understanding (1999: 81).

As a central objective of the present study is understanding what visitors engaged with in the case study museums, Doering's concept of the entrance narrative was thus a useful framework for approaching my conversations with participants. The work of Falk and Dierking (2000, 2013) is similarly useful in this regard, who together developed the

Contextual Model of Learning. Initially created with the view that the learning that takes place at cultural institutions is a process (Falk & Dierking 2000: 10), Falk and Dierking later went further to also see the Model as "a convenient aid in explaining and comprehending the museum experience" (2013: 26). The scholars asserted that the museum visit can be conceptualized as a dialogue between three overlapping contexts: personal, sociocultural, and physical, and that it is at the intersection of these that the museum experience can be understood (Falk & Dierking 2013: 26). Crucially for this study, Falk and Dierking viewed the meaning visitors bring to and take away from the museum as central to this experience. Briefly, the three contexts can be defined as follows:

- Personal Context—each museum visitor brings with him (sic) a unique background of prior experiences, interests, knowledge, motivations, beliefs, and values, about both the contents of the museum and the notion of the museum as a societal institution.
- Sociocultural Context—every museum experience is embedded within the macro-sociocultural context of museums as societal institutions and is mediated by micro-sociocultural interactions with others (members of one's own group, other visitors, and staff).
- Physical Context—the museum, including all of its architecture, exhibitions, objects, and interpretive materials (labels, media, brochures), represents a physical setting that visitors usually freely choose to enter and engage with. Even if they have not visited voluntarily, once inside, there is often a high degree of freedom and choice in terms of what to look at, discuss, and do (Falk & Dierking 2013: 33).

Falk and Dierking (2013) argued that the museum experience can only be understood when all three contexts are considered because it is at the intersection of them that the visit and meaning-making occur. The personal and sociocultural contexts devised by the authors overlap in many ways with Doering's entrance narratives. The physical context, meanwhile, emphasizes the agency discussed by Diamantopoulou, Insulander, and Lindstrand (2012) – and, to an extent, Macdonald (1998) – but also the role of the museums themselves.

On this latter point, I draw on research which has examined the intersection of these two things – visitor agency and museum environments – to investigate *how* meaning is made. Returning to Hooper-Greenhill, the author observed that the paradigm shift occurring

in museums also meant visitors were increasingly demanding an active encounter with collections. Such an encounter inevitably entails consideration of the exhibition itself. In this, I turn to Andrea Witcomb's (2015) work on museums as dialogic spaces, in which she drew on Lidchi's (1997) poetics of exhibiting (termed here as the poetics of display).

Poetics, Witcomb asserted, is about more than how the different display components are brought together to create meaning, but the ways in which museums can act as spaces of immersion, interaction, and negotiation. For her, poetics of display must bring to the fore "the subjectivity of the visitor and their interaction with these components" (2015: 138). Building on Sandra Dudley's (2010) subject–object interaction, Witcomb thus advocated for understanding that the meanings which are made during a museum visit are "performed and embodied by the visitor in the act of visiting the exhibition, through their emotional and sensorial responses to the materiality of the exhibition itself" (ibid.). Witcomb herself admitted to not employing this particular interpretation of the poetics of display on museum visitors, but rather on herself (ibid.). My research seeks to fill this gap to better comprehend how it may appear in practice. That said, this study diverges slightly from Witcomb, in so far as it does not fully capture her definition of interaction, which she considered to be performed and embodied "*in the act of visiting*" (ibid.). Given the limitations of this research (see chapter 3, section 3.5), I apply Witcomb's dialogic spaces model to what was recounted to me by my participants about their interactions during our conversations rather than direct observations made by myself.

As concerns this notion of recall, Falk and Dierking's (2000, 2013) Contextual Model of Learning once again offers a useful frame of reference. It was their view that the overlapping personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts of the museum experience – and how visitors make meaning from these experiences – is constructed over time "as the individual moves through her sociocultural and physical world; over time meaning is built upon, layer upon layer" (2013: 29). This study does not look deeply into the personal, socio-cultural, and physical contexts of my participants' visits beyond what they self-reported in our conversations about their backgrounds and motivations for going to the case study museums. It does, however, engage with the intersection of time and how they made sense of their visits after the fact, for each interview occurred at a distance to the visit, from a few months to a few years.

In her review of research on museum visiting, Macdonald emphasized the viewpoint (with a nod to Falk, Dierking, and their colleague Marianna Adams [2006]) that museum experiences and meaning-making are not confined to the time spent on site. Reflecting on Ruth Finnegan's (2002) research in the fields of communication and anthropology, she made a case for critically analyzing within visitor studies what she referred to as "ways of relating" (Macdonald 2007: 153). Macdonald asserted that this approach "incorporates attention to ways in which visitors 'assemble' impressions and ideas, and consider[s] how these interconnect with the exhibition design and other aspects of their lives" (2007: 153). According to Macdonald, investigating meaning-making in this manner can recognize the centrality of what occurs *after* a visit in the process. In looking at visitor reactions to the exhibitions post-visit, the present study aims to address Macdonald's call to investigate the interconnections between the exhibitions, the impressions and ideas visitors develop in relation to them, and their worlds beyond the museum.

Philipp Schorch's (2015) work on museum encounters and narrative engagements provides valuable insight into how to go about investigating the meaning-making process which incorporates post-visit experiences. Schorch's study stands, in some ways, at the intersection of Macdonald (2007) and Falk and Dierking's (2000, 2013) work, in so far as it brought together visitors' biographies and the passage of time when discussing narrative methodologies. For Schorch, narrative is defined as "an interpretive strategy and structure which comprises the elements of characters performing and events happening over a period of time, and through which the museum experience in its gestalt or unified whole becomes meaningful and entangled with a visitor's biography (as a particular form of narrative)" (2015: 438). More simply put, "visitors narrate their biographies into the museum experience and the museum experience into their biographies" (ibid.). One of the more convincing aspects of Schorch's argument lies in his use of H. Porter Abbott's (2002) work on narrative. Porter Abbott defined narrative as:

> a universal tool for knowing as well as telling, for absorbing knowledge as
> well as expressing it. This knowledge, moreover, is not necessarily static.
> Narrative can be, and often is, an instrument that provokes active thinking
> and helps us work through problems, even as we tell about them or hear
> them being told (2002, 11)

Schorch drew on this to emphasize the discursive strategies visitors engage in when narrating their experiences in the museum. Chapter 7 brings these discursive strategies to the fore, demonstrating the manner in which participants responded to the case study exhibitions through a continual and cyclical process of reflection and construction. This is particularly important when the participants in question are individuals for whom Communism was not a defining part of their lifeworlds. Having stated in chapter 1 that little has been written in English about how foreign visitors engage with museums of Communist history, or Communist heritage more broadly, it thus becomes necessary to draw on the various frameworks presented in this section to gain an understanding of how this subset of visitors engage with and make meaning about such museums.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the key concepts that underpin this study. It examined the political nature of museum exhibitions more broadly, and of representing Communism more specifically, the landscape of Communist heritage and museums that has taken shape over the last three decades, the cyclical act of creating and representing national identities in the museum, definitions of authenticity, and the ways in which we can investigate how visitors engage with museums and make meaning out of their visits.

I have shown how the division between displays of terror and the everyday has come to characterize museums across Central and Eastern Europe, and has been amply investigated by a range of scholars. In the former, narratives of a suffering citizenry are brought to the fore, along with the view that Communism was an aberration in the history of the region imposed from the outside. I have discussed how authors such as Cristea (2008), Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci (2008), Kuusi (2008), Main (2008), Mark (2008), Cristea (2008), Ivanov (2009), Apor (2012; 2014), and Zombory (2017) have examined this prevailing approach in museums in Romania, the Baltic states, Poland, Germany, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Representing Communist history through the everyday, on the other hand, has seen museums embrace an object-oriented approach, where the familiarity and relatability of everyday objects are relied upon to harken back to an era that many felt had abruptly disappeared. This is particularly the case in museums in the former East Germany, as has

been addressed by scholars like Betts (2000), Berdahl (2008), Arnold-de Simine (2011), Mueller (2013), Paver (2013), Bach (2015a, 2015b), Jones (2015), and Winkler (2015).

The importance of this existing research to the current study is twofold. Firstly, it has provided a framework for examining how Communism has been represented since its collapse in 1989 and created a base from which I can investigate the commonalities and divergences of my two case study museums. Secondly, it also establishes a historical lens through which to understand the purpose of museums of Communism – my case studies included – notably, as it relates to constructing and upholding national identities.

I have also discussed how the intersection between museums and national identity has long been a popular topic for scholars (Anderson 1983; Bradburne 2000; Mason 2004; Macdonald 2005; Knell, Aronsson, and Amundsen 2011; Watson 2021). This is thanks in no small part to the authority such institutions have in shaping the collective ideals and "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of a nation. Drawing on rituals, symbols, figures, and even the mundanity of everyday life (Edensor 2002), museums become a place for citizens to simultaneously explore their national identity and participate in its construction. The narratives discussed above with regards to suffering citizens and a love for household objects represent two ways in which identities – national included – of former Eastern Bloc countries have largely been constructed and preserved over the last three decades. Chapter 6 brings these narratives into focus to investigate the display techniques employed by museums to construct national identity. How this is done requires a not insignificant degree of authentication, especially when representing such identities to foreign visitors who cannot rely on their recognition of the narratives.

Understandings of authenticity in the tourism, heritage, and museum fields have, as I have demonstrated, evolved over the decades, with greater emphasis now being placed on its negotiated nature (Cohen 1988; Wang 1999; Jones 2010; de Jong 2018). While the expectation of encountering genuine objects is still seen as central to the museum visit (Wang 1999; Jones 2010), more research is being carried out into social, political, and cultural factors behind the use of objects – as well as other display components more widely – within an exhibition to authenticate particular narratives (van Mensch 2003; Jones 2010; Jones 2014; de Jong 2018; Doyle 2019; Cristache 2021; Kannike and Reidla 2021). At the same time, these factors are also being considered when trying to analyze how they influence the ways in which visitors themselves view the authenticity of museum objects

and museum experiences more generally (Wang 1999; Coffee 2007; Jones 2010; Jones 2014; Stach 2021). This study draws on each of these elements, examining in chapter 5 how the various types of authenticity are deployed by the case study museums to validate their diverging approaches to Communist history, and, in chapter 7, how visitors negotiate the authenticity of these representations and the narratives they construct.

This latter point, that of visitors being in a position to negotiate and determine authenticity, is part of the turn towards the collaborative over the last few decades (Vergo 1989; Hooper-Greenhill 1994, 2006); that is, seeing visitors as active interpreters and participants in the museum experience. Much interesting work has been carried out into *how* these experiences are articulated and meanings are made, particularly with respect to narrative methodologies (Macdonald 2007; Schorch 2015; Witcomb 2003, 2015). In applying this to a study on museums of Communism, focus is thus placed on the ways in which visitors recount their understandings of this history in Central and Eastern European countries whilst also using this to inform and reflect upon their own lives.

Drawing on these concepts will help me to examine the case study museums from a novel angle. Very few English-language studies have been conducted on these museums, and those that have have not looked specifically at the intersection between post-Communist identity construction and foreign visitors. At the time of writing, Balcerzak (2021) and Jovana Janinović (2022) are the only scholars to examine the PRL Museum in any kind of depth, both of whom analyze the museum for its commodification of Communism and its place in Warsaw's broader tourist offerings. My research moves away from discussions of the touristic consumption of Communism to examine not only how it can assist foreign visitors' in having a meaningful engagement with Poland's relationship with its past as constructed by the museum, but also how the PRL Museum constructs its nation's post-Communist identity(ies).

In contrast, the MoC, having been open since the early 2000s, has been subject to a small number of studies in English, including by Radostina Sharenkova (2008) and Slavenka Drakulić (2011). The museum's expansion in 2017 has attracted further interest by researchers, with new English-language analyses published for the first time in almost ten years. Rose Smith (2019, 2021) argued that the museum portrays Czechoslovakia as a victim of Communism, representing the ideology as incompatible with Czech values, though she did not examine the historical roots of this representation, or how it relates to the debates

which emerged in the 1990s. Bukovská (2020) took a business-studies approach to her analysis of the museum, discussing the museum's entrepreneurial roots; that is, its founding as a result of Spicker aiming to fill a gap in the market, as discussed in chapter 1. She also assessed the museum's for-profit status as well as the question of who the institution's main audience is. As regards the latter, this overlaps with Smith's (2021) short article published the following year, as both examined the influence Spicker's American identity brought to the exhibition's construction and how this reflects the visitors it is aiming at.

Muriel Blaive's (2020) chapter in the aforementioned volume edited by Norris is perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the MoC since its reopening in 2017, covering many of the topics and themes also discussed by Smith (2019, 2021) and Bukovská (2020). In relation to the present study, it is how Blaive set the museum against a backdrop of Czechia's post-Communist history that is most intriguing. She argued early in her chapter that the MoC and its reception tells us more about Czechia today than it does about Czechoslovakia under Communism (2020: 222). In particular, she contextualized the museum's place in Czechia through an overview of the complex legal and social circumstances of the transition to democracy, claiming that speaking about the Czechoslovak regime in the 1990s and early 2000s in anything other than absolutely negative terms became "tantamount to supporting a 'criminal regime'" (2020: 226). In Blaive's view, it is for this reason that the MoC – described by the author as "quintessentially Western in its amused commodification of communist era artifact" and presenting Communism with a 'veneer of cool'" (ibid.: 228) – is largely ignored by the Czech public and academic elites (ibid.: 220). Though Blaive has presented the most detailed examination of the new MoC to date with regards to its historical background, she leaned heavily into the commodification of Communism and its inception by an American businessman without linking it to the culture of anti-Communism she addressed at great length. The analysis of the MoC presented in this thesis contains commonalities with Blaive's (2020) position, specifically as it relates to anti-Communist sentiments, though it considers the museum less a commodification designed for Western curiosity than it does a testament to those same sentiments.

In the following chapter, I further address how these key concepts informed my methodological approach to the study, with particular attention to the social constructionist framework which underpins it.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of this study. I first address the philosophical position from which I have conducted my study, that is, social constructionism. In taking this position, I argue that knowledge about the Communist past in Central and Eastern Europe is socially constructed and that the case study museums are themselves a reflection and a part of this. Such a standpoint opens space for examining the case study museums as constructions of truth and knowledge (Whitehead 2016a, 2016b) about Communism as well as a site of encounter with visitors who have agency in how they engage with exhibitions.

I then discuss the data collection methods I used, beginning with an exploration of why case studies are useful and valid for the questions this thesis seeks to answer, before addressing the display analysis and guided tours I undertook at the two case studies and the semi-structured interviews I conducted with foreign visitors. By choosing these methods, I adhered to a qualitative approach in my aim to answer the research question outlined in chapter 1. More specifically, conducting display analysis allowed me to examine how two contemporary museums of Communism create, reflect, and reinforce post-1989 identities, focusing on how knowledge is produced and shapes the stories told at my case studies. My interviews with foreign visitors offered insight into how they engaged with this knowledge and the strategies they used to make sense of it.

I next describe my data analysis process. In particular, I discuss my use of thematic analysis (TA) as a method for analyzing my data, drawing heavily on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006, 2013; 2014) views of TA as a method in its own right and how researchers can examine the latent themes of their datasets. Following from this, I briefly address some of the limitations of this study, particularly as they relate to the Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss the complications that arose from this but also the additional data sources I collected and analyzed. In the final two sections, I look first at the ethical implications of carrying out research that revolves around both human participants and a politically charged topic such as Communism. I then focus on issues of reflexivity, examining

my position as an American and as a researcher, but also addressing the potential effects of my positionality on the data collection and analysis.

3.2 Social constructionism as a philosophical position

My study sets out to examine three phenomena. The first is how museal representations of Communism construct knowledge(s) about the Polish and Czechoslovakian regimes. The second is how these museums are sites for constructing and reinforcing post-Communist identity. And the third is how foreign visitors respond to the exhibitions, including what knowledge, beliefs, behaviour, and meanings arise from their encounter with the museum. The approach I take to studying these phenomena is informed in large part by social constructionism, as applied to the museum field. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as the view that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (1998: 42). With regards to this study, the case study museums have been constructed within the staff's sociocultural contexts, while the visitors have engaged with the museums in a manner equally contingent upon their own contexts. It is the interaction between visitors and museum displays that concerns this study. In other words, what comes to pass when curator-mediated exhibitions and the sociocultural contexts of foreign visitors meet in the museum.

It bears noting that the term *constructionism* has often been used interchangeably with *constructivism* – see, for example, Bryman (2012) – but, in line with Crotty, among others, I take the view that there is a subtle difference between them. Crotty (1998) described this distinction when he says that the latter should be reserved for "epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on 'the meaning making activity of the individual mind' and to use constructionism where the focus includes 'the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning'" (1998: 58). For Crotty, the culture(s) in which we are brought up arm us with a repertoire of meanings that, in turn, influence our further construction of meanings. Falk and Dierking (2012, 2013) expressed a similar sentiment in their Contextual Model of Learning, as was examined in chapter 2. According to them, the museum visit can be conceptualized as a dialogue between three overlapping contexts of visitors: personal, sociocultural, and physical. By bringing into consideration each of these

contexts, it becomes possible to understand the repertoire of meanings visitors hold as well as what occurs when they encounter the physical space of the museum.

I have chosen to examine the phenomenon of constructing knowledge about Communism and how meanings are made when confronted with this knowledge through the lens of the museum because, as Whitehead has said, the museum "is one of the most authoritative public institutions for the management and proposal of truths" (2016a: 3). It constructs knowledge and shapes canons, has "the power to define, legitimize, enforce, claim, or oppose certain meanings" (Mason 2005: 231), and exists as politicized representations of proposed truths. With regards to my case study museums, they are, as of 2024, among very few existing museums of Communism in their respective countries, and as such, occupy a potentially powerful space in the capitals' museum landscapes to construct and propose truths about the former regimes. I argue that this power is doubly impactful when considering its effects on a particular subset of visitors, that is, foreigners with no first-hand experience of Communism, for whom museums are a key site for accessing knowledge. As we have seen, visitors to any museum will be arriving with a repertoire of meanings – or a basic entrance narrative, to borrow Doering's (1999) term – that will impact upon their experiences on site. I seek to examine how these visitors will make sense of the knowledges and proposed truths propagated by museums' displays as they engage in this process of meaning-making.

I do not claim, however, that the truths proposed by my case studies are unassailable. Indeed, Whitehead argued the importance of not allowing museums to position themselves as bearers of overarching truths, stating that the "stories that museums tell are […] only some among many others competing as truth claims, constructed by various social institutions, each subject to political and logistical pressures which regulate and adulterate their theorisations in various ways" (2009: 20). These competing truth claims are apparent in the Communist history museums dotted across the former Bloc, as I showed in chapter 2 (see section 2.3). The competing, and at times overlapping, truth claims made by these different museums highlights the impossibility of arguing that the truths proposed by my case studies are correct above all others, and this study does not set out to disprove that. Rather, the purpose of this study is, in part, to examine which of these approaches the case study museums embrace, what themes arise as a result, and how these are authenticated. An additional purpose came into play following the initial data analysis, and

this was to investigate how differing approaches can lead to similar themes, and if so, what impact this might have on visitors' meaning-making.

The potential for varying truth claims is a critical issue for the social constructionist. Christian Smith (2010) is one of many scholars who argue that there is a scale of social constructionisms, labelling them as "weak" and "strong". The latter, he stated, is entirely culturally relative "since no human has access to reality 'as it really is' […] because we can never escape our human epistemological and linguistic limits to verify whether our beliefs about reality correspond with externally objective reality" (2010: 122). It is Smith's description of weak social constructionism, however, that informs my own position. It is for this reason that his definition is worth quoting in full:

> The weak version […] sounds something like this: All human knowledge is conceptually mediated and can be and usually is influenced by particular and contingent sociocultural factors such as material interests, group structures, linguistic categories, technological development, and the like—such that what people believe to be real is significantly shaped not only by objective reality but also by their sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, there is a dimension of reality that humans socially construct, what I will refer to below as institutional facts, that is, those aspects of the real that humans think, speak, and interact into existence. (2010: 122)

Smith's emphasis on knowledge being conceptually mediated and influenced by sociocultural factors is relevant for the direction of this study because the latter aims to analyze the representation of a historical era known to be open to contentious and competing remembrance and truth claims, as well as visitors' knowledge and beliefs of the era and how their engagement with the museums' displays have been affected by their respective entrance narratives (Doering 1999).

Achieving this aim can be aided by what Whitehead referred to as a "cultural nexus of museum knowledge production" (2016a: 3). According to Whitehead, this is the combination of display analysis, curatorial accounts of display production, and audiences' reception of displays (2016a: 3). Such a consideration is valuable in that it allows the researcher to reflect on "how meaning is made, not just by the communicating 'text' of a

display (if such it can be called) but also by the visitors who make sense of it" (Whitehead 2016a: 3). To analyze this, a weak social constructionist position is among the most suitable. Recalling Crotty's view that constructionism considers all knowledge to be constructed through interaction and that it is developed within a social context (1998: 42), such an approach lends itself easily to my study. As I will discuss in the next section, the central part of this study includes display analysis, museum tours, and visitor interviews, which has allowed me to investigate not only what truth claim(s) these museums are making, but also how visitors' interaction with them impact on the meanings they make about Communism.

In considering knowledge and truths to be socially constructed, in this case not only by museums but also through/within the interaction between the museum and their visitors, it bears stating that the following study relies to a significant degree on the language of *construction*. That is, my position that museums are far from neutral, that they are political creations with political ends, and that all exhibitions are conceptualized and staged with a message – or messages – in mind, necessarily entails a notion of construction. As was seen in the previous chapter (see section 2.2), museum scholars have described the work of museums as an act of *crafting*: crafting stories, narratives, myths. In doing so, they are not implying that museums operate in falsities, creating something which would otherwise not be true if not encountered in the exhibition space. Rather, they are highlighting how factual information can be used for particular purposes.

This is the position to which I adhere in the present thesis. The wide range of truth claims made about the Communist past in existing museums is made possible because of how knowledge is influenced by the staff's sociocultural contexts (Smith 2010). While they may be drawing on the same overarching history or specific historical moments, the techniques which are employed to do this are going to vary. As stated above, the aim of this study is not to determine the accuracy of the differing truth claims presented by the case studies. What this thesis sets out to do is understand how stories, narratives, and myths are constructed, and for what aim. What kinds of cultural and political work are these constructed narratives doing, and what effects might these have?

3.3 Methods of data collection

In view of my position that museum exhibitions are constructed to make truth claims and that visitors' entrance narratives have an impact upon their museum experience, the

methods I have selected for carrying out my research address a number of aims, including: 1) investigating the role of the museum in the construction of knowledge about Communist history, 2) assessing the role of Communist history museums as sites for creating identities, and 3) analyzing how and in which ways foreign visitors recognize messages of identity in the case study museums. To pursue these aims, I employed an overarching approach of case study analysis which focuses on two museums. Within each of these case studies, I collected data through three methods: display analysis, guided tours of the museums, and semi-structured interviews with foreign visitors.

Using case studies allowed me to pursue the aims and objectives of this research through the lens of two institutions dedicated exclusively to Communist history. By focusing on two specific museums that offer overviews of the whole of the Communist period, including its social and political facets, that are among the few in their respective countries that address this history in such detail, and which feature prominently on the tourist trail, I was able to investigate how Communism is represented in two museums with a significant amount of power in educating foreign visitors about their countries' Communist pasts. Secondly, any claims I make about knowledge construction in museal representations of Communism in my case study museums, and the impact of this on meaning-making amongst foreign visitors, is supported by an in-depth analysis of the displays at each institution. Going hand-in-hand with display analysis are guided tours of the exhibitions. Though this study considers these tours as distinct to the site analysis itself, it takes the view that tour guides at museums of Communism can be an integral part of the meaning-making experience as they share not only their knowledge but also their personal experiences of the era.

The findings borne out of my analysis of the case studies' exhibitions and guided tours were then triangulated with the findings of my visitor interviews in order to better understand the effect of the museums on their experiences. Speaking directly with visitors after their visit enabled me to ascertain the narratives with which they entered the museum, whilst also offering them the opportunity to talk in detail about their visits, including what they learned, what they spent time observing, and how their previous understandings of Communism were challenged and/or affirmed by the museum. This information offered the possibility to examine how meaning is made following visitor engagement with exhibitions. In combining different methods of data collection, I have

been able to guard against the risk of my research appearing anecdotal and lacking in validity, two threats to a sound qualitative study (Maxwell 2013; Yin 2016, 2018; Silverman 2017; Grix 2019).

3.3.1 Case studies

Case studies are a crucial element of this research because, as Yin wrote, they are best suited to studies that "seek to explain some contemporary circumstance" (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works)" and are "relevant the more that your questions require an extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" (2018: 4). As addressed at the start of this chapter, there are three phenomena at the heart of this study: 1) how museums construct knowledge about Communism, 2) how these museums are sites for creating identities, and 3) how visitors respond to these displays. By selecting a case study approach, I have thus been able to explore in-depth the topic of knowledge production and how this intersects with visitor engagement and meaning-making.

Nonetheless, I remain aware of some of the weaknesses of using case studies that scholars have highlighted. A key criticism of this type of research method is its dedicated focus on a limited number of instances, thus impacting on the generalizability of one's findings (Bryman 2012; McLeod 2010; Yin 2018). In this study, I make no claims of generalization, instead choosing to focus on the aforementioned phenomena as they unfold at my case study museums specifically. An additional weakness of case studies regards the human and economic cost of conducting such a study. The time-consuming nature of case study research has meant that there is a valid cause for concern about the time and money needed to make site visits possible. This was a critical issue for my project, as I lacked both the time and financial resources to undertake lengthy fieldwork at my case studies.

To limit the impact this could have had, I adhered to the notion of "patchwork ethnography" developed by Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe (2020). Developed amidst – though not necessarily in response to – the Covid-19 pandemic, Günel, Varma, and Watanabe took aim at the feasibility of "traditional" fieldwork within anthropology, namely lengthy immersions in the field and the rigid distinctions between "field" and "home" (2020). The authors shone a light on the changing nature of anthropological fieldwork, including work-life balance, employment obligations, environmental factors, and growing feminist and decolonial critiques of the discipline, and

argued for new ways are to carry out research which attend to these concerns. To this end, Günel, Varma, and Watanabe advocated for a "kinder and gentler way to do research because it expands what we consider acceptable materials, tools, and objects of our analyses" (2020). To pursue this, the authors encouraged researchers to work "with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production" (2020).

While the present study would not be classified as anthropological, the notion of patchwork ethnography is nonetheless helpful for explaining the choices made over the last four years, not least because it addresses the human and economic cost of conducting my on-site fieldwork whilst also attending to the unexpected obstacles that cropped up over the course of my research, the pandemic being foremost among these. There were two key ways in which I applied patchwork ethnography to my research. The first concerns the amount of time I was able to spend at each museum. Due to my not being able to financially support myself for extended trips to Warsaw and Prague, I collected display data and participated in guided tours across two visits, each lasting four days. These took place in November 2021 and November 2022. This meant that I had little time to conduct in-depth analysis on site, and instead spent the majority of my time at the museums gathering photographs, videos, and fieldnotes. My second visit was thus aimed at following up on questions and details which emerged during analysis as well as taking the aforementioned guided tours.

The second way I adhered to Günel, Varma, and Watanabe's approach to fieldwork related to the lack of success I had contacting the founders and staff at the case study museums. As I could not spend much time in Warsaw and Prague, I had limited chances to reach them while on site, and thus had to depend on cold emailing. While I waited for responses, I engaged in a review of secondary sources about my case study museums. This included reading through and watching English-language interviews with the museums' founders as well as reading news pieces written about the museums. When it became apparent that I would not be able to speak to the museums' staff, this secondary material became a valuable source of contextual information. Moreover, it helped me identify key themes to remain aware of as I gathered and analyzed the data from the site visit.

With regard to the kind of case study I have undertaken, qualitative research literature presents a variety of case study typologies, including those defined by Stake

(2008), Yin (2018), and Grix (2019). It is Stake's category of the instrumental case study that informed the boundaries of my own cases. In the author's opinion, this category denotes case studies that are "examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, contexts scrutinized and its ordinary activities detailed" (Stake 2008: 123). While I make no claim to redraw generalizations, as previously mentioned, my study does aim to provide insight into issues of knowledge production, identity construction, and meaning-making in Communist history museums whose target audiences did not live under Communism.

Purposive sampling was used to select the case study museums that best allowed me to investigate this issue. This was defined by Bryman as when "the researcher aims to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (2012: 714). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stated that such sampling seeks out "groups, settings and individuals where […] the processes being studied are most likely to occur" (cited in Silverman 2017: 270). Therefore, in choosing my case studies, I looked for institutions that have significant displays of Communist history, which are marketed on the tourist trail, and which provide key textual materials in English (i.e. labels, panels, printed catalogues, websites, and promotional products). Additionally, I sought to analyze museums which have not been the focus of extensive study in order to expand the literature beyond the main institutions which have been researched over the last three decades. Based on these criteria, I chose not to investigate the aforementioned *Alltag* museums in eastern Germany (as they are not aimed at foreign tourists) nor well-known museums, such as the DDR Museum in Berlin and the House of Terror in Budapest, both of which have been studied in great detail. Upon ruling these out, the Museum of Communism in Prague, Czechia, and the Museum of Life Under Communism in Warsaw, Poland, were ultimately chosen as case studies.

3.3.2 Display analysis

As examined in the literature review (see chapter 2, section 2.3), existing museum representations of Communist history put forth multiple truths about life in the former Bloc, with each one aiming to establish their respective "contentions and positions" (Whitehead 2016a: 3) about Communist history as "singular truths" (ibid.). The case study museums

selected for this project are no exception. In his work on display analysis, Whitehead argued that "the ability to decode, deconstruct and denaturalize" (ibid.) is vital for understanding how these constructed truths influence museum visitors. It is with this assertion that I turned to display analysis as a key method for examining the construction and interpretation of my case studies' version(s) of truth regarding the Communist past in Central and Eastern Europe. I adhere to Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason's definition of display as "a technology for constructing knowledge and for theorizing about the world or aspects of the world," (2012: 48), and I reject the traditional view that museums are a mirror onto which the existing world is reflected (for critiques of this view, see Hall 1997; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Whitehead 2009; Black 2012; Whitehead 2016a; Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason 2012).

Working within a framework of social constructionism, Whitehead contended that knowledge is far from absolute, and that contrary to the historical perception of museums as propagators of single truths, museum displays are, in fact, a "political, public production of propositional knowledge intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects" (Whitehead 2016a: 2). This has significant implications for display analysis, the purpose of which becomes "to expose the techniques and contingencies of that knowledge production and then to seek to understand the epistemological choices made and positions taken, whether consciously or not, as political ones" (ibid.). It is the intention of this study, therefore, to identify and analyze the "techniques and contingencies" (Whitehead 2016a: 2) of knowledge production so as to better examine its effects on visitors' meaning-making.

As an initial guide of what to observe during my site visits, I chose to use Mason's (2008) Exhibition Analysis Model & Evaluation Tool and Margaret Lindauer's (2006) Critical Museum Visitor framework (see Appendix A). Mason's (2008) model includes examining aspects of the space, layout, and display, taking note of the interpretation, design, and media deployed by the museum, critically evaluating the messages and cultural politics of the exhibition, and taking into consideration potential visitor engagement and interest. As regards Lindauer's notion of the critical museum visitor, questions around the social relations of power are brought into focus (2006: 205). According to Lindauer, a critical museum visitor is thus someone who "notes what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purposes. She or he also explores what is left unspoken or kept off display. And she or he asks, who has the most to gain or the most to lose from having this information,

collection, or interpretation publicly presented?" (2006: 204). The benefit of this framework is that it accounts not simply for what is present and observable but also what is not present, why that may be, and what is communicated as a result. These frameworks ultimately provided a structure for organizing my initial observations and understandings of the exhibitions, which I later built upon during my in-depth analysis of the displays using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. I address this in greater detail in section 3.4 below.

3.3.3 Museum tours

As Inga Specht and Franziska Loreit (2021) argued in their recent scoping review, the role of tour guides in tourism and museum studies is an extensive area of scholarship which has been investigated across a wide range of disciplines. Writing only a few years prior, Matthew Ferguson, Kevin Walby, and Justin Piché (2016) introduced their research on penal history museums in Canada with an overview of some of the leading studies on tour guiding, beginning with influential work published in the early 1980s. These include Erik Cohen's (1985) typology of guides published almost four decades ago, which divided them into original guides, animators, tour leaders and professional guides.

In Cohen's view, the original guide and animator fall under what he refers to as the "leadership sphere," with the former concerned with instrumental activities, such as ensuring "the smooth accomplishment of the tour" (1985: 11), and the latter overseeing the "cohesion and morale of the touring party" (ibid.: 12). Tour leaders and professional guides, on the other hand, fall under the "mediatory sphere" (ibid.: 14). Tour leaders, according to Cohen, are meant to serve an interactional role, whereby they "function as a middleman between his party and the local population, sites and institutions, as well as touristic facilities" (ibid.: 14). Lastly, professional guides fulfil a communicative role, engaging in activities of selection, information provision, interpretation, fabrication (ibid.: 14-16). According to Ferguson, Walby, and Piché (2016), Cohen's typology has dominated tourism and museum studies over the last forty years, though it is not the only lens through which tour guiding has been examined.

Ferguson, Walby, and Piché (2016) themselves drew on the "taxonomy of storytelling" developed in the early 2010s by Jeroen Bryon, which encompasses official, alternative, entrepreneurial or relational guides. Briefly, official guides are concerned with promoting a romanticized, positive image of their destination, stress its uniqueness and

beauty, and focus on general history. Alternative guides present more layered stories which cover both the history of the destination as well as modern life; negativity is not avoided as it is by official guides. Entrepreneurial guides aim to be entertainers, focusing primarily on the positive but also the negative "as long as it is spectacular" (Bryon 2012: 37). Lastly, relational guides are often locals who showcase daily life "as it is," taking visitors to places which are personally important to the guide and telling stories which are of interest to them (Bryon 2012: 33-40).

Bryon's classification is indeed appealing, particularly when considering the influence of storytelling on knowledge production, as the present study does. As I will show in the following chapters, my time with the tour guides at the case study museums was dedicated to observing how they steered me through the space, what they chose to focus on, and what stories and historical facts they told along the way. This overlaps with Ferguson, Walby, and Piché's discussion on the spatial and ethical considerations of tour guiding, which has to do with how guides produce or frame certain sites as "sacred" (2016: 479); that is, how they "verbally enshrine" certain sites by providing particular information (ibid.). To demonstrate this, the authors highlighted Macdonald's research on tour guiding at the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg, where the scholar observed guides encoding "preferred readings" of the site during their work (2006: 123) that would encourage visitors to "avoid glorification of the genocidal regime" (Ferguson, Walby, and Piché 2016: 479).

It is here that we can begin to see what Ferguson, Walby, and Piché referred to as "tricky spatial politics" (2016: 479). This is because amidst the diverse roles tour guides can take on (Cohen 1985) and the varying strategies they can employ in their work (Bryon 2012), tour guiding is, at its heart, a performance. In their review of the field, Ferguson, Walby, and Piché in fact noted a recent turn towards researching the performative role of tour guide, which investigates how guides' actions "shape the perceived meanings and interpretations of sites" (2016: 478). To underscore their point, they cited Overend, who wrote that the guide "is at once a performer and an interpreter, at the centre of the experience" (cited in Ferguson, Walby, and Piché 2016: 478). Specht and Loreit summarized this position when they wrote that guides simultaneously deliver and interpret content, mediate enjoyable interactions between visitors and exhibitions, and foster emotional and intellectual connections, all while deciding the route and objects to be focused on (2021: 97). These

actions are even more intriguing to observe when the content of the tour is personal for the guide.

Indeed, an additional consideration when deciding to bring tour guiding into this thesis was the positionality of the guides in relation to the museum content. This has been explored rather extensively in museums and heritage sites which focus on difficult history, especially at sites where those affected by such history serve as guides (Ferguson, Walby, and Piché 2016; Banaszkiewicz 2017; Stach 2021; Ballis 2022). In such circumstances, Anja Ballis argued, it is "important to consider [the tour guides'] role as facilitators, too. In this context, we have to understand tour guides both as subjects shaping history and 'objects' shaped by institutions" (2022: 2). As "subjects shaping history," the guides are in a unique position of power when it comes to shaping and authenticating certain interpretations of history.

While guides without such first-hand experience also hold power through their position as experts, those that personally experienced the history they are speaking of add a richness to the interpretation by being able to provide personal anecdotes alongside historical facts. They are also able to share their unique views on the subject, which Ferguson, Walby, and Piché argued has important implications for the "perceived authenticity of narratives and displays" (2016: 477). At the same time, it is important not to mistake the anecdotes tour guides provide as transparent window onto the past, for these are always told in relation to the exhibition around them. Scholars have pointed to these issues to highlight the risk in depending on the recollections of tour guides for a factual account of history. De Jong asserted that any medium used by a museum, tour guides included, "must necessarily be adapted to the rules of exhibition" (2018: 162), while Noah Shenker, in his work on Holocaust testimonies, argued that "the presence of human witnesses is ultimately subordinate to the museum's 'official' account of Holocaust history" (2015: 62).

I took one tour in each museum during my second site visit in November 2022. Both sites offer tour with certified guides, and those I was led around by were Czech and Polish. During my time with them, I took note of how they constructed their tours and what knowledge they deemed most important to communicate. I was keen to observe, as Dicks wrote, how they "constrain the movements of tourists by channelling them into pre-selected enclaves, directing their gaze towards certain sights rather than others and

ensuring their conformity to particular itineraries" (2004: 56). Furthermore, I wanted to see how they authenticated their tours to visitors beyond the natural authority they held as guides. In doing so, I took note of reminiscences and anecdotes (Dicks 2004) that lent credence to the exhibitions.

3.3.4 Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews as a means for investigating visitor experiences in museums of Communism amongst foreigners, and more specifically, how visitors' engagement with constructed truth affects meaning-making. The benefit of employing interviews in my research is that the method closely aligns with the tenets of social constructionism, in so far as they allow me to, as Kathy Charmaz claimed, elicit participants' "definitions of terms, situations, and events" (2006: 32). In carrying out interviews, participants' own words become the data with which to investigate the assumptions and meanings they associate with Communist history in CEE as well as what occurred during their time in the museum and how they recalled the visit in our interview. This approach is supported by Yin, who argued that interviews give researchers the ability to ask participants directly "about their interpretations and opinions […] insights, explanations, and meanings related to certain occurrences" (2018: 119).

The prevalence of interviewing in qualitative research has meant that authors have written a great deal on the definition, techniques, and rationales behind the method, including Yin (2016, 2018), Marshall and Rossman (2016), Silverman (2017), and Grix (2019). While their terminology varies, each author offered a valuable framework for designing my interviews. I opted for what Grix (2019) referred to as the semi-structured interview (Yin [2016] termed this "qualitative interview," while Marshall and Rossmann [2016] adhere to Patton's [2002] use of "interview guide or topical" approach). Semi-structured interviews stand apart from structured and unstructured interviews within Grix's categorization, which sees the former as too rigid and not allowing for deeper exploration, while the latter are too loose and unfocused (2019: 120-121). Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, provide for a degree of flexibility, as the researcher comes prepared with a list of questions or topics they would like to ask, but leaves room for following lines of inquiry that were not initially planned for (ibid.). This flexibility came to define my interviews, which yielded a rich and varied amount of information, despite the general uniformity in questions.

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The complex questions and risks that can arise when conducting interviews have also been addressed by many authors. David Silverman, in particular, spoke at length about the analytic issue of focusing on participants' perceptions of the topic(s) at hand, asking, "How far is it appropriate to think that people attach a single meaning to their experiences? In this case, may there not be multiple meanings of living in the community, represented by what people say to the researcher, to each other, to carers, and so on?" (2017: 100). In such cases, Silverman reminded the researcher to consider carefully the ultimate use of interview responses; that is, whether they "are to be treated as giving direct access to 'experience' or as actively constructed narratives" (2017: 100). With regards to the interview data gathered in this study, what resulted were the latter, or narratives which were constructed by the participant over the course of our conversation. Indeed, Kim Etherington asserted that any account of one's experience is a reconstruction, "*remembered* and told at a particular point in their lives, to a particular researcher/audience and for a particular purpose" (2013, original emphasis). At the same time, the nature of the semi-structed interviews were such that full conversations between myself and the participants emerged, rather than a question-and-answer type of exchange. As a result, the narratives themselves were co-constructed (Wengraf 2001; Marshall and Rossman 2016; Yin 2016).

It is also important to note that scholars have shone a light on the use of narratives in interviews as indicative of the cultural repertoire possessed by participants. According to Mirka Koro-Ljungber, individuals have agency in constructing narratives, but they are nonetheless restricted by "a particular set of narrative resources that are at hand" (2013: 301) for them to draw upon. Similarly, Etherington argued that narratives contain "complex patterns, descriptions of identity construction and reconstruction, and evidence of social discourses that impact on a person's knowledge creation from specific cultural standpoints" (2013). This does not mean, however, that these narratives are simply windows onto the interviewees' culture. Indeed, to recall Etherington's point, if we consider individuals' accounts as something told in a particular moment to a particular researcher, then this "has a bearing on *how* stories are told, *which* stories are told and how they are presented/interpreted" (2013). In other words, they are relational, or, as Gergen and Gergen described it, "discursive actions" (2006: 118).

Returning once again to Etherington (2013), her argument that accounts are reconstructions leads us to an additional risk associated with interviews as a research

method; that is, the subjectivity inherent in responses. For this study, however, such subjectivity is exactly the point. Marshall and Rossmann have argued that participants can easily fall into a case of "recalling selectively, focusing on subsets of experience, filling in memory gaps through inference, and reinterpreting the past" (2016: 300), but it is precisely this outcome that this study aims to examine. As such, I have not purposely addressed this issue through techniques such as asking respondents about their views multiple times or in multiple ways, so as to corroborate their answers (Yin 2018), or verifying their answers with other data sources (Yin 2016; Marshall and Rossmann 2016; Silverman 2017).

With regards to how my participants were chosen, a mix of purposive and random sampling was used. To return to Bryman's definition of the former, I purposely recruited exclusively foreign visitors as these were the participants that were "relevant to the research questions […] being posed" (2012: 714). As this study aims to bring attention to the experiences foreign visitors can have in museums of Communism, expanding the conversation beyond the typically held belief that such visitors cannot inherently "read" these museums' messages (Petkova-Campbell 2010; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Apor 2014), it was therefore necessary to restrict recruitment to visitors who were not raised in a Communist or former Communist country. Beyond this requirement, sampling was random in so far as I opted to speak to anyone who answered my recruitment call.

Over the course of the study, I moved away from my original plan to interview visitors on site, including walk-throughs of the exhibition followed by semi-structured interviews, and instead chose to recruit and speak to past visitors entirely online. This choice was motivated primarily by the Covid-19 pandemic and the slow return of tourists following the easing of travel restrictions, as well as the amount of time and money that would have been required for such in-depth interviews. A recruitment poster was thus published online on 22 July 2022. For this phase of the project, I requested to join 70 Facebook groups dedicated to living in and travelling to Prague, Czechia, Warsaw, and Poland. More specifically, there were 37 groups for Prague and Czechia and 33 groups for Warsaw and Poland. Of these, 21 Prague and Czechia groups approved my request to post and only seven Warsaw and Poland groups approved my request. This may perhaps explain why I received a greater number of participants wanting to speak to me about the MoC in Prague.

Initially, the aim was to recruit exclusively foreign residents in these locations, primarily as this was 1) in line with the purpose of my study (that is, to speak with foreign visitors), and 2) because I assumed there would be more Facebook groups dedicated to expatriates. This assumption was based on my personal experience of living as an expat in several European cities, during which I have observed expats congregating around these types of online groups as a means to connect to other foreigners and seek advice about life in the country. After one week of the recruitment poster being made public, however, during which I received very few responses, I grew concerned that I had perhaps not cast the net wide enough. I thus made the decision to open recruitment to any foreigners who had ever visited the case study museums, including those who did so on holiday, so long as they were from non-Communist or non-former Communist countries.

After expanding the recruitment parameters, I then published the poster on additional sites such as Twitter, TripAdvisor, and Reddit. Unfortunately, the poster was flagged as spam on the latter two websites and taken down. Subsequent attempts to publish them resulted in the same outcome. I also contacted six tour groups in Prague and five in Warsaw that offered Communism-themed tours which included a visit to the museums to ask if they could share my poster with their clients. Only one of these responded positively, while two declined to help. For this reason, much of my recruitment centred on the aforementioned Facebook groups.

As of November 2022, a total of 16 people had responded to my recruitment poster, five of whom I successfully recruited. While some did not respond to my follow-up email asking to arrange a time to speak, others dropped out when learning there would be no compensation for their time. One withdrew for medical reasons. The make-up of these participants is as follows:

Name (pseudonyms)	Age	Country of origin	Case study museum
Jack	41	United States	Museum of Life Under Communism
Sarah	54	United Kingdom	Museum of Communism
Chris	38	United States	Museum of Communism
Gianmarco	37	Italy	Museum of Communism
Carol	60	United States	Museum of Life Under Communism

Table 1 List of recruited participants

Carol was a tourist to Warsaw while the other four were full-time residents whose time living in their respective countries ranged from five months to seven years. While participation was open to anyone (with the aforementioned exception that they were not from a Communist or former Communist country), I am acutely aware that those ultimately recruited were Western foreign visitors. The analysis and conclusions presented in this thesis are thus not representative of a global audience. Though this is a small selection of participants, the aims of the study are such that the rich and varied data that emerged from such in-depth interviews proved significant nonetheless.

The interviews, conducted over Zoom in Autumn 2022, lasted roughly 30 minutes on average, though one participant spoke for almost two hours. To structure my conversations with participants, I developed an interview protocol, which divided the questions I intended to ask into three sections: "Background," "The Visit," and "Reflections". I aimed to keep the questions as open-ended as possible, and avoided closed questions such as their name, age, and where they were from. This information was instead gathered in the sign-up form. To open our conversation, I adhered to Bryman's suggestion to ask "questions that are more likely to be salient to respondents […] early in the interview schedule, so that their interest and attention are more likely to be secured" (2012: 221). As can be seen in Appendix B, I chose to start the interview with an open invitation for them to tell me about what brought them to Poland or Czechia. This had the added benefit of serving as a warm-up question which aimed to make the participants more comfortable.

The main part of the interview was open-ended, during which I asked them to talk about their museum visit. I instructed them to begin with whatever came to mind first and to talk about whatever parts of the museum they wanted to. With a primary aim of this thesis being to investigate how visitors make meaning in the museum, this invitation enabled me to explore the "interpretive strategies and repertoires that visitors perform throughout the fluid, variable, and contingent processes of meaning-making" (Schorch 2015: 437). As participants spoke, I took notes of things I could probe further (Gillham 2000; Magnusson and Marecek 2015; and Silverman 2017) as well as prompts should the conversations have come to standstill (Gillham 2000). These notes also served as a basis for my follow-up questions. For the latter, Wengraf (2001) proposed a simple template in which to write down a topic that comes up repeatedly, followed by a column with the examples – using exact wording of participants – followed by another column with potential follow-up

questions. However, the speed and flow of the conversations made such an organized approach difficult to maintain, and so I adhered solely to writing down examples using the exact wording of the participants.

Lastly, I closed the interview by asking participants to reflect on if – and if so, how – their views of Communism have changed since visiting the museum. Charmaz (2002) called for ending interviews with a reflection-prompting question as such, though her suggestion was originally made within the context of a grounded theory study. That said, her assertion is equally applicable here, in that as an aim of this study is to explore what Schorch referred to as a "dialogical negotiation of knowledge" (2015: 437); that is, what occurs when the visitors' prior understandings of Communism encounter curator-mediated exhibitions about the same topic – such a question was intended to be a chance for participants to express a "higher level of reflexivity leading to the transformation of prior meanings, the development of new understandings, and the growth of the self" (Schorch 2015: 451).

3.4 Thematizing the data

In the previous section, I discussed the methods of data collection I applied to this research; that is, a case study approach with display analysis, guided tours, and visitor interviews. I now turn to the methods of analysis I employed on the resulting data sets, the bulk of which were analyzed using thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013; 2014). Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). In other writings, the authors have expanded the definition to describe themes as "patterns of meaning" (2014; 2017) and to refer explicitly to analysing qualitative data (2014). I will discuss my use of thematic analysis in more detail below, but before doing so, I would like to lay out the timeline followed in analyzing the data.

Whilst understanding that analysis is an iterative process (Bryman 2012; Marshall and Rossman 2016; Yin 2016), I aimed to collect data in successive stages, each of which were to be followed by analysis before moving onto the next one. The intention of working in this manner was that each stage would inform the one that came after it. Bryman referred to this as "repetitive interplay" between data collection and analysis, with analysis starting "after some of the data have been collected, and the implications of that analysis then shape the next steps in the data-collection process" (2012: 566).

I analyzed primary and secondary sources related to the case studies before undertaking my fieldwork. These sources included the museums' official websites and social media channels, media interviews with the museums' owners, fifteen news articles about the MoC, and nine news articles about the PRL Museum. Additionally, I consulted websites within the tourism industry to better understand how the museums are marketed to the public; these were both locally focused, such as Warsaw City Break and Welcome to Prague, and internationally-recognized companies, like Lonely Planet and Get Your Guide. I also read through visitor reviews of the case studies on TripAdvisor, Facebook, Yelp, and Foursquare as well as a number of blogs in which visits to the museums were discussed (seventeen related to the MoC and eight to the PRL Museum).

This aligns in some ways with Silverman's recommendation to analyze data that is already in the public sphere (2017: 318) and is seen as an approach that allows students to refine their methods of analysis before being confronted with the large datasets acquired further into the study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) similarly suggested analzying pre-existing data, which they argued serve as guidelines for subsequent data analysis. This, they said, "can be used to suggest several categories by which the data could initially be coded for subsequent analysis" (2016: 402). These sources did indeed provide me with a preliminary list of themes to look for as I analyzed my data, including the existence of the terror/everyday divide discussed in the previous chapters, the museums' intended audiences, Polish and Czech identity, political statements about the regimes, and social commentary about life under Communism.

Each of these went on to inform what I took note of during my first site visit in November 2021 as well as my subsequent analysis of the data gathered during that trip, which I carried out in the spring of 2022. This analysis from the site visit did not explicitly inform the questions I prepared for my visitor interviews, in Bryman's sense, but it did have some bearing on my analysis of the interviews, in so far as I was more attuned to whether these pre-identified themes would also be reflected in the participants' responses. The data from the secondary sources and my first trip did inform what I observed on the museum tours I participated in during my second site visit in November 2022, as well as my analysis of the guided tours.

As previously stated, the data collected was analysed according to thematic analysis. This method overlaps with the coding process seen in many other types of analysis (Bryman

2012; Silverman 2014, 2017; Marshall and Rossman 2016; Yin 2016; Cresswell and Cresswell 2018), and, as a result, has led some scholars to view it as a tool to be applied within various analytic methods (Boyatzis 1998; Ryan and Bernard 2000). Others, including Braun and Clarke, consider thematic analysis a method of analysis in its own right, whose main aim is the identification and interpretation of themes in the dataset. I follow Braun and Clarke's position, and thus analyzed my dataset thematically.

In defining thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke argued that the method is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework (though they do not claim that *no* theoretical framework is needed), but rather analysis "is seen as something created by the researcher, at the intersection of the data, their theoretical and conceptual frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, and research skills and experience" (2014: 20). This flexibility allows for researchers to commit to either data-driven (bottom-up) or theory-driven analyses (top-down), depending on the needs of their research question. With regards to this project, analysis combined elements of both approaches, using an iterative approach in which some pre-existing codes guiding the direction of my coding and the subsequent identification of themes while remaining open to finding new themes within the data.

Before addressing my process for analyzing each of the data sets, I will briefly address the two key types of themes according Braun and Clarke, which they labelled as semantic and latent. The former calls for themes to be "identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written" (2006: 84). The latter, on the other hand, goes beyond the semantic content of the data to "identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (ibid.). When working within a weak social constructionist framework, focusing on latent themes is a suitable approach, as it is an objective of this research project to identify precisely the ideas, assumptions, and even ideologies that, in my view, shaped what was expressed by participants in the interviews, but also what was found in the displays.

3.4.1 Museum site analysis

Following my return from my initial site visit, I analyzed the case study museums one at a time. I began by working my way through the museum display by display, consulting the

photographs I took during my time on site. This first part of my analysis focused primarily on the text panels and labels, taking note of the main points of each one. These became the basis of my initial codes. This process was, however, also informed by prior research on museums of Communism as well as the other primary and secondary sources I analyzed before doing my fieldwork. After going through my photographs of each museum, I grouped the initial codes into umbrella themes. As I fleshed out my main argument, I then returned to the museums' objects. I referred to the photographs I took to scrutinize where these fit into the umbrella themes, whilst also noting new themes that may have arisen when considering the text and objects in tandem.

3.4.2 Tour analysis

Upon returning from the case study museums, I uploaded my recordings of the guided tours to the encrypted online transcription service Otter.ai. As I listened to the audio, I took notes on the specific points in the exhibition my guides chose to focus on, how they authenticated their authority, and where they introduced personal anecdotes. These observations allowed me to identify prompts in the exhibition which informed what they aimed to communicate to me. In turn, I began to formulate an analysis of the process of knowledge production. Alongside this, I generated an initial list of themes which, were heavily informed by my previous analysis of the displays. As such, I took note of instances in which the guides reinforced their respective museums' approaches to representing Communist history and where in the exhibition this occurred.

3.4.3 Interview analysis

My analysis of the visitor interviews was carried out in a way similar to that of the guided tours. Following each interview, I uploaded the Zoom recording to Otter.ai, where I then listened to the audio while editing the transcript in real-time. When I finished editing the interview, I downloaded a PDF copy to be read again, this time taking detailed notes and making observations in the margins. Lastly, I read the transcripts a third time while typing up my handwritten notes and observations. I also re-read the interviews at various times whilst writing chapter 7, dedicated to the visitor responses, so as to keep them fresh in my mind. From the second reading onward, I pulled out any identified themes, alongside

quotations exemplifying these. A number of themes were identified which existed across all the interviews, regardless of which case study museum the participant visited, and it is these common themes which became the basis of my analysis presented in chapter 7.

3.5 Limitations to the study

Having begun a research project that required international travel in January 2020, my progress was inevitably impacted by the global pandemic that was declared in March of the same year. The most prominent of these impacts was the limited access to my case study sites and reduced visitor numbers, both due to national border closures and other travel restrictions imposed by my university. My original intention was to visit the museums three times in summer 2021, early 2022, and summer 2022, respectively. The first of these was to be dedicated to display analysis, the second to interviews with staff, and the third to interviews with visitors. University travel policy in the wake of the United Kingdom's third national lockdown in spring 2021 meant that no international travel could be undertaken until the 2021/22 academic year, and as a result, I did not conduct my first site visit until November 2021. At the same time I was analyzing the data collected during this visit, I attempted to contact museum staff at both institutions. After several months, I successfully reached the owners of the museums, but despite initial interest, both failed to respond to my requests to set a time for an interview. Ultimately, these limitations did not prove to be overly detrimental to the outcome of this study, even if its direction has changed over the years, but it is important to acknowledge from the outset that the project required adaptations to the originally planned methodology.

3.6 Ethics

In accordance with the requirements for ethical approval mandated by Newcastle University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, which states that research "involving *human participants* in a non-clinical setting, including questionnaire/survey, experiments, [and] observational studies [...]" (my emphasis) requires internal University Ethical approval, I applied for and was granted ethical approval on 8 April 2020. In selecting which visitors to speak to, the decision was made to exclude children. This is because of the additional ethical issues regarding interviewing individuals under the age of 18. As regards the interviewees

and tour guides, information sheets and consent forms (Appendices C-F) were given to them in accordance with University ethics policies detailing the purpose of the study, with the option to withdraw from the study at any point. All of these were returned to me signed.

In speaking with participants about the political and social ramifications of the history of the Communist regimes in Poland and Czechia, full respect was given to the views expressed by the participants, including those which challenged mine. It should be noted that whilst conducting this research, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As this occurred prior to my interviews, the event was a key topic of discussion in our conversation. I took care to respect the views of each participant regarding the invasion. Going hand-in-hand with this, I am aware that my views of Communism may differ from those of the participants, even those with whom I share a common background. Similarly, as a researcher interested in this topic, my views may have also differed from these visitors, many of whom did not hold specialist knowledge about the subject. Therefore, I endeavoured not to make personal judgements about the validity of their statements.

3.7 Reflections on positionality

Yin contended that the researcher is the instrument with which his or her research is conducted (2016: 40). As such, it is paramount to lay out the motives and background that influence me as that instrument. Indeed, in arguing that knowledge about Communism is constructed within one's social reality, I must recognize that I cannot separate my own knowledge from my social reality. As an American who grew up in the aftermath of the Cold War, I was unknowingly influenced by a deep culture of anti-Communism (Hirshberg 1993). This has borne in me specific knowledge and biases regarding the history of the Communism in the former Eastern Bloc. Though I aimed to remain aware and self-critical of my position when undertaking this research, I am mindful that I may not be fully aware of all biases within myself. As previously stated, I strived to remain non-judgemental and to keep an open mind, particularly concerning interviewees' responses, tour guides' comments, and museum displays that were in opposition with how I was raised to view Communism. It bears noting, however, that as someone interested in the subject of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, I have made conscious efforts to learn about Communist

history in order to challenge the assumptions and preconceptions with which I was tacitly raised. This has primarily been achieved through academic reading, though perhaps more impactful were visits to Communist history museums, with these ultimately becoming a starting point for my interest in knowledge production and meaning-making in such museums, inspired as I was by my own shifting understandings of the topic over time.

Overlapping with this is the language context of my time in those museums and the meaning-making which arose as a result of this. That is, I am acutely aware that my interaction with these museums has been through the English language, and that it is within this context that I have also conducted this research. Supported by the general reliability of museum translations, all the analysis presented in this thesis is centred on the English-language materials provided in my case study museums. This includes the promotional material, online interviews with the museums' owners, and, most importantly, the texts and labels which accompany the displays. My research is thus informed by the linguistic and cultural knowledge stated here.

Additionally, my position as an interlocutor in the interviews resulted in a data set that was very much co-produced by the interviewees and myself as the interviewer. If we return to Crotty's assertion that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, *being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world*, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (1998: 42; my emphasis), this acknowledges the likelihood that the knowledge that emerged from each interview is one that is dependent upon the purpose of my questioning and the story the interviewees wanted to tell in response to it (Etherington 2013).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has served two purposes. The first is that it laid out the philosophical framework within which the analysis chapters are situated, namely that of social constructionism as applied to the museum field. As previously discussed, this study seeks to examine how knowledge about Communism in Poland and Czechoslovakia is constructed in the museum, how museums become sites for defining and accessing identity, and how visitors engage with exhibitions about Communist history, bringing to bear their personal and sociocultural contexts in the process. A social constructionist position thus lends itself

well to this investigation because it provides the space to consider museums as institutions which construct stories and make truth claims for political purposes, which are informed by the sociocultural contexts in which they are found (Whitehead 2009) – in this case, post-Communist Poland and Czechia. At the same time, it offers a basis from which to examine the repertoire of meanings of my participants, which have been produced and transmitted within their respective social contexts.

The second purpose is that it presented the key methods of data collection and analysis which guided this study. The methods of data collection were selected because they best lend themselves to investigating the aims and objectives laid out in chapter 1 (see section 1.4). The case studies chosen offer an opportunity to examine in-depth instances of knowledge construction by museums whilst also benefitting from their targeting of foreign audiences, allowing me to examine the key research question this thesis seeks to answer; that is, in what ways foreign visitors engage with and make sense of Communist history in these museums. Additionally, display analysis is beneficial for understanding how knowledge is disseminated through the museum, an institution long recognized as having the power to shape meanings (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Mason 2005; Whitehead 2016a). In support of this, I return to Whitehead's assertion that decoding and deconstructing museum communication is vital as museal representations continue to "have some kind of effect on the hearts and minds of visitors who tend to trust in their singular truth and authority" (2016a: 3). Lastly, interviews are the best method for ascertaining participants' views of Communism and how they engaged with the case study museums. They are therefore crucial for discovering the extent to which they respond to messages about post-Communist identity as well as the strategies of meaning-making they employ in the process.

Analysis of the data collected during fieldwork and interviews was done following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013; 2014; 2017) method of thematic analysis, for doing so allowed me to analyse the museum data in relation to the key themes identified in existing academic literature, including the terror/everyday division, and to understand how the case study museums fit into this previously defined landscape. In this, I acknowledge the active role I played in picking out these themes, finding space for my observations in the landscape that has been defined by scholars who have come before me (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80). At the same time, employing thematic analysis also enabled me to deconstruct the

overarching narratives constructed by the case studies into manageable themes, understanding where they appeared most potently in the exhibition and how this strengthened the narratives – and truth claims – the museums have created. Applying thematic analysis to the interview and tour guide data required an active role on my part as it did for analyzing the museum display data, in so far as many of the themes identified in the latter shaped what I noticed in the former.

In conducting and analyzing the visitor interviews I strived to remain aware of the ethical implications surrounding discussions about the political and social ramifications of authoritarianism, as well as asking participants to elaborate on their ideas, assumptions, ideologies, and the social contexts that inform them. As stated above, I approached the interviews openly and refrained from making judgements about what was told to me. Doing so required me to reflect on my position as a researcher, an American, and someone who inevitably shared in the direction of the interviews. Though challenges arose at times when participants discussed views that differed significantly from my own, I returned in those moments to the social constructionist perspective which underpins this study, acknowledging that our differing repertoire of meanings could offer a more nuanced picture of museum encounters and how different meanings are made during and after museum visits. The outcomes of these interviews, as well as the site visits themselves, are presented in the following chapters. Before turning to these, however, I will present a brief overview of the museum layout so as to better set the scene for the narratives identified within the data.

Chapter 4: Understanding the museums: setting the scene

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context to the case study museums as a whole which serve as a basis for asserting the themes and narratives explored in chapters 5-7. This will be in the form of a textual walk-through of the exhibitions, with supplemental photographs where appropriate. For further visual clarity, I drew a map of each museum during my site visit. This walk-through is structured according to my own movement through the exhibitions. As I discuss further on, the displays in the MoC in Prague were numbered 1-67, and this influenced to a large degree the way I moved through the rooms. The PRL Museum in Warsaw did not have numbered displays, and so the route detailed below is how I understood the exhibition to be arranged. Both museums, including the numbered MoC, provide a significant amount of freedom of movement, and as such, I acknowledge that other visitors can approach the exhibitions different to the way I did. Nonetheless, my descriptions below aim to provide a brief introduction to the museums' layouts and the main topics found within.

4.2 Museum of Communism, Prague (MoC)

I spoke in chapter 1 of the Prague museum's relocation to its current premises in 2017. The museum underwent significant changes at this time, shifting from being object-dependent to more pared-down and concise. In doing so, the museum team significantly reduced the number of objects on display and placed more focus on the text panels as the main driver of communication (see, for example, Figs. 3-7 below). The exhibition is divided into three "acts": Dream, Reality, and Nightmare. This overall format was designed for the original museum by the Czech-born documentary filmmaker Jan Kaplan and was then carried over to the new site (Hill 2001; Newsweek 2002; Bukovská 2020).

The result can be defined as a thematic display with chronological elements, according to the classification outlined by Mason, Robinson, and Coffield (2017: 169). In their examination of "classic" exhibition genres, the authors identified thematic displays as one of the most frequently-used genres, alongside chronological, monographic, and national, though they acknowledge that many more exist and that overlap occurs between

them, as is the case in the MoC. Indeed, though the exhibition is largely thematic in nature, as I will detail below, it opens with the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and the ends with the fall of Communism in 1989, creating a chronological thread that runs throughout. As regards the thematic layout, Mason, Robinson, and Coffield contended that this comprises "displays that group and arrange objects according to key ideas, principles, questions or features" (2017: 169). We may consider "Dream," "Reality," and "Nightmare" as the "key ideas" the authors referred to, and that the curators have designed an exhibition that invites visitors to consider the displays in relation to these three acts.

As stated above, the exhibition contains 67 displays, which are spread across five sections:

Section 1

The first room (Fig. 3) in the exhibition is dedicated to the birth of the First Czechoslovak Republic and its founding hero, Tomáš Masaryk, before moving on to the threat of war in the 1930s, the Munich Agreement, the subsequent Nazi occupation, and the post-war reprisals against ethnic Germans. There is also a short interlude focusing on the "Fathers of Communism," separate from the main topic but linked by the mention of low living and working standards to highlight the attractiveness of Communist promises in the 1920s and 30s.

Section 2

The second room (Fig. 4) details the rise of Communism and the Soviet Union's influence in the country. Topics include the 1946 elections, nationalization efforts, and the 1948 February coup that solidified the Communists' hold on power. One half of this room is dedicated to the role of the Soviet Union in the Cold War as well as Czechoslovak Communists' emulation of their Soviet leaders. This is further emphasized by the final display in this section about Prague's Stalin Monument, which dominated the capital's skyline between 1955 and 1962.

Section 3

The third room (Fig. 5) is the largest space in the exhibition, with 22 displays (compared to five in the first and second rooms, 19 in the fourth space, and 16 in the fifth space). The

main section within the "Reality" act, this room is thematic, with topics including economic issues, leisure, urbanisation, shops and business, healthcare, factory work, mandatory parades, Stalinist culture, and propaganda. The final stretch of this space overlaps with the start of the fourth section – also the beginning of the Nightmare act – by way of a corridor with displays corresponding to their respective acts opposite one another on either wall. The final topics on the "Reality" side of the space comprise the police, military and civil defence training, the eradication of voluntary associations, and the People's Militia.

Section 4

The fourth section (Fig. 6) is divided into two spaces and the aforementioned corridor. This part of the exhibition is dedicated to topics such as escape attempts, the Secret Police, religious persecution, punishment – both execution and labour camps – and the border. In a stark change of design, the walls are black, the lights dimmed, and the ceiling low. There is a mock interrogation room (Fig. 16 below) which has been installed on its side, creating a dizzying sensation. Accompanying this is an audio track playing the sounds of someone attempting to cross a border fence before being captured and interrogated. Combined, these elements may elicit a sense of discomfort, which aligns with the "Nightmare" title of the act.

Section 5

In the final section (Fig. 7), the bulk of which is separated into two alcoves, visitors come back to the white-walled, brightly lit interior present in the first three sections. There is a return to the chronological layout seen in the first section, with topics that run through the liberalization of the 1960s, the Soviet invasion in 1968, the normalization period following the crackdown, Gorbachev's "openness" (*glasnost*) and "restructuring" (*perestroika*) policies in the late 1980s, and the 1989 Velvet Revolution. The section is not strictly chronological in nature, however, as there are also topics dedicated to school under Communism, shops, the Chernobyl disaster, dissidents, censorship, the Berlin Wall, and the "martyrs" Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc, two students who publicly set themselves on fire in protest of the 1968 Soviet

invasion. The final display is dedicated to Václav Havel, a dissident and the first president of Czechoslovakia following the end of Communism.

Figure 3 Interior of the Museum of Communism – Section 1
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 4 Interior of the Museum of Communism – Section 2
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 5 Interior of the Museum of Communism – Section 3
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 6 Interior of the Museum of Communism – Section 4
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 7 Interior of the Museum of Communism – Section 5
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The layout of these sections can be considered open yet very ordered (see museum maps below, Figs. 8-12). Each one leads to the next, with no comfortable option of moving back and forth between them. The displays run around the edges of the rooms, with very few instances of free-standing objects or displays situated away from the walls. Moreover, each of the displays are numbered, making it easier to follow the exhibition route as it was laid out by the curators (for a detailed visual of where the individual displays are located in the museum, see Appendix G, my hand-drawn maps of the exhibition space). It should be said, however, that the numbered sequence may not be immediately obvious, as the numbers are quite small. Visitors could thus find themselves moving in a different direction within each section. This was the case during my initial visit, when I walked the third section "backwards," having not noticed the numbers. That said, I do not feel anything was lost by doing so. It was only upon conducting an in-depth analysis of the text panels that I saw how ideas were built upon from one display to the next, thus understanding the order of the displays. But not every display builds on the one before it, and as such, the information presented was not confusing or out of context when encountered in a different order.

As previously stated, the displays can be viewed as corresponding to their respective acts. According to the museum's official exhibition map (Fig. 12), the Dream act comprises the first section (marked with a blue bullet point on the map), while Reality encompasses the second and third sections in addition to three mock reconstructions in the final section (indicated with a red bullet point). Nightmare includes the fourth section and most of the fifth (identified by a black bullet point). It is important to note that the map does not list each display but rather a mix of specific displays and general topics. For example, "The Spartakiad" and "Tales of Escape" are displays, while "Leisure" and "The Army – Socialism's Watchdog" are topics around which nearby displays coalesce.
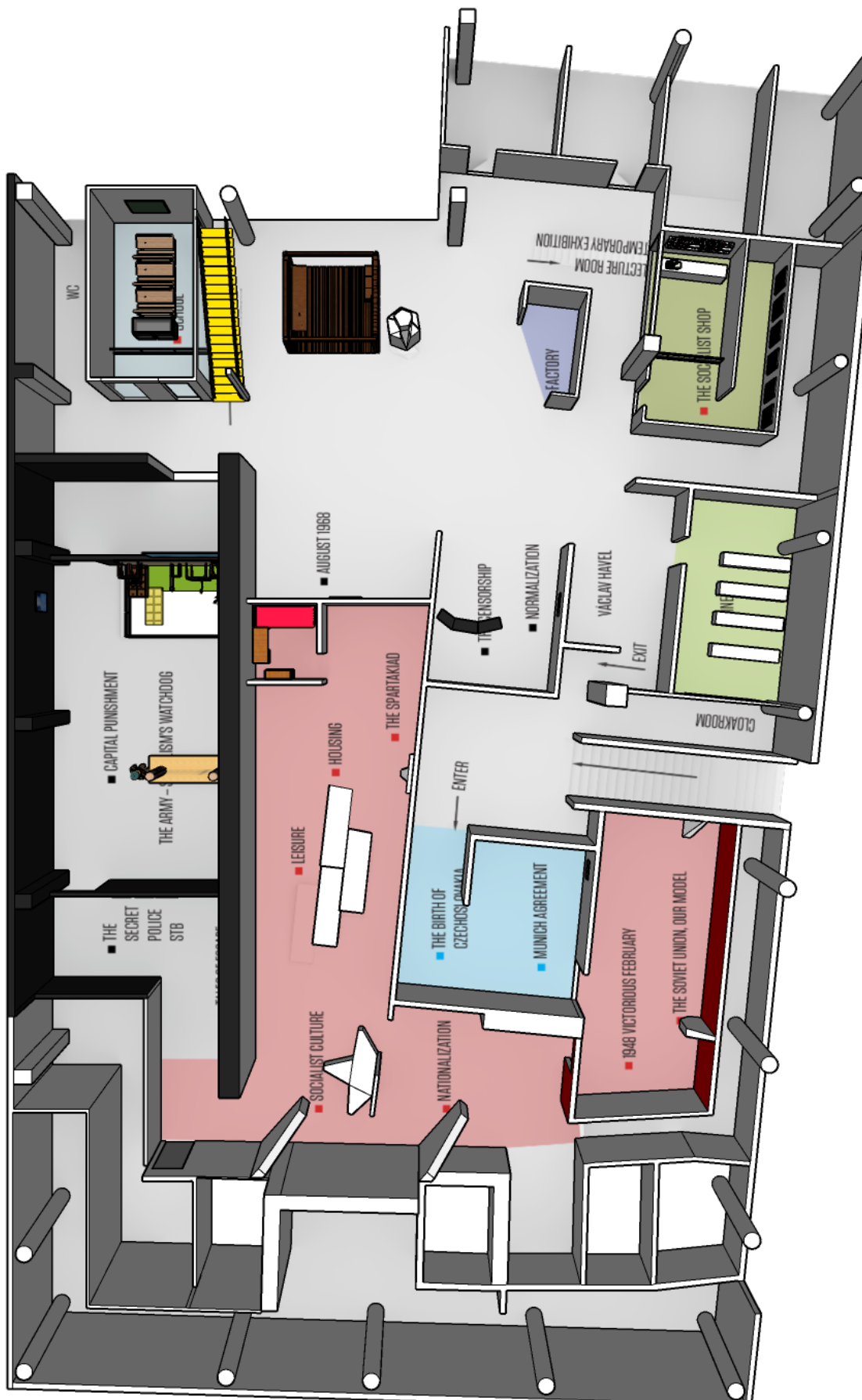
Figure 8 Top-down perspective of exhibition space
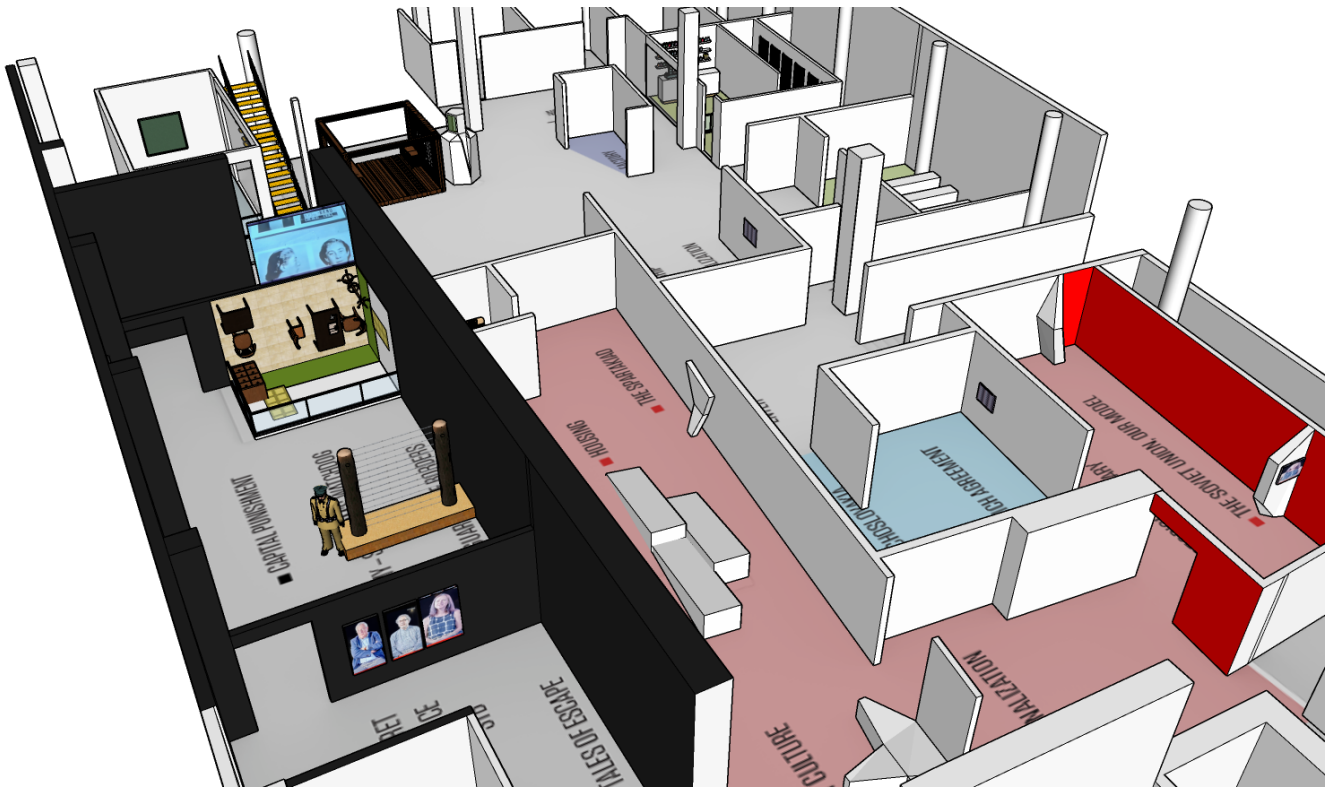
Figure 9 3D perspective of exhibition space

Figure 10 3D perspective of exhibition space

Figure 11 3D perspective of exhibition space
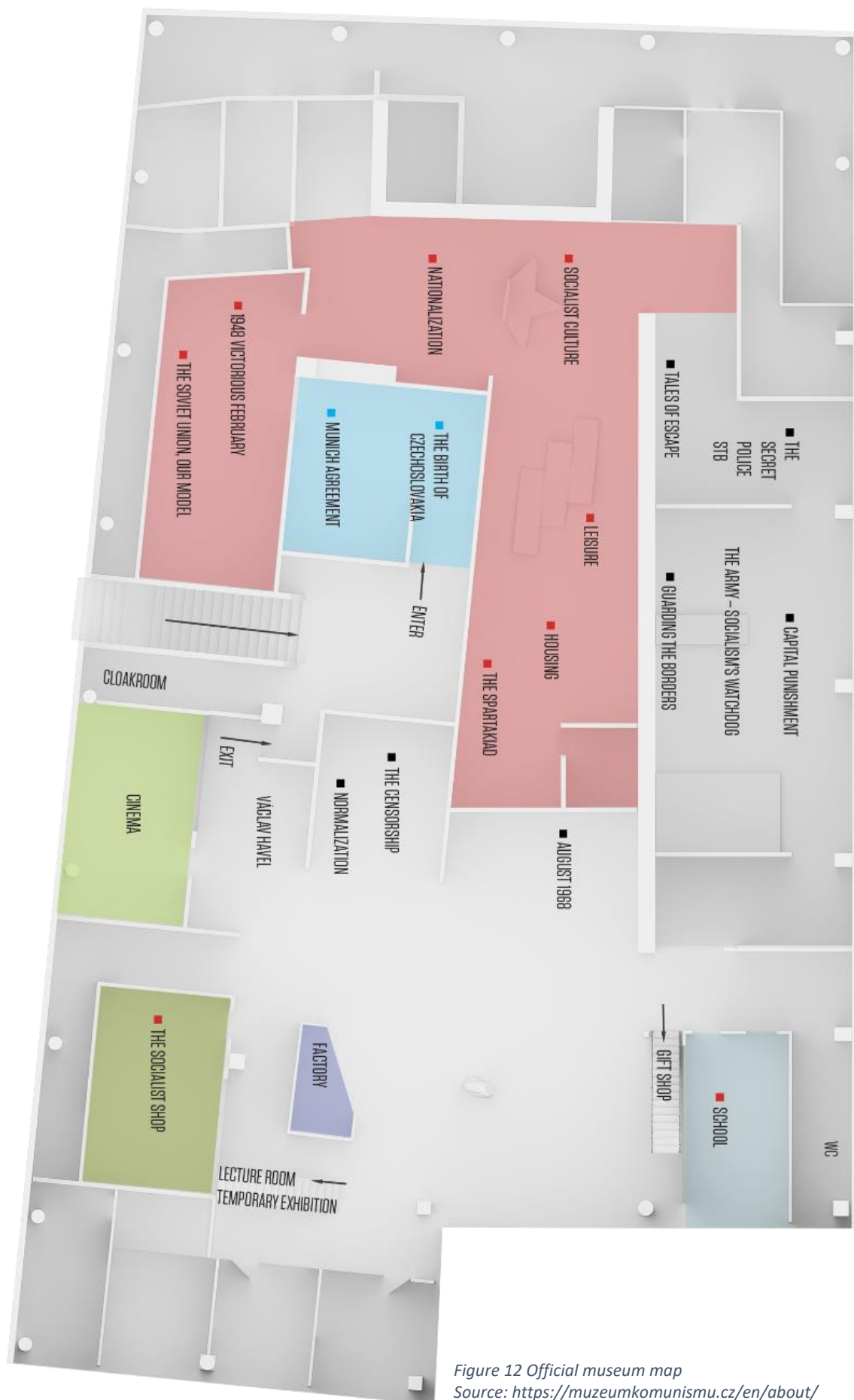
Figure 12 Official museum map
Source: https://muzeumkomunismu.cz/en/about/

In my analysis of the museum, however, I found that the new site does not lend itself well to the three-act narrative originally designed for the first iteration of the museum. Indeed, despite the divisions laid out on the map, there are some instances in which the displays do not appear to correspond to their acts. This is most evident in the final section, officially assigned to the Nightmare act according to the map, which starts with "August 1968" and includes the Velvet Revolution. The mock school room and grocery store are classed as "Reality" along with the mock factory, though the latter is not categorized as belonging to any of the three acts on the museum's website and on-site maps available to visitors (the latter of which is only available in Czech). The sole place where its categorization is stated – in the form of a red bullet – can be found in an English-language wall map at the entrance to the museum.

Furthermore, the factory reconstruction is not accompanied by a numbered text panel, or indeed labelling of any kind, and its placement in the final section appears to fill an empty space rather than be integrated into the ordered displays that surround it. In light of this, it is my view that rather than serving to further any messages about the reality of daily life under Communism, which was the focus of the third section and many displays prior to it, the factory was a transplant from the old museum that is more of an interesting photo opportunity than it is a key part of the exhibition. Were this to be the case, however, its placement creates a rupture in the flow of the museum route, confounding the message of a victorious Velvet Revolution by thrusting visitors back into the gloomy workspace of a dirty factory floor. Thus, in applying the three acts to the new site, tensions were created between the displays and their respective acts in some places that complicates understandings of the displays' message(s).

With regards to the mock school room and the grocery store, it is possible to see how the affordances of the museum space would require these two reconstructions to be in these particular locations in the museum. As can be seen in figure 13, the majority of the exhibition was installed in a largely open space, with free-standing walls delineating the different sections. The mock school room and the grocery store, on the other hand, were fitted into what appear to be two existing spaces on the exhibition floor. Nonetheless, their presence amongst the Nightmare displays creates a dissonance in the message(s) that is not

addressed by the museum. This muddled messaging is a consistent feature in the final section.

Figure 13 Bird's-eye view of the exhibition
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The final twelve displays cover a range of topics that fall under the umbrellas of all three acts, though are categorized by the museum as belonging solely to "Nightmare". They contain elements that coincide with earlier displays, such as messages of hope but also oppressive policies and propaganda. The conflict between these displays and their officially assigned act has implications for the meanings visitors could make when engaging with them. Indeed, as Jean D. Wineman and John Peponis wrote, our perceptions are formed and understandings shaped by the arrangement of exhibition elements, including their connection, separation, and grouping (2010: 86). That said, it is also important to point out that the museum does not go to great lengths to signpost these three acts in the exhibition, but instead publicizes them only on the museum's map (Fig. 12) and on the website. It is also written on the wall outside the main exhibition space, but no context is provided. As such, the official three-act arrangement of the exhibition may have no substantial bearing on the visitors' understanding of the museum, but it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the framework established by curators.

Given the reduction in objects during the museum's re-development in 2017 and that the emphasis is now placed on text, the displays rarely contain more than three types of display component, which I categorize as objects, photographs, videos, and video testimonies. Each display contains a title and text panel three-to-four paragraphs long dedicated to a different topic. In addition to the text, all but five of the exhibition's 67 displays include objects. The number of these range significantly per display. Some contain only one object, while a display dedicated to what it means to be a "typical" socialist worker (display 12, *The Socialist Hero*) features a floor-to-ceiling collection of twenty Socialist Realist paintings along with eight medals enclosed in a display case. The majority of displays, however, contain between five and ten objects. These comprise 2D materials such as posters and newspaper clippings, and 3D objects like the aforementioned paintings and medals as well as sculptures and mannequins. According to the guide with whom I toured the museum, the objects on display are historically authentic items which date to the Communist era. He mentioned this infrequently – once in response to my query about the authenticity of some paper currency on display and once unprompted when introducing the Socialist Realist paintings.

There are exceptions to this, however, some of which are openly addressed while others are not. For example, there is a mock gallows in section 4 whose label describes it as "A replica of the gallows used in the 1950s for executions" (display 43, *Persecuting the Faithful*), while earlier on the exhibition route there is a series of 1953 banknotes printed onto paper that is presented without any similar kind of labelling. Taking note of the latter example, I remain open to the possibility that reproductions and fakes may exist in the museums that are not stated as such, but as I was not able to speak with the museums' staff, I cannot confirm which elements are and are not materially or historically authentic.

In addition to the objects, the museum also makes heavy use of photographs, including physical photographs, though these are primarily presented as images printed onto the wall as decals. As I will address in chapter 5, these photographs do a great deal of work in terms of authenticating their environments as well as the topics of the displays. Other media include sixteen television screens. Of these, eleven are used to present interviews with people relevant to the displays' respective topics, nine of which belong to two displays alone, while the remaining five show pertinent images and video clips on loop.

The video testimonies are a key feature in the museum, with headphones and seating provided to encourage visitors to stop and listen.

Each testimony is unique to the screen they are displayed on and are shown on a loop. The audio is in Czech, with accompanying subtitles in English. The testimonies are of Czechoslovak citizens recounting their lives under Communism, with topics ranging from everyday life to prison camps. Five of the testimonies are directly related to the topics of the displays they are surrounded by. The remaining six are located at the end of the exhibition route in a small viewing space. Their placement lends a sense of detachment to the videos, unmoored to anything around them and giving the impression they were installed wherever there was available room in the exhibition space. Like the photographs, chapter 5 explores this detachment in greater detail.

Lastly, there are seven mock set-ups placed throughout the exhibition route: the aforementioned factory (Fig. 14) and grocery store (Fig. 15), as well as a bedroom, border fence, school room, chemical protection space, and interrogation room (Fig. 16). Models of "typical" Communist spaces is a widespread display technique in museums of this nature, most commonly used to represent the private sphere (i.e. the home) or the oppressive policies of the regime (i.e. interrogation rooms) (Kuusi 2008; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Jones 2011; Mueller 2013; Kannike and Reidla 2021). Where the MoC stands apart from other similar museums is its expansion of the private realm to include a classroom, a grocery store, and a factory, creating to an extent a new category of the "everyday life" sphere. These recreated environments are non-immersive spaces, with barriers blocking entrance so visitors can only observe them. The exception is the chemical protection space, where visitors are invited to dress in protective gear and take photos for social media.

Figure 14 Mock workshop
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 15 Mock grocery store
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 16 Mock interrogation room
Source: Samantha Vaughn

As stated, every display includes a text panel while the four additional types of display components are scattered throughout the museum, and none contain all four apart from the mock grocery store, titled *Socialist Shops*. Moreover, the museum offers neither a paper guide nor an audio guide, so visitors are expected to get most of their information from the wall texts. It is for this reason that the current study sees the text panels as the primary vehicle for communicating the museum's messages. Given the heavier emphasis on text over objects, there is a sense that the objects are relegated to a supplementary role, serving, according to Pearce, as signs which stand in "for the whole of which they are an intrinsic part" (1994: 23). It should be noted that other display components are nonetheless drawn upon at various points throughout the thesis to support my analysis. Indeed, the use and significance of some of these will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6, including photographs of important figures in Czech history at precise moments in the exhibition as well as the unsettling environs of the Nightmare section, bringing to the fore the dark nature of every object found within it. Before I do so, though, I would like to turn to the second case study, which is far more object-dependent than its Czech counterpart.

4.3 Museum of Life Under Communism, Warsaw (PRL Museum)

Like the MoC, the PRL Museum also relocated to larger premises in recent years, opening at its present site in 2019. The current exhibition covers 260 square metres and contains 27 displays. These are not numbered, however, nor does the museum provide an official map, and so these 27 displays are what I identified during my analysis. For the purposes of this study, a display in this museum is considered to be a text panel with a heading, parallel texts in Polish and English, and associated objects. The layout is almost entirely thematic (Mason, Robinson, and Coffield 2017: 169), with displays that cover a range of topics on everyday life, including sports, tourism, culture, fashion, and the automotive industry, as well as terror, food shortages, opposition groups, the Communist party, and the reconstruction of Warsaw after World War II. Additionally, there are decade-by-decade timelines running throughout the centre of the exhibition which provide short historical information.

The exhibition begins in the stairwell leading from the ticket desk to the main space. The topics found in this area are dedicated to the aforementioned opposition groups, particularly the trade union Solidarity, whose establishment in August 1980 and role in

bringing about the end of the regime in Poland in 1989 have made it a key player in the history of Polish Communism. That the museum chose to open the exhibition with 1989 rather than the beginning of Communism in Poland will be examined in chapter 6. Upon reaching a small mezzanine at the top of the stairs (Fig. 17), visitors are greeted with a brief description of the post-World War II situation and how this paved the way for the rise of Communism in the country. The text states:

"In 1945, under the agreement of the anti-Hitler coalition, Poland fell in the sphere of Soviet influence. With the blessing of Joseph Stalin, the power was taken over by the communist Polish Workers' Party (PPR).

The introduction of Moscow inspired political rule in Poland took place in the wake of the Red Army flooding the Polish territories. Political opponents were forced to leave or murdered.

In the political upheaval, the communists appealed to the ambitions of unskilled workers and peasants who were given the opportunity for social advancement and power, but were expected to be blindly obedient in return. Formation of the new government was also fostered by the urge to rebuild the country and a general sense of irreversibility of the newly introduced geopolitical system."

Figure 17 Mezzanine, Museum of Life Under Communism, Warsaw
Source: Samantha Vaughn

A combination of the below eye-level placement – where it can be ignored by visitors shuffling past, especially if there are crowds on the small mezzanine (Serrell 2015: 33) – the brevity of the text, and the simplification of the geopolitical context of Eastern Europe after World War II is indicative of the museum's approach to representing Communist history in Poland, where difficult topics are often glossed over in favour of other themes. This will be explored in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6.

At the top of the stairs, the visitor can then choose to turn left to a single display detailing statistics about life in the Polish People's Republic (and the toilets), or go to the right, up a few more stairs to the main exhibition space. Here, the displays are installed in a mostly open-plan layout, as the main part of the exhibition is located in a single, large room (Fig. 18). There are two final rooms at the far end of this space, comprising the museum café and a playroom designed to look like a nursery (Figs. 19 and 20). Lastly, two additional spaces leading off the main exhibition house a model flat and small cinema showing short propaganda films (see Figs. 21-23).

Figure 18 View of exhibition space from the café, facing towards the entrance
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 19 View of the café
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 20 Partial view of the nursery
Source: Samantha Vaughn
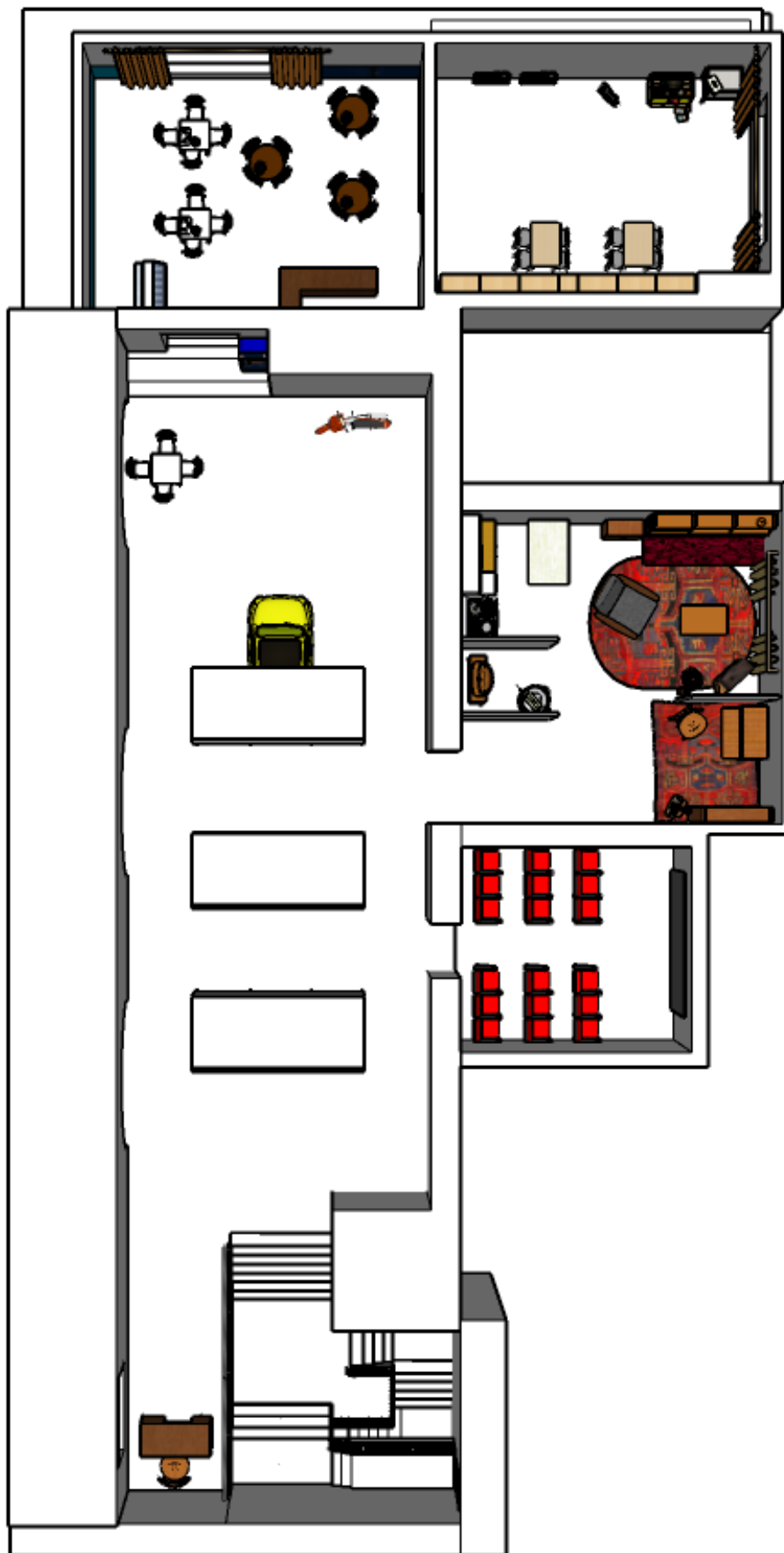
Figure 21 Top-down view perspective of exhibition space
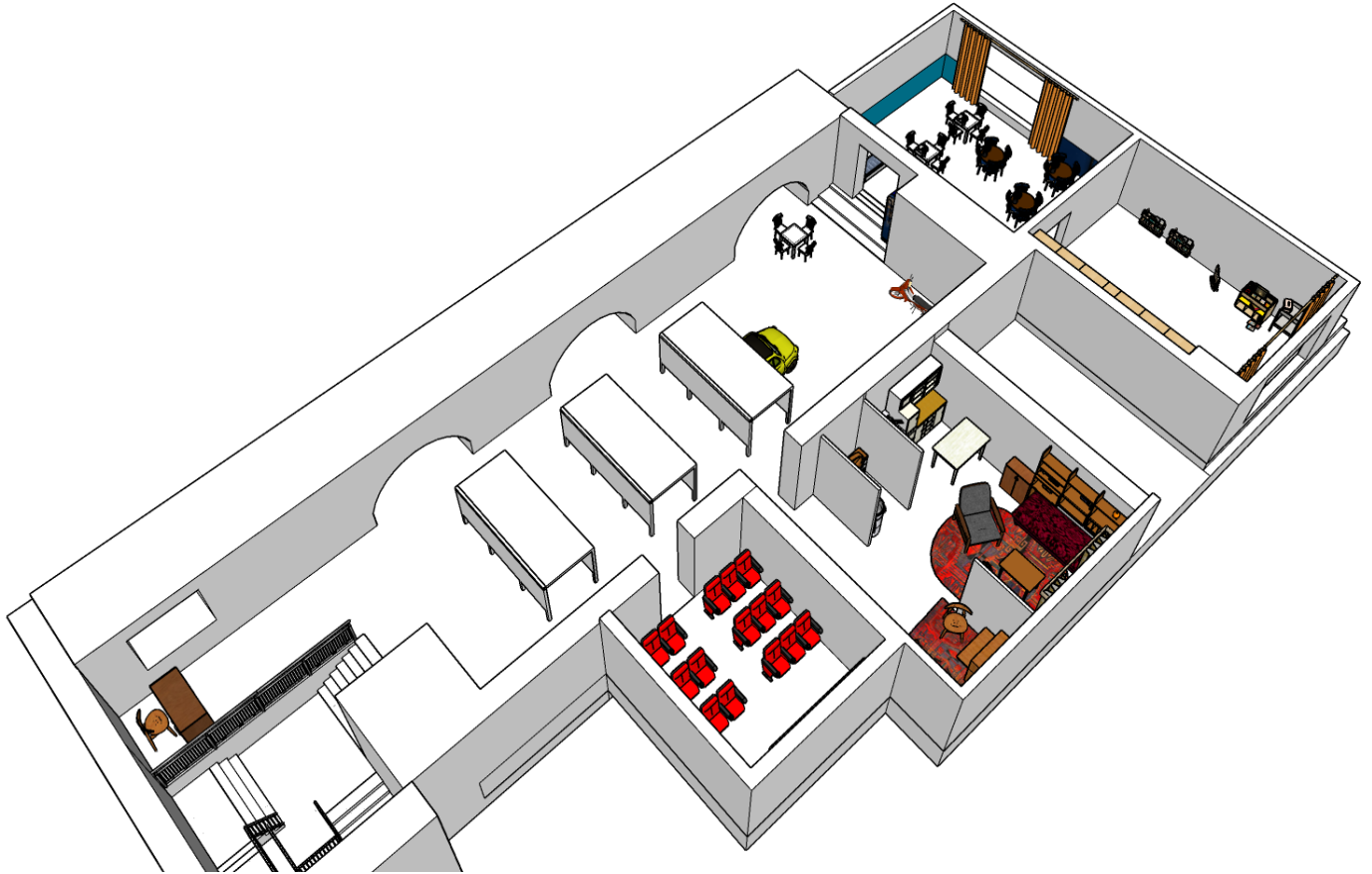
Figure 22 3D perspective of exhibition space

Figure 23 3D perspective of exhibition space

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There does not appear to be any overarching division of displays similar to the MoC's three acts (for a detailed visual of where the individual displays are located in the museum, see Appendix H, my hand-drawn maps of the exhibition space). At first glance, one might see a distinction between the displays at the start of the museum, dedicated to opposition groups, the Communist Party, and the rebuilding of Warsaw, and all those that fill the rest of the exhibition, which are devoted to daily life under Communism. This rudimentary division does not account, however, for the overlapping messages that run through the exhibition. As such, I contend that the PRL Museum does not feature any kind of overall groupings of its individual displays, but rather serves as one large exhibit about everyday life in the PRL.

In terms of the layout, the displays line the perimeter of the open room, while in the middle there are the above-referenced decade-by-decade timelines on free-standing panels. On the opposite side of these are what I describe as object corridors, as they are lined with dozens of 2D and 3D objects (Fig. 24-26). The free-standing panels running down the centre of the room create a zigzag effect as visitors wind their way through the space. During my time on site, I found that this circulation pattern does not always make for a smooth visit, as the timelines run opposite to the flow of the route. Due to this, I concluded that the exhibition can be visited in a fairly open manner. While there is an expectation to start at the front of the room and work one's way down to the café and mock nursery at the end, how one gets there is largely up to the visitor.

Coupled with the limited contextualization of the topics, this open plan further strengthens the potential for the visit to be driven by one's own interpretations. Mason, Robinson, and Coffield highlighted the capacity for such decoding when they wrote, "displays that encourage visitors to roam freely between groups of objects place emphasis upon visitors making their own connections, or upon individual objects' own stories" (2017: 173). This supports the aforementioned argument by Wineman and Peponis that visitors' understanding is shaped by "patterns of accessibility through the space of the exhibition" and the arrangement of exhibition elements" (2010: 86).

Figure 24 Timeline: 1950s and 1960s
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 25 Home goods corridor
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 26 Electronic goods corridor
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The possibility of undirected movement in the PRL Museum does not seem to limit the effects of the peripheral displays, but it could be said that the object corridors lose some of their force. My analysis showed that the three corridors relate to the displays lining the right side of the room; that is, the music players and radios link to Culture, the domestic life and house supplies are associated with the mock flat, and the groceries in the third corridor relate to the display on food shortages and rationing. What is arguably lacking here is an in-depth examination of these objects or of their use in Communist Poland. Instead, they are accompanied by minimal descriptive labels containing the name and date of the object. Given the lack of detailed explanation provided in the corridors themselves, their corresponding displays on the right side of the room are an opportunity to delve further into the topics and make connections between the objects and the texts. By walking through the exhibition freely, there is a risk that such connections will not be made. It should be noted, however, that more detailed texts alongside the objects does not imply that these connections will necessarily be made. According to Beverly Serrell and Katherine Whitney, museum visitors do not often spend much time in exhibitions – an average of twenty minutes (2024: 146) – indicating in-depth reading of text panels and labels is unlikely to be a priority to some visitors.

As regards the make-up of the displays, each contain a main text panel, one or more smaller detailed text panels, and 2D and 3D objects, though their inclusion varies from display to display. The objects located on the perimeter are primarily 2D, which could be attributed to the narrow space available and the need for things not to jut into the exhibition path. Most of the 3D objects are reserved for the object corridors. The homegrown nature of the original museum, with the owner sourcing many of the objects from his family's basement and others being donated by private individuals (*Telewizja Republika* 2019a), appears to have been maintained in the current museum, though there is evidence of acquisitions through official channels. This is particularly evident in the photographs on display, as the majority of them have been obtained from the National Digital Archives, according to their labels, and printed on large cardstock for exposition.

The object corridors contain the bulk of the donated objects. The layout, with the objects lining the walls of the corridors and accompanied by a brief descriptive label, makes them appear as what Stephanie Moser called a "visual spectacle" which defines the collection as a "treasure hoard" (2010: 27). The result of this is that it places the museum

within the category of previously existing Communist history museums dedicated to the everyday. As discussed in chapter 2 (see section 2.3.2), these institutions are noted for their preference for displaying masses of label-less objects in an effort to awaken the memories of the domestic sphere of Communism for those visitors who lived through the era. Like these earlier museums, the importance of these objects at the PRL Museum lies in the fact that they are authentic, in so far as they are materially and historically genuine. Like his counterpart at the MoC, my tour guide at the PRL Museum also commented on the authenticity of the collection. This included references to the display of Solidarity leaflets at the start of the museum, the many knick-knacks on display in the mock flat (see section 5.3.2), some newspapers announcing the outcome of the country's watershed election on 4 June 1989, and the automobile installed in the exhibition along with a collection of car manuals next to it. He did not say anything beyond mentioning that these objects were "original," but it is interesting to note that these affirmations were made at regular intervals throughout the tour, never allowing the genuineness of the collection to be far from my mind.

It could be said, then, that the exhibition may be defined as object-centred, which Moser claimed "seeks to present a wider subject area using significant parts of collections" (2010: 29). Alternatively, Graham Black's (2005) terminology encapsulates the strategies of this exhibition, which combines features of an "object display" approach as well as an "object-oriented" approach. The former, Black wrote, entails "the presentation of a collection for its intrinsic interest, with the objects expected to 'speak for themselves'," whereas the latter is one in which "the collections remain central to the displays" (2005: 275). Both are accompanied by limited information and interpretation (Black 2005: 275). As previously stated, the PRL Museum is, at times, characterized by a lack of detailed labels, or the lack of labels all together. The combination of this limited information and the broadly open layout have created an environment in which the potential for individual interpretation is foregrounded. That said, the PRL Museum does indeed make strong arguments about life in Communist Poland, which I will turn to in chapters 5 and 6.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter offered a textual – and at times, visual – description of the case studies' layouts. Both sites are relatively small, but they are nonetheless packed with an extensive

number of texts and/or objects for visitors to engage with. The MoC places much greater emphasis on text panels as a way to communicate its main messages and build its overall narratives, while the PRL Museum in Warsaw foregrounds objects with limited information provided via their labels, even if the main text panels offer adequate descriptions about their respective topics. As may have been clear from these short overviews, the museums differ in their representations of Communism. The following two chapters will explore this in more detail. In doing so, I will draw out the main themes I identified in each exhibition and build a picture of the narratives these tell.

Chapter 5: Terror and the Everyday: Modes of Authenticity

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 introduced the existing divide noted in the academic literature between representations of Communism as centring on themes of terror and oppression on the one side and those dedicated to representing a more mundane everyday on the other. The former is most notably represented by museums in the Baltic states, Romania, and Hungary (Kuusi 2008; Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2008; Apor 2012, 2014; Levick 2023), while the latter is a central approach in many museums in the former East Germany, where counter-narratives began to crop up in response to the dominant state narratives of oppression and brutality (Berdahl 2008; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Bach 2015, 2015b, 2017). This chapter explores this divide in relation to the case study museums. In particular, it investigates the extent to which their representations of Communism fit within the dichotomy highlighted above. It ultimately suggests that both museums offer a somewhat more nuanced portrayal but aspects of terror and the everyday predominate in one museum or the other due to the way the narratives are authenticated.

A key part of how this occurs is the museums' use of authenticity. That is, each draws on authenticity in its many forms to convince visitors of the validity of their representation of Communism either through the lens of terror or the everyday. As was examined in chapter 2, authenticity in tourism studies has been a point of inquiry for scholars for several decades, from Dean MacCannell's (1973) influential examination of authenticity in tourism, and particularly his arguments on staged authenticity, to subsequent expansions by Ning Wang (1999) centring on constructive authenticity. Within the adjacent fields of heritage and museum studies more specifically, significant focus has been placed on authenticity in terms of object *genuineness* and the reciprocal relationship between museums authenticating objects and objects authenticating museums (Jones 2010; de Jong 2018), as well as the effects of these on visitors' perception of authenticity (Balcerzak 2021; Wang 1999). Many of these debates have revolved around how authenticity can be defined and determined, with a general inclination towards its negotiated nature. This is particularly important in museums, whose very act of constructing messages and narratives must be made credible in some manner, whether it be through the

use of authentic components in its collection, by negotiating their authenticity through their arrangement or, as this chapter argues, both (Jones 2010). The role of visitors in the negotiation of authenticity will be examined in chapter 7.

The manner in which I approach authenticity in this chapter is situated firmly within my social constructionist approach. I hold that entities are not objective and do not have a reality external to social actors (Bryman 2012), but rather they are constructions of these actors. Within the museum, it is thus possible to contend that the variety of display components employed cannot be considered objective, and that their role in exhibitions is to aid in the construction of narratives. What follows is an analysis that considers the *genuineness* of the case studies' objects, testimonies, and photographs, but does so by examining them holistically (Moser 2010). That is, how their arrangements and presentation within the exhibitions construct authentic narratives about the terror of Communism in Czechoslovakia or everyday life under the Polish regime. In so doing, they reflect the cyclical nature of authentication described by de Jong (2018); that is, the museums authenticate the display components both as originals as well as representatives of Communist history, which enables them to authenticate the museums' narratives. There are innumerable entry points into this analysis, but I focus my analysis here on specific corners in both exhibitions.

It is important to reiterate that although the division between representations of terror and representations of the everyday persists even within the present case studies, it is not a clean one. As was shown in chapter 4, although the MoC is focused predominantly on the more oppressive elements of Communism in Czechoslovakia, it does also cover topics of everyday life such as vacations, healthcare, culture, urbanization, and shopping. Similarly, the PRL Museum offers a slightly nuanced portrayal of the Polish regime, with topics including the nation's cultural outputs, athletic prowess, booming automobile industry, and flourishing domestic production, as well as the more negative Martial Law, rationing, and inefficiency in the production of consumer goods. That said, neither museum leans into their more nuanced representations as the primary focus, with the MoC presenting its topics of everyday life within the wider frame of repressive policies, and the PRL Museum glossing over the more negative aspects of life under Communism to foreground its focus on the everyday. How they successfully minimize these instances of a balanced depiction of Communist rule has much to do with the manner in which they authenticate their

respective approaches to representing the Communist era. This is the central theme of this chapter.

5.2 Constructing terror through representations of control and oppression in the Museum of Communism, Prague

The MoC draws on a wide set of authentic display components in constructing and authenticating its approach to Communist history. In this section, I examine the Czech museum's approach to representing the former regime, which centres heavily on themes of terror and oppression. This is most notably transmitted through text, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is the primary driver of communication in the museum, though not the only one. Below, I take into consideration the many different display elements to investigate how constructions of authenticity play a role in supporting the museum's overarching approach to Communism. There are several moments in the exhibition that I could have turned to to illustrate this, but I focus here on one of the most impactful. What follows is an account of the transition between the third and fourth section of the Prague museum, where visitors move into the darkened space of the Nightmare act to learn about the most overtly terror-focused topics in life under Communism.

5.2.1 Citizen oppression and emigration

The Nightmare section as a whole is ripe for analysis when investigating how the MoC constructs a narrative of terror and oppression. The dark colours and low ceilings which define the atmosphere, described in chapter 4, lends fittingly to the topics discussed in this part of the exhibition. The first set of displays lining the walls as visitors move into the fourth section presents an array of oppressive policies enacted by Czechoslovakia's Communist Party. The focus is evident from the titles of the displays, which are *Emigration*, *Tales of Escape*, *The Repressive Apparatus*, and *The Secret Police*. Together, they comprise a number of overlapping display elements through which this narrative is authenticated.

First and foremost, the text panels paint a broad picture of oppression, repression, and disapproval of the Czechoslovak regime. *Emigration*, for example, points to a correlation between the main waves of migration and key moments of very different political change in the 20ᵗʰ century:

"In the 20th century, people left Czechoslovakia in several waves. People fled from the Nazis in 1938, from the Communists in 1948, and from Russian soldiers in 1968. The motive of most people for leaving was disapproval of the political situation in the country. Once the Communists took over in 1948, they criminalized leaving the country. That meant that culprits were not just breaking the law but that by fleeing to another country they were enlisting themselves in the service of the enemy.

Between 1948 and 1989, about 200 000 Czechoslovak citizens fled the country; many more were unsuccessful. They were captured and sent to prison, shot while trying to escape, or were killed by electric fences. The first massive wave of 25,000 refugees left Czechoslovakia in the three years after February 1948. Thereafter, the number of refugees dropped rapidly, due to the many deaths in the border zone, the success of border guards at stopping people, and the strict restrictions that were put on travel to the free world. Between 1952 and 1964, the average annual number of refugees was 252. The Soviet military invasion of Czechoslovakia produced another wave of refugees in 1968-1969, when 70,000 people fled the country. At that time, escaping the regime's despotism was as easy as it was after February 1948. Border crossings remained open until the autumn of 1969. In the following decade, the borders were hermetically sealed once again and the number of emigrants dropped. However, from 1979 onwards, about 5,000 people managed to escape each year."

Display 34, Emigration

In opening this section as such, there is an impression that Czechoslovaks were opposed to any forms of government that did not align with the nation's democratic foundations introduced at the start of the museum. Indeed, it continues the narrative begun in the exhibition's opening room, which details the founding of a democratic Czechoslovakia and the eventual loss of democracy first under Nazism and then under the Communists (see chapter 6 for a detailed analysis of this space). This reference to Nazism in the fourth section's *Emigration* display may appear anachronistic this deep into the exhibition, but in tapping into this historical wrong to draw attention to mass migration, it indicates how the display does little to define the distinct experiences of life under the ideologically different regimes. Instead, it opts to present Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 20th century as subject to a general totalitarianism defined solely by its lack of democratic freedoms.

The blending of this "double occupation" is not new in historical discourse across the former Eastern Bloc, nor in museums dedicated to the history of Communism. Recalling his analysis of memorial museums of Communism presented in chapter 1, Zombory (2017)

outlined several arguments made as early as the mid-1990s equating Nazism and Communism, and which can be found replicated inside the exhibitions. Zombory asserted that "the visual representation of the 'double occupation,' by spatially juxtaposing Nazism and Communism, synchronizes the two as evils of history, concealing their historically successive and antagonist relation" (Zombory 2017: 1038). This tendency is recreated inside the MoC, where it is used to underscore what I found to be one of the museum's overarching messages: that Czechoslovakia and modern-day Czechia are inherently democratic in nature, and that their time under totalitarianism was an aberrant era in their history. This aligns with observations made by Apor (2012), which I introduced in chapter 2. In Apor's view, bracketing Communism as aberrant creates the notion that citizens of the former Eastern Bloc from were not responsible for the regimes (2012: 572). This has been examined in other museums of Communism as well, including the Sighet Memorial Museum in Romania (Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2008) and the occupation museums in the Baltics (Kuusi 2008; Mark 2008).

With regards to the *Emigration* display, the crushing of the nation's democratic ideals is further shown to have been accentuated by the brutal force with which the Communist Party sought to keep its citizens inside the country. Those who failed in their escape attempts were, as seen in the text panel above, "captured and sent to prison, shot while trying to escape, or were killed by electric fences" (display 34, *Emigration*). This fear-inducing notion is reiterated in the following display, *Tales of Escape*, which states:

"In total, 450 Czechoslovaks died while trying to escape life behind the Iron Curtain. Most were shot, some bled to death and died on electric fences, whereas others drowned or committed suicide for fear of getting caught. More than 600 soldiers deployed to guard the borders also died. They most often fell victim to the booby traps that had been set for people trying to escape."

Display 35, Tales of Escape

As if to underscore this brutality, as well as the dangers of border crossings, hanging between these displays, above eye-level, are five small photographs of dead bodies taken from official files as well as a framed 1955 report investigating the death of someone attempting to escape into West Germany (Fig. 27). These images function, in Susan A. Crane's words, as "evidentiary ballast" (2013a), where the photographs "function as part of

the argument being presented" (2013: 135). This is because the photo is turned into a component of what Crane referred to as the "presentational environment," i.e., "how and where it is being presented" (2013a: 134). Elizabeth Edwards and Sigrid Lien further explored Crane's notion of "evidentiary ballast," defining it as when "photographs are used to provide a sense of authenticity, ambience, memory and affect rather than specific information" (2014: 8). In both these instances, the original function of the photographs – in this case, photos taken as part of a police investigation – are neglected in favour of using them to authenticate a specific narrative in a purposefully constructed environment. This aligns with Edwards and Lien, who stated that rather "than excavating the historical voice of a photograph, displays often mobilize photographs for their assumed immediacy, directness, and unmediated inscription" (2014: 7).

Figure 27 Photographs of dead bodies, display 34, Emigration
Source: Samantha Vaughn

This notion of assumed immediacy and directness are critical here, as are the sense of authenticity and ambience. The photographs in this display are graphic. Some bodies are

naked, others bloodied, others still caught in barbed wire. They are intended to shock, to communicate in no uncertain terms the brutality of the Czechoslovak regime towards its citizens seeking freedom. In choosing explicitly graphic photos that were taken as part of a police investigation and suggesting they are for adults' eyes only through their placement, the museum has both established and authenticated its truth (Whitehead 2009, 2016a) that Communism was an era characterized by terror and oppression. Furthermore, the early use of these photos in this section encourages the visitor to view the remainder of this part of the exhibition through this lens. Indeed, turning the corner, visitors will find a mock border crossing and learn more about the guards that protected the border, both of which keep a light shining on the oppressive force employed by the regime.

According to the text panel, for those who were successful in crossing the border, it was their families who suffered, persecuted by the authorities for their relatives' actions. This latter point was emphasized by my tour guide, Pavel, who explained that colleagues and family members of people who escaped across the border often found themselves in trouble because they "should have known" they were going to leave the country (personal tour: 1:01:29). This points to the museum's emphasis on the social control enacted by the government, which is represented through a variety of topics, from propaganda to the "new socialist man" to state holidays. In this corner of the exhibition, this is best represented by three video testimonies located alongside *Tales of Escape* (Fig. 28).

Figure 28 Video testimonies, display 35, Tales of Escape
Source: Samantha Vaughn

From right to left, the first testimony is by Monika Arkai, the daughter of prominent dissident and future foreign minister Jiří Dienstbier, the filmmaker Michael Wellner Pospíšil, and Karel Hvížďala, an author and acquaintance of Václav Havel. Each one recounts how their lives were affected by the Communist regime as well as their reasons for leaving. Their testimonies are varied and personal, but a reflection on freedom in their youth – and the lack thereof – features in all three. Monika and Michael discuss the implications of a process known as *kádrování* in Czech, which loosely translates to "cadre screening," and how it led to their desire to leave Czechoslovakia. Though they did not use this word specifically, they speak about not being able to attend university because they came from "bad" families, which was a hallmark of the practice of cadre screening. Before discussing these accounts in further detail, however, it is important to take note here of a particularity of all video testimonies in the museum.

Given the edited nature of these videos, it is common across all of them for the subjects to discuss things that are not immediately comprehensible to visitors, especially those without an understanding of Communist policies and key figures. I often found myself unable to follow the thread of an account or became confused when names were dropped as though their connections were obvious to the witness, suggesting an implied viewer who is a Czech native. This did limit the impact of the individual testimonies when on site. I was able to notice more specific associations when later analysing the exhibition as a whole. For example, up to this point in the exhibition, visitors will not have encountered the term "cadre screening," so some may not understand why Monika and Michael were not able to attend university. It is not until the end of section four that cadre screening is described, a final note before visitors enter the white-walled final space in the exhibition. It is here that they learn how the Communists assessed citizens based on their backgrounds and political leanings (display 50, *Persecution*). For those paying close attention (for, again, neither Monika nor Michael specifically use the term *kádrování*), the pair's testimonies are both authenticated by and authenticate this explanation of "cadre screening," reflecting de Jong's (2018) claims about one of the functions of witness testimonies. The later explanation provides context to their accounts, while the witnesses become authentic examples of two individual lives which were actually impacted by this practice.

That said, even if the specificities were unclear, broader themes were still understandable, including Monika and Michael feeling they needed to leave because of

their families' status as "bad". With regards to these two testimonies, they both recount how they ultimately felt there was no future for them in Czechoslovakia and made the difficult decision to leave their families behind, potentially forever. When examining how the museum constructs the framework for experiencing Communism, there appears to be an effort here to present the regime as without a heart, driving people to make such immense choices. Karel does not talk about how or why he was permitted to emigrate, as Monika and Michael do, and so it is impossible to know the circumstances surrounding his departure. But he nonetheless powerfully summarizes the enormity of gaining his freedom when he talks about his journey to Germany:

> I remember quite well an experience from the train on which I crossed the border. We had just crossed the border from Cheb to Schirnding. A boy came on with long hair in a bright shirt. And he began sticking exile magazines in the compartments. Of course, I took them quickly, looking forward to reading them. All the people there were afraid. I also offered them to the people, because I was given them. I was sitting on the edge, and I had the most. Today I still can't forget that moment. See, you'd behave the same way if you didn't know you were fleeing, that you were leaving. They were so scared. *They did that to us… I will always hold it against them, this horrible distortion…* (Karel Hvíždala's video testimony, my emphasis)

The fear described in Karel's testimony becomes particularly relevant from this point onward in the exhibition. In opening the "Nightmare" section with the accounts of citizens who felt oppressed to the point of needing to leave their homeland, visitors are given human faces they can link back to when learning about the policies that upheld this oppression. In this manner, Monika, Michael, and Karel's experiences testify to the terror described throughout this part of the exhibition.

That the testimonies can function in this manner is due to the idea that witnesses are *authentic* representatives of history. De Jong examined this in her research on Holocaust survivor testimonies in museums, where she wrote that "all witnesses to history are authentic representatives of the past because they have been there. The traces that the past has left on their bodies authenticate their testimonies. The witnesses to history's

experiences in situ authenticate their testimonies given *ex post facto*" (2018: 115; her emphasis). For de Jong, it is in fact their status as victims that offers the most credibility to their stories, arguing that victims are considered the most trustworthy of witnesses to history, over perpetrators or bystanders (2018: 120).

It is not my intention to draw comparisons between the victimhood of Holocaust survivors and citizens of former Communist countries, but de Jong's work offers one way of analyzing the power of Monika, Michael, and Karel's accounts to authenticate the MoC's terror-focused approach to this part of the country's history. Through them, visitors are invited to hear first-hand the negative effects the regime had on people's lives, not only those speaking on screen but all those mentioned by them as well, such as the Karel's travel companions. Their stories thus mirror the cruel topics visitors will soon encounter, topics that are complemented by the final video testimony in the section, given by Jiří Stránský, a member of a prominent anti-Communist family, grandson of former Czechoslovak Prime Minister Jan Malypetr, and a frequent political prisoner under the regime. Jiří's testimony is primarily about his time in prison camps, the reasons he was arrested, and the ways he learned to survive it. Highlighting the cruelty of the regime, Jiří talks about being sentenced to "those terrible years…because I had done absolutely nothing… But when they hit me, they told me they knew I had done nothing, but that they had to break my family" (Jiří Stránský's video testimony).

The trio of video testimonies located at the start of the Nightmare section, combined with Jiří's concluding testimony before visitors enter the final part of the exhibition space, creates what Sara Jones (2014) referred to as a "mediated remembering community". According to Jones, a remembering community is characterized by a "network" of memories amongst a group (2014: 37). In the museum, such remembering communities are mediated from the moment they are constructed; that is, "diachronically produced texts on the same theme are brought together by an editor, curator or director [...] – into a single cultural product" (Jones 2014: 38), selected, edited, and installed in a manner relevant to the museum's mission. It is within this process that "the narratives of the individuals appear to overlap and support one another" (ibid.), which serves the purpose of confirming an overarching narrative.

In the case of the testimonies provided by Monika, Michael, Karel, and Jiří, the individual accounts have been edited and presented in a manner that, although distinctive

in their respective experiences, ultimately construct a largely similar account which confirms Communism in Czechoslovakia to have been a brutal affair. In this way, each testimony is ultimately made to support "the 'truth' of the other" (Jones 2014: 37), even when the four Czechs may never have met one another in person (Jones 2014: 38). All eleven video testimonies found throughout the exhibition function as an extended "mediated remembering community" which collectively tells of life's difficulties under Communism, but the four found in the darkened atmosphere of section four are particularly potent as a collection, thanks in large part to how they are aided by their surrounding environs.

In this regard, it is not only the reciprocal backing that testimonies offer one another, but how their placement within the exhibition is as much mediated as the accounts themselves (Ferguson 1996). Approaching these videos, visitors have just been plunged into darkness, learned about the repression afflicted upon the people by the police, militia, and army, and read about the difficulties of emigrating and the even greater difficulties of escaping. The unsettling atmosphere within which the testimonies are situated thus underscore the accounts. They become the "presentational environment," to borrow Crane's (2013a) term, in which the testimonies are authenticated and, in turn, authenticate the accompanying displays (de Jong 2018). By framing these witnesses in the videos as authentic representatives of history, whose accounts have been selected and edited to communicate a broadly unified message (Jones 2014: 151), and arranging them in a specific point in the exhibition, surrounded by thematically similar texts, objects, and photographs, the MoC has created the potential to influence collective understandings of Czechia's Communist past, which could, in turn, authenticate this approach to representing history in the eyes of visitors.

This holistic narrative of oppression continues even after visitors leave these video testimonies behind, being further emphasized in the following display, *The Repressive Apparatus*. Here, visitors are given an explanation of the "five pillars" of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's (KSČ) authoritarian rule: the National Security Corps, the justice system, the army, the border guards, and the People's Militias. There are no objects in this display; only language is used to express its message (Fig. 29), which is concentrated on the Stalinist period of the late 1940s/early 1950s. This should not be seen as returning to a chronological account of the Czechoslovak Communism, which is reserved for the first and last sections of the exhibition (see chapter 4). Instead, this display – and indeed, the wider

Nightmare section – very much retains its thematic approach to the history of Communism, which it does by focusing on an era marked by immense brutality to support the overall representation of Communism as first and foremost a terror regime.
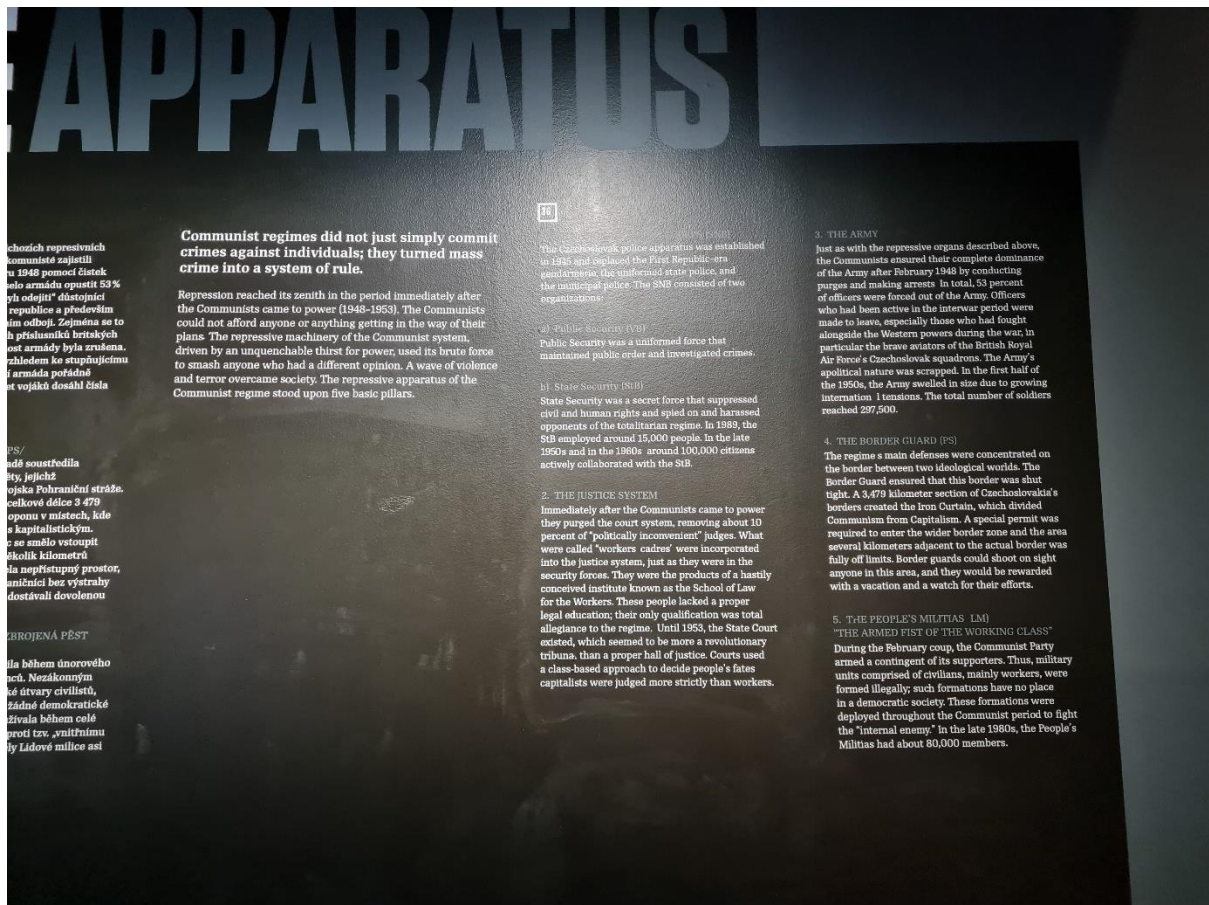
Figure 29 Display 36, The Repressive Apparatus
Source: Samantha Vaughn

That language is the only technique used here makes this display unique amongst within the exhibition, as even those displays which are text-driven and objectless – of which there are a few – are nonetheless surrounded by *something*, be that a photograph or wall decal. *The Repressive Apparatus* stands apart in this regard, making it an ideal example of how museum text can communicate key messages on its own, whilst still interlinking with the displays around it. The first thing that is noticeable is the emphasis on the criminal nature of Communism, which is stated directly in the text panel's first sentence:

> *"Communist regimes did not just simply commit crimes against individuals; they turned mass crime into a system of rule."*
>
> *Display 36,* The Repressive Apparatus

The opening paragraph thus sets the tone for viewing the Communist Party's actions as part of a systematic and purposeful program of cruelty. This also establishes the mood of the display itself, which lays out these five "pillars" as fundamental to the regime's grip on power, each of which are described as deeply ruthless. This is reflected in the severity of the hyperbolic language, with references to the use of "brute force," the "wave of violence and terror" which gripped Czechoslovak society, the suppression of "civil and human rights," and guards being rewarded for shooting people on sight if caught in the restricted border zone. What is communicated here is a heartlessness at the roots of Czechoslovakia's Communist regime, a regime which would, as the opening paragraph states, "smash anyone who had a different opinion".

It is important to note, however, that although those "who had a different opinion" are mentioned extensively throughout the exhibition, those who did not are rarely addressed. I discussed in chapter 2 (see section 2.3.1) the tendency noted by scholars for museums of Communism which a focus on themes of terror, state surveillance, and oppression to draw a boundary around its respective citizens, laying the culpability in upholding the Communist regime squarely at the feet of Party members across the Bloc (Apor 2012). The MoC aligns with this trend, positioning ordinary Czechoslovaks as counter to Communist ideals. This will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter, but the present display highlights the strategies with which the MoC attempts to distance its citizens from those in power as well as the tensions which inherently arise from this.

In laying out the "pillars" which underpinned the state's "repressive apparatus," the museum's staff will have needed to could not ignore the fact a great many citizens supported the functioning of these very "pillars". And yet, these instances are defined by a sense of silence, ambiguous language, or even a rational "explaining away" of citizen involvement. In doing so, the visitors are encouraged to overlook the question of who, in fact, is included in "the Communists" discussed so frequently throughout the exhibition.

One of the more obvious examples of how this issue is treated with silence can be found in the description of the fifth "pillar", the People's Militia:

> *"During the February coup, the Communist Party armed a contingent of its supporters. Thus, military units comprised of civilians, mainly workers, were formed illegally; such formations have no place in a democratic society. These formations were deployed throughout the Communist period to fight the 'internal enemy.' In the late 1980s, the People's Militias had about 80,000 members."*
>
> *Display 36,* The Repressive Apparatus

The existence of the People's Militias is, of course, a crucial historical element worthy of inclusion in a museum whose mission is to showcase Czechoslovakia's Communist regime. That it was ordinary citizens who belonged to these Militias, however, is a fact the museum seems reluctant to address. The issue of civilian collaboration thus becomes a sticking point in the museum's messaging that the citizens were opposed to all forms of non-democratic governments, as was previously discussed. This is not to overlook the mention of these civilians in the above excerpt; rather, I seek to draw attention to the *way* this fact is presented to visitors. First and foremost, there is no invitation to consider the implications of having civilians involved nor what this could indicate about the prevalence of Communist ideology in everyday life. Instead, the visitors are immediately told that such units were illegal. In shifting focus to the legality of the Militias, they can be very easily dismissed as illegitimate and not subject to further discussion.

In explaining this strategy, I turn to what Vinitzky-Serouss and Teeger (2010) referred to as covert silence in the domain of forgetting. The authors defined this as an "attempt to effect forgetting" (2010: 1,114) about the difficult aspects of a topic, doing so by minimizing or burying such silences under "much mnemonic talk" (2010: 1,115). According to Vinitzky-Serouss and Teeger, this is useful when remembering something that is uncomfortable but enacting overt silence is not possible. To ignore the existence of the People's Militias in Communist Czechoslovakia would have been a failing on the part of the museum's mission, and as such, the role civilians played within them is discussed whilst simultaneously minimized by discussions of legality and democratic principles.

The silences woven into cases of civilian collaboration also blend, at times, with an ambiguity which makes it equally possible to overlook who precisely served the country's Communist regime. This can be seen in the description of State Security (StB), one of the two organizations which made up the first "pillar," the National Security Corps (SNB). The short paragraph concludes with statistics about how many people were part of the StB:

"In 1989, the StB employed around 15,000 people. In the late 1950s and in the 1960s around 100,000 citizens actively collaborated with the StB."

Display 36, The Repressive Apparatus

The vagueness of the language here highlights a useful technique in minimizing the repercussions of collaboration for the museum's overall message. For example, the language surrounding those "employed" and those who "actively collaborated" can be ambiguously interpreted. It is difficult to discern in this instance whether the museum is delineating a difference between being employed and collaborating. If there is no difference, is the visitor thus expected to see the enormous drop in participation between the early years of the regime and 1989 as evidence of civilians' declining support for State Security? Such ambiguities ultimately serve to gloss over citizens' implied collaboration with the regime, burying it under the "much mnemonic talk" described by Vinitzky-Serouss and Teeger.

And yet, in those moments when the museum does indeed address civilian participation in the Communist regime, there usually appears to be an explanation for it. Near to *The Repressive Apparatus* is a display dedicated to collaboration, which divides the types of "cooperating citizens," as they are referred to, into two categories: covert collaborator and confidential contact. A third category is listed as well, defined as a "candidate for covert collaboration". These are defined as follows:

"COVERT COLLABORATOR
Responsible for maintaining conspiratorial contact with counterintelligence workers, completing assigned tasks, and submitting acquired intelligence. There were three categories of collaborators: resident agent, agent, and owner of a conferred apartment.

CONFIDENTIAL CONTACT
Engaged in the simplest form of cooperation with the StB. Such people did not necessarily always know that they were providing information to the secret police. They acted in good faith that they were helping the republic, justice, and the common good.

CANDIDATE FOR COVERT COLLABORATION
A person the StB had picked to try and persuade to cooperate. In the 1980s common persuasion methods included blackmailing candidates with everything from making criminals out of their family members to releasing compromising information about them to the public."

Display 38, Collaboration

In describing collaboration in these terms, the culpability of citizens who worked with State Security is called into question. Should we consider them truly supportive of the regime if they viewed themselves as acting for reasons of justice? Or are they really accountable for their participation if they were blackmailed into doing so? These types of explanations thus serve to "rationalize" support for or even active participation in the running of the regime without fully laying blame upon the citizens.

These strategies of can be identified at various moments throughout the exhibition, raising important questions about how the museum is defining the "Communists" and what this means for visitor understandings of what life was like in Communist Czechoslovakia. Where it is difficult to explain away citizen support, silence and ambiguity become key for drawing attention towards the terror and oppression that defined Communism in the country. We see this evidenced in *The Repressive Apparatus* itself, which, on the whole, does coincide with the Nightmare section's focus on brutality. To return to the first "pillar"

presented in the display, State Security is described not only through its aforementioned statistics; it is also defined as,

> *"a secret force that suppressed civil and human rights and spied on and harassed opponents of the totalitarian regime."*
>
> *Display 36,* The Repressive Apparatus

We see this reflected in some of the video testimonies, such as that of Monika, who recounts how a government official told her to stop applying to university because she would never be accepted due to her family's anti-government position. Visitors are then treated to an expanded explanation of the State Security's activities in the next display. Labelled "Secret Police" here, the text panel details the violent mandate of this "pillar" of the regime:

> *"The main task of the StB was to fight 'external' and 'internal' enemies and to prevent the leakage of state, economic, and professional secrets. StB members and collaborators infiltrated all parts of society-from embassies, to schools and sports clubs. The StB's basic methods included provocation, kidnapping, assassination, blackmail, intimidation and psychological terror. In the 1950s, under the influence of Soviet advisors and with approval from the highest political leaders, the StB literally 'manufactured' class enemies, spitting them out on a conveyor belt to then smash them to bits.*
>
> *StB investigation methods included physical violence, brutal beatings electrical torture methods, night-time interrogations, extended solitary confinement, and sleep, water, and food deprivation. Physical violence was accompanied by psychological terror, humiliation, threats of the arrest of family members, and even faked executions.*
>
> *Display 37,* The Secret Police

Supporting this statement is a small collection of objects, documents, and a photo related to the subject of spying (Figs. 30-31). The objects are a Zenit FS 12 camera gun and a small camera used in covert photography in a glass display case. On the wall to the right of the glass case are two framed pieces of paper detailing the "technical descriptions of bags that contained small cameras" (display 37, *The Secret Police*). Above these is a photo of a bug that could be installed behind a wall. Immediately, there is an obvious issue with using this particular camera gun. Historically authentic as it may be, the accompanying label

openly states that it was likely used for sports photography rather than spying. That said, this need not be considered an issue. Its placement in this display and the label's explanation that "similar designs" were indeed used by security forces lends to precisely the type of constructive authenticity Wang (1999) was writing about, or indeed even MacCannell's (1973) notion of staged authenticity. Regardless of the camera's authenticity in terms of the true nature of its use, the setting in which it has been arranged authenticates it as an "adequate representative of history" which in turn authenticates the museum's narrative as "genuine" (de Jong 2018: 120).
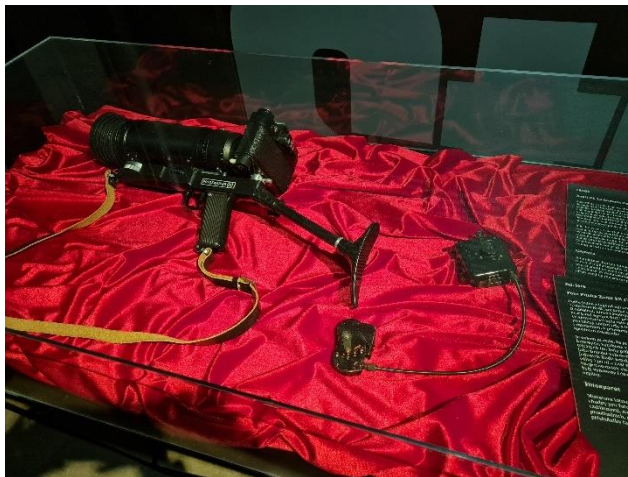
Figure 30 Display 37, The Secret Police
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 31 Display 37, The Secret Police
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Resting on a bed of red satin (a colour long associated both with Communism and blood), the cameras are immediately suggested as tools used to spy on citizens, and are maybe reminiscent for some visitors of Cold War-themed movie props. This understanding is further enhanced by the technical descriptions hanging on the wall to the right, particularly as the small camera in the display case is roughly the right size to fit in the bags described in the sheets of paper. Moreover, the photograph depicts the bug almost "in situ," either in the process of being removed from or installed in a wall. The small camera in the glass case thus brings a physical dimension to the topic of spying. Visitors can see how this may have been executed by viewing the files on the wall or the photograph of the bug, and bridge that understanding with the physical presence of an authentic camera that *could*

have been used to carry out the spying. By bringing together these files, the photo, and the small camera, visitors can experience the StB's oppressive activities in three materially different, and supposedly authentic ways, which are in turn supported by the ambience of the surrounding space.

What these examples have shown is the way the MoC utilizes several different authentic display components to construct a narrative that control and oppression were integral to the Czechoslovak Communist regime. As a final example, I will share an anecdote by my tour guide, Pavel, who used his experience of living under Communism to authenticate the displays around him as well as this wider narrative of oppression.

5.2.2 Historically authentic: the benefit of first-person accounts for authentication

As mentioned in chapter 3, I participated in guided tours of both case study museums during my second site visit in November 2022, the purpose of which was to observe what knowledge the guides deemed most important to communicate, how they mediated the museum's messages for visitor consumption, and how this impacted on my understanding of the messages. What emerged from my time with the guides was an insightful performance of authenticity, in which each one drew on their direct experiences and/or status as locals to bring credibility to their roles and to support the museums' approaches to Communist history. My tour at the MoC in Prague was conducted by an elderly Czech gentleman named Pavel who had lived more than half his life under Communism. As a result, he was able to provide many personal anecdotes about living in Czechoslovakia as well as share his unique views on the subject. Drawing on Ferguson, Walby, and Piché's argument that a guide's personal experience with a subject has important implications for the "perceived authenticity of narratives and displays" (2016: 477), I found that Pavel's experiences living under Communism enabled an almost immediate trust on my part to consider him a credible person to speak about the Communist past in Czechoslovakia. It is important to note that I say *almost*, for although his credibility was aided in large part by his age and experience, it was how he performed those characteristics that ultimately had the deepest impact on how I perceived the truthfulness of his representation of the history of Communism in Czechoslovakia, as well as that of the museum.

To understand how Pavel added to the constructed authenticity of the Nightmare section discussed above, I must go back to the beginning of our tour, as it was from the start of our time together that he established his credibility as an authentic representative of history. Early on, Pavel spoke about forced collectivization and the decline in agricultural output as young people chose to look for work in the developing heavy industry instead. To make up for the lack of a labour force, he said, the Communist Party mandated students help with the harvest. To support this information, Pavel offered a first-person anecdote from his own time working on the farms as a teenager:

I lived in the South of Bohemia, a potato region. And September/beginning of October, the school was closed, and we went to the agricultural country, we pick up potatoes there. And some of [my] classmates hated it or they did not want it, but was an obligation, the school was closed. I must say for me, the school was always boring. And to go for two weeks in the nature I accepted with pleasure. The physical work did not bother me. And it was a small adventure for me. Once, I could drive a car with horses. Even once, I could drive an agriculture tractor. They came and said there was nobody to transport potatoes from the field to the deposit and asked who has a driving licence. I had a driving licence at 15 years old for the small *moto*. I knew how to drive the car of my father. It was not so complicated to drive a tractor. And you can imagine as I went in front of the girls of our class [pretends to wave to the girls]. Of course, we slept in a cottage, separating girls and boys. And the girls of our class were in village not very far from us. In the afternoon and in the evening, we went to see the girls of our class, inviting them for a walk in the nature. I have now a nice souvenir for this period, called Agriculture Brigada. And of course, today the law will not allow the children are used under the age of 18 as labour forces, but in this time, it was possible, it was necessary. If not, the potatoes will not come on the Czechoslovak market (personal tour: 35:22 – 37:09).

It is clear from this recollection of his time working on the harvest that Pavel's life under Communism was not always defined by the terror and oppression the museum aims

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to represent. While his story is indeed bookended by information about the inefficiency of the government's policies regarding heavy industry and agriculture, an anecdote about a joyful teenage experience served a deeper purpose in terms of authenticating the museum's overall approach. Simply put, the story served to add a richness to Pavel's history, one that was neither marked by complete terror nor complete joy, but rather the natural mix of both we all encounter in our own lives. In this way, my guide strategically made use of his experience as an authentication practice (Stach 2021) in order to encourage me to authorize his credibility. He built a sense of trust by tapping into an aspect of the human condition I as a visitor could relate to, a trust I could then place in his ability to accurately present information about what Communism was "really" like. That is, he positioned himself as one single person whose life was impacted by Communism in Czechoslovakia, cutting through the larger social, political, and historical happenings presented in the museum. This later worked to his advantage when he engaged with topics closer to the overall themes of the exhibition.

When we approached the transition between the Reality and Nightmare sections, the authenticating power he possessed was palpable as he addressed some of the oppressive ways the regime affected him. Prompted by the display about the People's Militia, he told a story about his own run-in with the Communist Party:

> I had my own experience with the People's Militia, and I would like to tell you a small, private story, if you allow. I worked for an export-import company. We did international business was the product of the automotive industry. And this company sent me in 1982 to France to represent the interests of the Czechoslovak automotive industry on the French market. After five years, I had to come back, it was the normal exchange period. And because my supervisors were satisfied with the results of my work in France, they propose me to become the commercial director of this company. It was a big promotion for me. I accepted with pleasure.

> Only some days later, I received a telephone call from Prague to Paris. It was the chief of the personnel department […] And he informed me that the local committee of the Communist Party refused my nomination because I was not

member of the Communist Party. In this time, the position of commercial director... well, already it was called the *nomenklatura*. The [company] could not decide itself to nominate a person. It could propose them, but the Communist Party had to confirm this proposition. And in my case, because I was not a member of the Communist Party, they refused my nomination. Some weeks later, vice-general director of this company came for a business trip to Paris, and they bought me the form of the request to become the member of the Communist Party. And practically, I have no chance to say no, it's on the table and sign here. And if I refuse, I could stay in France and emigrate. But I signed it. It was only so I could not become immediately the member of the Communist Party, it was a two years test period, as I became the candidate to the membership of the Communist Party for two years. But as candidate as well, I was acceptable for the local committee of the Communist party.

I came back to Prague. During two years, I really did this job of commercial director. In the end, the delegation of the Communist Party came to see me with big news: "now you can be really member of the Communist Party, with all rights and obligation." And at the same time, they want to [give] me a so-called party task, that I become also a member of this People's Militia. And I said no. It was too much for me, I refuse to accept. And I expected they will send to me an old member of the Communist Party to discuss with me about the historical role of the People's Militia. Not at all. Two days later, they convocated a meeting. I was invited, I received the same question, I gave the same answer. And in the evening, I had to leave my company. I lost my job (personal tour: 54:09-57:23).

The point of this story, he told me, is to show that "Communism is not reformable," because for all the changes taking place under Gorbachev at that time, Communist Czechoslovakia was still stuck in the repressive policies of the past. It was, he said, "the same as in '50s, or '60s. When somebody in opposition criticizes something, not be obedient, he was punished" (personal tour: 58:00). It was a compelling argument, told at a significant transitional point

in the museum. Ahead of me sat the darkened interior of the Nightmare section, where I could already hear the audio track playing the sounds of a failed escape attempt and the subsequent interrogation (see chapter 4), triggering a deep sense of discomfort. I would soon be surrounded by topics about the worst of life under Communism, with photographs of dead bodies, video testimonies of émigrés, and displays about Czechoslovakia's "repressive apparatus" and secret police.

And yet, Pavel does not introduce this section by speaking about any of the above topics. Instead, he uses a personal story to paint a picture of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s as repressive as the 1950s, authenticating the museum's approach to representing Communism as a terror regime above all else. In the span of only a few minutes, the uncomfortable immersivity of the environment collided with the emotional retelling of Pavel's encounter with the Communist Party. Together, these differing museal techniques reinforced the anti-Communist attitudes within which I was socialized as an American citizen and enabled me to negotiate my belief that the MoC's oppression-focused approach to representing the Czechoslovak regime was a truthful representation (Wang 1999).

This continued throughout the rest of our time in Nightmare section. As we walked deeper into this space, his focus did turn to the 1950s and 1960s detailed in the displays. He spoke extensively of the show trials of the 1950s, and specifically that of the loyalists Rudolf Slánský and Artur London. He was a young child in the Stalinist period, and so what he recounted were primarily historical facts, but this did not stop him from adding in personal anecdotes where possible. For example, he spoke about reading Artur London's 1968 memoir *The Confession* while in France and being shocked to learn about the involvement of the Soviet Union in the show trials (personal tour: 1:10:00). He felt, in a sense, that he had been misled by his own government about Czechoslovakia's enemies. Together with his story about being fired for refusing to join the People's Militia, Pavel constructed a view of Communism as brutal and destructive, even in the 1980s and even to its most loyal followers, but he also represented himself as a victim of repression and secrecy – whether that be the freedom to choose with whom to associate or facts about his country's history – albeit a luckier one when compared to Slánský.

Recounting this anecdote in the terror-infused atmosphere of the fourth section, Pavel thus continued to be a credible voice, authenticating and being authenticated by the testimonies, photographs, documents, and objects displayed around us, all of which serve to

substantiate the MoC's overarching approach to representing Communism as an era of terror and oppression. At the same time, the human touch he brought to the exhibition introduced a degree of bottom-up interpretation that is otherwise rarely present in the MoC (beyond, perhaps, the witness testimonies, though the topics discussed within them adhere strictly to the larger themes found in the museum, in line with previous research by de Jong [2018] and Shenker [2015] on Holocaust testimonies). Pavel, too, stuck to the museum's main messages for the most part, but his brief forays into tales of everyday life under Communism proved important to authenticating the overall narrative for me as a visitor. In the following section, I turn to the PRL museum to demonstrate how a more extensive approach to representing Communism through the everyday can be equally powerful in authenticating this same history.

5.3 Re-constructing the everyday in the Museum of Life Under Communism, Warsaw

Like the MoC in Prague, the PRL Museum makes use of a diverse range of authentic interpretative supports to construct and substantiate its approach to representing Communist history. But while the Czech museum takes the stance that terror and oppression were defining features of its regime, the PRL Museum constructs an image of a thriving and resilient people, which it does through a focus on the everyday. In many respects, this brings it in line with the museums of the everyday, or *Alltag* museums, established across eastern Germany, as was discussed in chapter 2. Like its eastern German counterparts (see, for example, Berdahl 2008; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Bach 2015a, 2015b, 2017), the aim of approaching the history of Communism through the lens of everyday life appears to be to reconstruct "what it was like" to live under the Polish regime.

Where the PRL Museum differs from those found in Germany, however, is in the amount of focus it gives to its objects, choosing not to depend almost exclusively on its material culture of Communism nor strategies of informal display to authenticate its narratives (Bach 2015a). Unlike *Alltag* museums, which have been found to rely on the familiarity of everyday objects (Winkler 2015) and thus need not employ "practices of authentication" (Bach 2015b: 140), the PRL Museum does indeed provide ample interpretation for its objects, even if this is not uniform across the museum (see chapter 4). In the present section, I examine how everyday objects, photographs, and period furniture are used in conjunction with the text panels to promote messages about Poles' thriving

everyday life under Communism. Once again, owing to the many instances in the exhibition that could illustrate this point, I have chosen to limit my focus to two areas of the museum. First, I present an account of the exhibition's most celebrated topic, culture, before moving to the museum's primary mock set-up: a flat decorated to represent a Communist-era home.

5.3.1 "It was a showcase, a manifesto of independence": using culture to represent the people

A key way the PRL Museum establishes its approach is through its promotion of Poland's successes and outputs, both material and immaterial, particularly those coming from its cultural scene. This is perhaps a reflection of the museum owner's views about life under the regime as well as the value he places on how Communism is to be remembered today. In a 2019 interview with *Telewizja Republika*, Patla spoke multiple times about the richness of Polish culture during Communism, expressing his belief that it was superior to those of neighbouring countries. In one instance, he stated, "I would say it was richer than in DDR or Soviet Union, that's for sure. Our socialist system […] were giving some opportunities to rise the culture [sic]" (*Telewizja Republika* 2019b: 5:19-5:31). His enthusiasm for promoting Polish culture is reflected in the objects, photographs, and videos he chose to collect when founding the museum, affirming what scholars have long observed about the role of museum staff in assigning value to exhibition content. Hooper-Greenhill has argued, for instance, that exhibitions are "the result of purposeful activities which are informed by ideas about what is significant and what is not. *Both collections and exhibitions embody ideas and values*" (2000: 3; my emphasis). What, then, are the ideas and values surrounding the PRL Museum's culture-related objects?

Installing them across the museum, Patla and his team have used these elements to delineate and validate a narrative about a thriving cultural scene under Communism. Nowhere is this more evident than in display 11, which centres entirely on the topic. *Culture* is the most densely packed and detailed display in the museum (Fig. 32 and 33). It takes up nearly a quarter of the right wall, features in-depth text panels covering music, television, literature, theatre, and film, and contains 29 objects related to each of these cultural fields. The wall is also the most richly decorated part of the exhibition, with a Mondrian-esque design that differs from the rest of the museum's largely grey colour scheme. The extensive

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distribution of space – and the resulting amount of decoration and components this allows – signals the significance of this display, and therefore of culture, in the museum's narrative (Mason, Robinson, and Coffield 2017).

But the display goes well beyond representing the people as avid consumers of culture. Indeed, much of the text and objects are dedicated to the extensive cultural outputs *produced* throughout the era. While the in-depth text panels offer a decade-by-decade description of some of the leading outputs in music, television, literature, theatre, and film, the display elements authenticate this information with physical proof. The objects in question comprise vinyl records, posters, literary pieces, theatre programmes, theatre tickets, and film festival programmes, alongside several photographs and a video playing on loop of a Rolling Stones concert held in Warsaw in 1967. This returns us to the materialist understanding of authenticity, whereby the objects can be considered authentic in so far as they are "real, original, truthful, or genuine" (Jones 2010: 181) items from the Polish People's Republic.

Figure 32 Display 11, Culture
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 33 Display 11, Culture
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The importance of this material authenticity is deeply rooted in the bottom-up development of the museum's collection. As mentioned in chapter 4, most of the objects were sourced from Patla's family's basement and through donations from private individuals (*Telewizja Republika* 2019a, 2019d). They thus serve as "valuable witnesses to history," as the museum defines its collection in its opening display (Display 1, *Welcome*

Message) which can claim to credibly represent what life under Communism – as the museum's title indicates – was "really like". To provide an example of how the authenticity of these artefacts aid in framing Poles' relationship to culture in the PRL, I turn to the topic of music within the display on culture. Here, the main text panel states:

> *"The music market flourished, attracting audiences to festivals and competitions, like the ones in Sopot (from 1961) and Opole (from 1963). In the 1980s, the Jarocin festival became the voice of the generation. One had to be there at least once"*

> *Display 11,* Culture

Alongside this, two smaller in-depth text panels dedicated exclusively to the topic of music (Fig. 34) boast about the successes and popularity of the music industry over the 45 years of

Music

Polskie Nagrania (Polish Recordings) had the monopoly on the Polish music market. The record label, founded to release mostly folk and classical music, offered other genres as well - pop, avant-garde, big beat, rock'n'roll and jazz. The prices of records from Polskie Nagrania were very affordable. There was a fashion for carying vinyls under one's arm – it was a showcase, a manifesto of independence. Foreign records, not available in stores, were traded at flea markets, and the best deals were made in Gdansk, where the vinyls were brought by sailors. It took effort to get the coveted records with the music of Western performers. A temporary solution was sound postcards, which could be bought at a recording studio. The songs selected by the buyer were copied to a postcard from a reel-to-reel tape recorder.

Radio Luxembourg gave access to music from behind the Iron Curtain. Radio Luxembourg broadcasts were listened to in the evenings and at night. Satisfactory reception of the transmission at a wave of 208 meters took place only after dark, when the ionosphere was at a convenient altitude. Being up-to-date with Radio Luxembourg hit chart has become a determinant of being cool.

Although Polskie Nagrania normally did not publish Western recordings, sometimes there were occasional longplay licenses, such as the Abba "Waterloo", Procol Harum, and even Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen and Leonard Cohen.

In the 1940s and 1950s, music was a way to free oneself from years of occupation, poverty and personal tragedies. Jazz music became a "light in the tunnel" and although, at the turn of the 1940s and 1950, jazz was officially declared hostile to socialist ideals, a Polish jazz school was born and after 1956 became a well established subgenre. One of the organizers of the jazz movement was a known writer Leopold Tyrmand, Krzysztof Komeda created the music for Roman Polański's 'Knife in the Water', and Zbigniew Namysłowski began his international career as a jazzman.

The concert of Rhythm and Blues band in 1959 in Gdansk began the era of Bigbit (Big-Beat), which was the Polish version of rock and roll. Franciszek Walicki, the founder of the band, and the creator of the Bigbit name, founded another band called Błękitko-Czarni with Czesław Niemen as the lead singer. His solo song "Dziwny jest ten świat" from 1967 became a manifesto of the generation of the 1960s, and Niemen's solo album became the first golden album in the history of Polish pop music. The songs of Czerwone Gitary band enjoyed great popularity in the second half of the 1960s.

Numerous festivals and reviews confirmed the flourishing of the music market. In the 1960s, song festivals in Sopot (1961) and Opole (1963) were inaugurated and broadcast by television. There were also "politically correct" festivals: the Soviet song contest in Zielona Góra (1965) and the Soldier's song contest in Kołobrzeg (1967). Thanks to a more open attitude towards the West, foreign music stars could perform in Poland. In April 1967, the Rolling Stones played in Warsaw's Sala Kongresowa. Their performance is considered the most important rock concert in the history of the PRL.

Polish pop music golden era was the 70's. The performances of Maryla Rodowicz, Czesław Niemen and Krzysztof Krawczyk would receive standing ovations. At the same time, rock bands like Maanam and TSA persued bolder means of expression. The presence of censorship forced artists to show a lot of additional creativity. The message could not be expressed directly. Artists were looking for original words and metaphors, which would be properly interpreted by the fans, but not attract the attention of the authorities.

After the events of 1980, bards gained in popularity, among them Jacek Kaczmarski, whose "Ściany" (Walls) became the unofficial anthem of the entire generation. In August 1981, a festival called the First True Song Review was organized in Gdańsk. Since 1980, the festival in Jarocin enjoyed great popularity among young people. Rebellious youth identified the event as an oasis of freedom. Although youth music was reluctantly tolerated by the authorities, they hoped that involvement in counter-cultural movements would distract young people from political activity.

Figure 34 Music in-depth text panel, Display 11, Culture
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Communism (NB: for purposes of space, an image has been included, cropped from its original). Affirming these claims are three photographs of the music festivals and a vinyl records store, as well as a record from the 1950s, three musical postcards from the 1960s, and the aforementioned video of the Rolling Stones. Together, their credibility as historically "true" remnants of the PRL is foregrounded to serve as "proofs of truth or connectors with reality," as Whitehead writes (2016a: 4), "sticky" with the history (Mannergren Selimovic 2022) of a music scene long since passed.

Although their credibility as authentic representatives of Communist history is aided by their material realness, how they are framed by the museum's staff is equally central to establishing the power they possess in upholding the display's messages as well as the museum's overarching approach to representing Communist history. That is, the photographs have been used to showcase the country's music festivals rather than, say, their part in a wider array of social events organized by the state, or the role of photography in capturing moments of everyday life; the music postcards and vinyl were not employed in a discussion about the production of everyday objects; and the video footage of the Rolling Stones concert was not part of an examination of the ways in which citizens had access to Western culture. Their particular framing thus creates a web of signification (Lidchi 1997: 204) that reflects the values expressed by Patla which opened this section. This demonstrates how the PRL Museum has deployed the authentic objects, imagery, and videos in its collection for the very particular purpose of naturalizing the museum's position. In combining the text panels and objects, the museum effectively argues that the music scene under Communism need only be interpreted as a thriving sector of society that was enjoyed by all.

This is further evidenced by how the extensive components on display in *Culture* have been framed to minimize the history of censorship in the Polish People's Republic in favour of promoting the idea that the cultural scene flourished more or less unhindered. While it should be noted that censorship is mentioned in the text panels, it occurs only briefly. Examples include the main text panel:

> *"Throughout the period of the Polish People's Republic, literary and artistic creativity struggled with censorship, ideology and iron curtain. The creation of censorship in 1946, ie the Central Office for Press, Publishing and Entertainment, served to limit the freedom of expression"*
>
> *Display 11,* Culture

The in-depth text panel accompanying the aforementioned music outputs:

> *"The presence of censorship forced artists to show a lot of additional creativity […] which would be properly interpreted by the fans, but not attract the attention of the authorities."*
>
> *Display 11,* Culture

And the in-depth text panel dedicated to film:

> *"[Man of Iron], which is set in 1980 during the [Gdansk Shipyard strikes],   won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Festival, and was nominated for Oscars (the martial law authorities withdrew it from the competition)."*
>
> *Display 11,* Culture

Apart from brief references such as these, *Culture* notably glosses over issues of censorship and free speech. Instead, the display elements are deployed to shine a light on the popularity of the different cultural industries in the PRL and its thriving production *despite* the limitations imposed by censorship. What visitors are asked to take away, therefore, is not that that censorship was prevalent and free speech limited, but how Poles adapted to the restrictive policies to create culture in the face of such circumstances.

This reflects a wider willingness to underplay Polish Communism's repressive policies at many points in the exhibition. Indeed, this tendency in several areas of the exhibition to focus on the country's cultural, industrial, and consumer outputs and not on the oppression that went hand-in-hand with them speaks to the way in which the everyday is often approached in these types of museums. Rather than addressing the wider social, cultural, and economic spheres of Central and Eastern Europe's Communist regimes to paint a background to the lived experiences of the people, museums such as this one or the *Alltag*

museums in eastern Germany use their collections not just to reconstruct "what it was like" to live under the regime but, largely, to focus on the people. As has been shown in these examples, the genuineness of the objects, photographs, and video clips in the PRL Museum is tapped into to authenticate a narrative about the creativity and ingenuity of the Polish people in finding ways to not only adapt but thrive. The purpose of the visit is thus not intended to be about learning what brought Communism to Poland in the first place, nor how it was sustained over its four and a half decades, but instead to understand what it meant to be Polish during this era. In the following section, I turn to a realm far more personal than Poland's cultural scene to demonstrate how authentic display components are used in a very particular manner to create an authentic representation of domesticity in the everyday.

5.3.2 The home as a testament to perseverance

The Warsaw museum has made mock set-ups an integral part of its exhibition route, with the centrepiece being a mock flat located midway through the museum. The presence of the flat brings the PRL Museum in line with several existing museums of Communism around Central and Eastern Europe, particularly those in Germany (see chapter 2, section 2.3.2). At its heart, the aim of the space is to provide an authentic representation of what the home looked like under Communism. This makes the flat a useful display for investigating the effect of constructions of authenticity in its varied forms, as the space brings together authentic furniture, objects, and photographs to create a private home that may feel authentic to visitors, akin to Goffman (1959) and MacCannell's (1973) "back region".

Inside, visitors find four thinly divided "rooms": a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room of the "worker," and a living room of the "intelligentsia" (Figs. 35-38). Each room is filled with objects of all sorts, from toilet paper to cleaning products in the bathroom, cooking supplies in the kitchen, family photographs and miscellaneous trinkets in the two living rooms, and period furniture throughout. The items on display have been installed with no interpretation (excluding the photographs, which I will address shortly), aiding in the immersion of a space and increasing a sense of stepping into an authentically recreated home. At the same time, however, this immersion is not all-encompassing. The PRL Museum makes no attempt to mask the staged nature of the flat, and instead leans into the limited

space available for the reconstruction to offer an idea of what life was like. This is evidenced by the fact that the bathroom does not contain a toilet, the "window" in the worker's living room is covered by a photo of the outdoors, and there are photographs, objects, and text panels across many of the walls. This makes the space more like stage three of MacCannell's (1973) six-stage front-to-back continuum, in which a front region is entirely designed to look like a back region. With regards to the visitor experience, a sense of full immersion in one's home does not occur, but this does not prove detrimental to the museum's overall narrative.

Figure 35 Mock flat, bathroom
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 36 Mock flat, kitchen
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 37 Mock flat, worker's living room
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 38 Mock flat, intelligentsia's living room
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Lidchi's (1997) notion of the poetics of display is useful here, for it allows us to see how the individual objects, furniture, photographs, and text panels have been brought together within this space to produce a particular narrative about home life in the Polish People's Republic. That is, where the display components analyzed in the previous section authenticated a narrative about how cultural industries thrived during the regime, the flat speaks to the realities of having to make do against a backdrop of bad housing policy and shortages of household supplies.

The text panels are a good starting point for investigating this, which emphasize the difficulties citizens had in furnishing their homes. A small piece of text surrounded by photographs of living rooms and a furniture store states that,

> *"Practically throughout the entire communist era, people had to find a way to live in small and very inconveniently arranged flats. Their limited space made it virtually impossible to organise an area designated for everyday life only and separate rooms for individual family members to sleep in. Special multifunctional and space-saving segment furniture was designed to help with the problem: wall units and shelf-sofa beds. Thanks to them rooms could serve multiple functions and be used simultaneously as a bedroom, a dining room, a living room and a study."*
>
> *Display 20,* Our Own Place

Right away, a link is created between the information about citizens needing to contend with the challenges of their living arrangements and the size and shape of the space visitors find themselves in. We may assume that the mock flat is constrained by the amount of room available to reconstruct it within the exhibition space, but the staff nonetheless make an effort to position the flat as representative of the smallest housing size available to citizens during the time of the PRL (Fig. 39). The text panel and figures thus authenticate this space's ability to stand in for a typical flat in the Communist era.
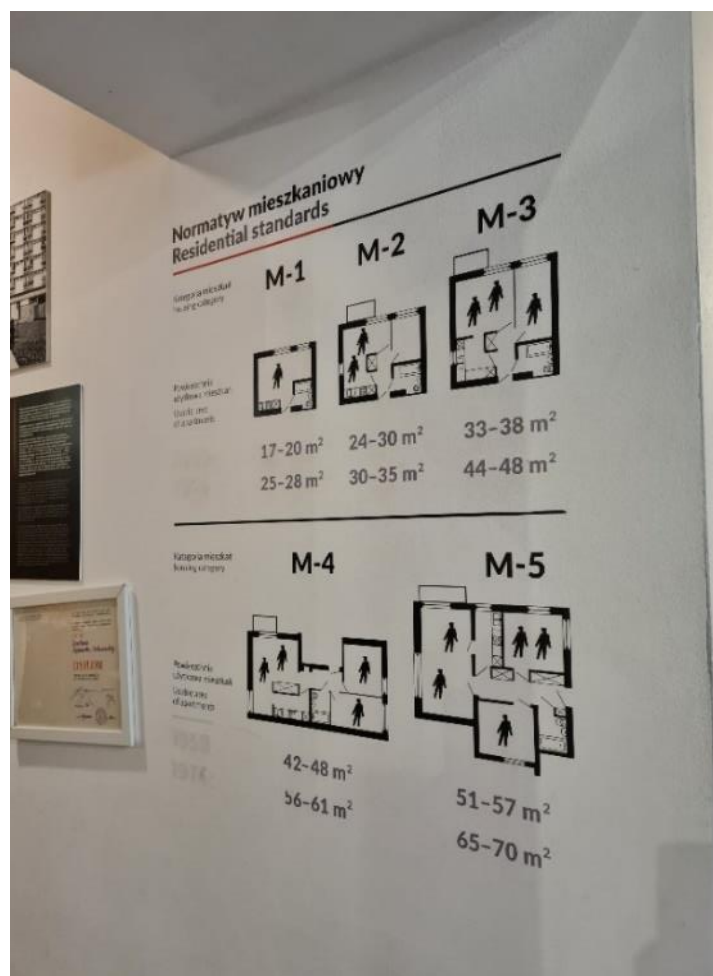
Figure 39 Mock flat, graph of housing standards
Source: Samantha Vaughn

This is further emphasized in the kitchen (Fig. 24 above), arranged to reflect the information provided in its accompanying text panel, which states that kitchens installed in the 1950s and 1960s were,

"narrow, windowless […] in which people sometimes managed to squeeze in a tiny table and one stool to sit on […] they also served as a storage space for food and household goods or as a place for ironing"

Display 20, Our Own Place

The space is thus designed to be narrow and packed, with every almost surface covered in dozens of objects, including kitchenware, scales, coffee tins, glass bottles, mixers, a radio, and a timer. Like the rest of the museum's collection elsewhere in the exhibition, these items too are materially and historically authentic. The museum uses the authenticity of their existence through time (Benjamin 1968) to have them represent a vision of the home

under Communism. In much the same way de Jong contended that museum objects can authenticate the museums' narratives as genuine (2018: 120), so too does the PRL Museum employ historically and materially authentic objects to construct an *authentic* space which matches the description in the text panel.

Figure 40 Mock flat, photographs of Communist-era kitchens
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The photographs on display in the kitchen area, which date from the 1950s and 1970s, also demonstrate this (Fig. 40). The images do not entirely match the text panels nor the mock setting, as one of the kitchens is spacious and two have windows. This dissimilarity does not inherently harm their use in this space, however, for they nonetheless reflect the overflowing, crowded spaces described in the texts and on display in the flat. I return here to Crane's (2013a) writings on "evidentiary ballast" in so far as the photographs are being used not only to support the text panels and provide a visual link to the mock kitchen, but

they are also an integral facet of the messaging encoded into this space (2013a: 135). They have, as Crane wrote, been turned into a component of the kitchen's "presentational environment," allowing for a visual link to be drawn between the past and the staged setting in the museum, regardless of the context in which the photos were originally taken (ibid.). These photographs thus have the power to contribute to the museum's mission of authentically recreating a domestic space, thanks in great part to the context within which they have been placed.

To adapt Wang's (1999) position on constructive authenticity, whereby authenticity is contextually determined and ideological, I take a somewhat literal stance. That is to say, the context in which Patla and his team have arranged these historical photographs – in a mock setting, alongside period furniture and textual supports – has determined their ability to function as part of the whole; it transforms Patla's vision of the average kitchen into an authentic representation. This is crucial to the kitchen's role (and the flat's more widely) in establishing a narrative about what domestic life was like in the PRL, for the sum of all these parts increases the potential for grasping the challenges citizens had in building a comfortable home during Communism.

This is, in my view, the primary takeaway from the mock flat, as the other text panels around the room also indicate the range of obstacles Poles faced in the domestic sphere. Indeed, returning to the aforementioned text panel surrounded by photographs of living rooms, we see an acknowledgement of the "multifunctional and space-saving segment furniture" which was designed to satisfy the limited space available in these homes. This claim is supported by a foldable bed in the "worker's" living room (Fig. 22 above), which Patla took from his grandmother's house when he began building his collection (*Telewizja Republika* 2019c). The bed is folded down, crowding the space. This has the effect of limiting visitors' ability to walk around this part of the room. They are not barred from doing so, but it is a tight squeeze between the bed, table, and TV cabinet. The experience of trying to physically navigate this space and the risk of bumping into something thus underscore the inconvenience of a flat of this size.

The purpose of this example is to highlight the different applications of authenticity in upholding the PRL Museum's overall approach to representing life under Communism that goes beyond the materialist understanding of authentic as genuine. In the case of the mock flat, it is not only the genuine display components that drive its authenticity, but

rather, this has been constructed by Patla when creating a space that reflects his own experience of Communist-era houses. Patla has, as Hooper-Greenhill once asserted, made the choice to select historically and materially authentic objects to produce a particular narrative borne out of his familiarity with the domestic sphere under Communism. This process further echoes Wang's (1999) work on constructive authenticity, in so far as the authenticity of the flat has been projected onto it by Patla's imagery, expectations, preferences, and beliefs, which, as was noted above, substantiates a message about Poles having to navigate life in an era plagued by economic difficulties.

Focusing on such difficulties may seem out of place in a museum that often glosses over the more repressive characteristics of Communism, especially when compared to the *Culture* display discussed above. But it is precisely this comparison that enables us to identify one of the key messages encoded into the mock flat. Just as *Culture* is about how Poles successfully thrived against a backdrop of censorship, so too does the flat convey perseverance. Consider, for example, the owner's 2019 interview with *Telewizja Republika*. Touring the flat with the journalist, Patla pointed out various objects around the flat that represented how Poles had to adapt under Communism, including boxes, bottles, and tins that were always reused, a washing machine which had many functions (see also chapter 6, section 6.3.2), and a pair of shoes from the 1980s made from "the only material that was left" (*Telewizja Republika* 2019c: 1:12). This transforms the flat into an immersive piece of commentary about Polish adaptability and perseverance, authenticated through the myriad knick-knacks, furniture, and photographs installed in the space. I will return to this idea of adaptability in the following chapter.

The examples provided in this section highlight the approach taken by the PRL Museum to represent Polish Communist history from the level of the everyday. There is a degree of nuance in the displays, which hint at the oppressive policies that characterized life in the PRL, such as references to censorship in the culture display and the difficulties citizens faced when setting up a home. But these references are often overshadowed by stories of survival, perseverance, and the ability to adapt. What close analysis shows, however, is that far from trying to distance themselves completely from the terror and oppression that marked the Communist period, the museum in reality embraces this characterization – as muted as the allusions may be – as it allows stories of a national pride to come to the forefront. I explore this further in the following chapter, where I examine how it is

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emphasized to create a sense of national identity that formed during the country's many decades under Communism.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the MoC in Prague and the PRL Museum in Warsaw approach the history of their respective regimes in divergent ways. While the Czech museum constructs a representation of its regime through a lens of control and oppression, its Polish counterpart tends towards portraying the everyday in the Polish People's Republic. To authenticate these approaches, both museums have leaned into the notion of authenticity in its different forms. First and foremost is the materialist understanding of authenticity, which concerns the *genuineness* of the museums' collections (Jones 2010). That is, historically and materially authentic objects and photographs, alongside first-hand witness accounts of life under Communism (de Jong 2018). Secondly, there is constructive authenticity, which Wang (1999) asserted is negotiated and contextually determined. Lastly, there is a type of reciprocal combination of the first two, in which museums authenticate objects through their reputation of being an authority in knowledge and the objects respond in kind to authenticate the museums' narratives thanks to their status as genuine things, or witnesses to the past (de Jong 2018).

The MoC relies heavily on this authenticity as visitors transition to the Nightmare section of the exhibition. Those who hire a tour guide may be treated to a personal recollection on the difficult topics of this section, as I was with my guide Pavel, but for visitors who forego this option, the messages are still driven home through the authenticating techniques in the displays themselves. Opening with video testimonies by first-hand witnesses allows the museum to establish a framework for moving through the rest of this section, undeniably the darkest part of the museum. Visitors are introduced to negative policies of social control and the oppressive forces that led the witnesses to leave the country. This creates a sense of fear for those who stayed behind, which is driven home by the spy gear on display. This small corner of the exhibition may offer the most overt representation of control and oppression, but these are red threads which run throughout its entirety. What this ultimately creates is a sense of victimization suffered by Czechoslovak citizens, particularly at the hands of the Communist Party and their Soviet masters. This notion of victimization will be explored further in the following chapter, where I will present

a picture of how the museum utilizes their oppression as a foundational myth for a proud national identity.

The PRL Museum takes a different perspective, opting instead to approach the Polish regime from the ground up. To this end, it deploys authentic objects to serve as witnesses to history, representing what life was "really like". The collection of objects, photographs, and video clips relating to Poland's cultural outputs in the Communist era are a prime example of this. What life was "really like," however, is a matter of construction (Ferguson 1996; Whitehead 2009, 2016a, 2016b), and what we find in the PRL Museum is a narrative about Poles' ability to thrive in the face of oppression, unhindered by their political circumstances. The focus is not on its citizens being victimized, as is the case in the Prague museum, but instead how they succeeded in flourishing within the bounds of their oppression. This is also reflected in the mock flat, where making the best of a bad situation in the domestic sphere is on display. Here, authentic objects, furniture, and photographs are similarly utilized to propagate the idea that Poles managed to find a way to live well enough despite the chronic issues with housing shortages and supply chains.

It will have become clear over the course of this chapter that despite authenticating two different approaches to representing Communist history, with terror and oppression dominating the Czech museum and everyday life defining the Polish museum, both exhibitions are nonetheless encoded with a broadly similar message which prioritizes national identity. I will explore this in more detail in the following chapter, examining how both museums tap into existing nation-defining tropes to construct identities born out of or shaped by their Communist pasts. In particular, I will discuss the ways in which the MoC draws on its history of victimization to delineate a boundary around its Communist past and bring to the fore the country's democratic ideals, whilst the PRL Museum calls on the distinctiveness of the Polish people and common characteristics to engender a sense of pride in the nation.

Chapter 6: Encouraging perceptions: narratives of national identity and national pride in Communist history museums

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 identified different forms of authenticity evident within the case study museums which served to substantiate their respective approaches to representing Communist history. More specifically, the myriad display elements utilized in the exhibitions were scrutinized to build a picture of how their material authenticity and perceived authenticity afforded a sense of authority to the institutions. In so doing, this has allowed the MoC in Prague to construct a narrative of Communism as an era of terror, marked by a distinct lack of democratic freedoms and victimization, and the PRL Museum in Warsaw to represent its regime as one that is to be comprehended in a bottom-up fashion, with a focus on the everyday experiences of Polish citizens living in a restrictive and badly-run society.

This chapter examines these narratives in greater detail. It situates the case study museums within the frameworks laid out by several scholars, including Anderson's (1983) "imagined community," Smith's (1991) "expressive ceremonials and symbols," and the narrative tropes delineated in the works of Macdonald (2005) and Watson (2021). In particular, it takes a deeper look at how particular images, objects, and national figures are deployed by the museums to encode a culturally specific perspective of Czech and Polish (national) identity. As was outlined in the literature review, I recognize that national identity is multifaceted and continuously shifting (Mason 2005; Hall 1996), and so I do not claim that the characteristics identified as being represented in the museums are quintessential of their respective nations. Rather, my focus is on how the exhibitions tap into a number of nation-building tropes using their images, objects, and national figures to construct what the *museums* claim are the national identities of their respective countries. I do this through an examination of three overlapping facets of national identity construction: self-definition, the everyday, and emotion.

Section 6.2 examines the way Czech and Polish identity is defined both relationally and through distinctiveness. The following section shifts the focus to a more mundane level, looking at how banal interactions and habits are framed in the museum as a critical underpinning of national identity development. In the final part of this chapter, I consider the role of emotion in how museums encourage visitors to believe in the museums' national narratives. Here, I offer some reflections about my own position as a foreign visitor to these

museums as a precursor to more detailed discussion about foreign visitor responses in chapter 7.

6.2 Building a national identity through self-definition: mobilizing national heroes

In her work on British identity and Holocaust commemoration, Macdonald described the relationality that underpins the construction of national identity, claiming that nations engage in a practice of self-definition in relation to other nations (2005: 49). Processes of opposition and the highlighting of differences between nations serve to create an "us vs them" narrative that is central to the production of all collective identities. Watson reiterated this, writing that national identity is "often expressed through difference, usually *difference from the nearest national neighbours*" (2021: 23, my emphasis). In the drive to distance themselves from Communism, as detailed by Light (2000a; 2000b) and Mark (2010b) and mentioned earlier in this thesis, former Communist nations have defined their post-1989 identities as distinctly national, drawing on their respective characteristics. Part of this process entailed situating themselves in opposition to the Soviet Union, which for them was defined by the Communist ideology they were rejecting. Chapter 5 hinted at these expressions of difference, namely through the distinctness of what it means to be Czech and Polish, and I would like here to expand on how these are constructed throughout the case study museums as a whole.

In the following two sections, I offer examples of how the countries' national identities are constructed through these processes of opposition and distinctness. The MoC in Prague mobilizes its national heroes as a way to indicate an implicit difference between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. It is their oppositional role that draws out the characteristics of a Czech national identity, which serves as a foundational myth for contemporary Czechia. In the PRL Museum, the national narratives of perseverance and ability that I highlighted in chapter 5 coalesce with those emphasising how the Polish people ultimately resisted against and brought down Communism in the country.

6.2.1 Drawing on foundational figures in the MoC: A Czech approach

The MoC differentiates Czechs from their former Soviet counterparts by going to great lengths to delineate Czechoslovakia's own achievements, characteristics, and history.

One element of this history is the key figures who helped form Czechoslovakia in 1918 and contemporary Czechia in 1989, Tomáš Masaryk and Václav Havel, the first and last presidents of Czechoslovakia, respectively. These men are situated in the museum as heroic and democratic individuals that stand in complete opposition to the Soviet Union's totalitarian leaders. The involvement of Masaryk in this narrative may seem like an anachronism, the former president having died a full decade before the Communist party rose to power. But as laid out in chapter 4, the MoC begins with the founding of independent Czechoslovakia after the end of World War I, before quickly transitioning to the threat of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and the Communist takeover in the 1940s. Opening the museum in this manner not only serves to provide some background information to contextualize the coming of Communism, but it also lays the necessary foundation for creating a link between the country's two eras of democracy. More specifically, the museum has constructed an overarching story about Czechoslovakia/Czechia's democratic ideals and the opposition of these to Communism.

The sense of consistency across the decades that this creates echoes the point made by Macdonald in her work on British identity, which holds that "continuity over time—and preferably over a considerable time-period—was one of the properties through which the newly imagined communities were legitimated" (2005: 49). The choice to mobilize Masaryk and Havel as a way to create this continuity transforms their memories into "reified notions of history and roots" (Edensor 2002: 25), imbuing them with an intentional symbolism to represent the country's inevitable return to democracy after 1989. Spatially the two men can be read as implying what "we have long been in the process of becoming" (Preziosi 2011: 58). How, then, does the museum frame these early years in democratic Czechoslovakia's history?

As visitors push through the turnstile into the exhibition space, they are greeted with three images of Masaryk. These include a bust directly opposite the entrance, a framed photograph with the words "We shall remain faithful," and a floor-to-ceiling wall decal of Masaryk declaring Czechoslovakia's independence (Fig. 41; turnstile is not visible in the photo but is to the right of the wall decal). Examining this from the perspective of placement, which Whitehead argues has "a strong discursive function in emphasising [...] the significance, centrality or relations of objects" (2009: 30), it becomes immediately obvious that installing these display components within the visitors' line of sight before they

approach even the first display establishes an understanding of the president as a key figure in the country's history.

Figure 41 Entrance of the exhibition; the turnstile is just out of view, to the right of the wall decal
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The museum does not often present opportunities for engagement with the display components and decoration before the text, which makes this first encounter with the exhibition potentially powerful. Writing of the affective capacities of object-viewer encounters, Dudley mused on the power of object and viewer coming into contact with one another "without prior or parallel explanation or context" (2015: 57), and the opportunity for "powerful responsive ideas and feelings" (ibid.) to arise. Notwithstanding the fact that an absence of context is never possible, which Dudley herself acknowledged, there is something to be said for the effect of encountering the larger-than-life wall decal of Masaryk before one has the opportunity to adjust to the exhibition space. Even for those who do not know who he is, his presence in the narrative is made explicitly important by way of this presentational environment (Crane 2013a).

Susannah Eckersley (2020a) also examined such encounters in her research on German museums serving as contact zones for refugees. It is her exploration of the memories of loss that are expressed within this encounter which stands out. She wrote that when "powerful memories of loss, trauma, attachment and change are articulated, objects

often take on a heightened symbolic significance and affective power for individuals" (Eckersley 2020a: 292). If, as the MoC does through its emphasis on victimization, the experience of Communism in Czechoslovakia can be considered traumatic and marked by a loss of democracy, it becomes possible to understand how engaging with the display components installed at the start of the exhibition, especially when one has yet to orient oneself to the space, can generate a powerful, perhaps even affective response. If the museum's intention is to build up to Havel and the transition back to democracy, the seeds of the triumphant feelings this incites are planted from the opening display.

Indeed, Masaryk's crucial role in the history of Czechoslovakia is soon made clear, when he is framed as representative of the country's democratic ideals. He is mentioned multiple times throughout the exhibition, always framed as the antithesis of Communism and its undemocratic principles. For example, in the second section of the exhibition, the curators introduce the figure of Stalin as a Communist puppet-master before describing the erection of Prague's infamous Stalin Monument on the same site as an intended statue of Masaryk as "one of the great paradoxes of history" (Display 10, *The Stalin Monument*). The president is thus drawn upon in this instance to represent the country's inherent incompatibility with totalitarianism.

The same attention is given to Havel, a former dissident and the last president of Czechoslovakia, in the final section of the exhibition. The last display is dedicated entirely to Havel (Fig. 42), where he is positioned as the epitome of a democratic figure. The main text panel opens with:

> *Václav Havel, the first post-Communist President of Czechoslovakia and symbol of the Velvet Revolution, grew up in a family that instilled the democratic ideals of the First Republic in him. Thus, the Communists forbade him from studying at university.*
>
> *Display 67,* Václav Havel

In defining him as a symbol of the Velvet Revolution, the museum thus roots his person in a key moment in modern Czechoslovakia, when 45 years of Communist rule came to an end and democracy was restored. Furthermore, the reference to the First Republic creates an additional connection to Masaryk. In doing so, it emphasizes how the ideals which defined this earlier period in Czechoslovakia's history – personified by Masaryk – were of such antithesis to Communism that Havel himself was barred from accessing higher education solely because he believed in them.

Figure 42 Display 67, Václav Havel
Source: Samantha Vaughn

It is worth noting here that the reference to Havel not being allowed to attend university also creates a link back to the end of section 4, where display 50, *Persecution and Cadre Screening*, describes the obstacles citizens faced when they were critical of the regime or came from families with a history of criticizing Communism. By extension, this also creates a link to the video testimonies given by Monika Arkai and Michael Wellner Pospíšil examined in the previous chapter (see section 5.2.1), as both individuals described not being allowed to attend university for the same reason as Havel. This thus produces a narrative thread which runs throughout the exhibition, bookended by the nationally known figures of Masaryk and Havel, but using individual citizens along the way to underscore how the desire for democratic freedoms were felt at all levels of society. This link also serves the double

purpose of presenting Havel as *Czech*. That is to say, we can see Monika and Michael *in* Havel and Havel *in* them. His position as the president who delivered the nation from Communism thus becomes rooted in his Czechness; he was a citizen like any other but one who rose to the occasion to fulfill the democratic ambitions of all his fellow countrymen. Indeed, the main text panel in his display continues with a description of Havel's fearless pursuit of freedom:

> *At the age of 20, Havel began actively contributing to literary journals; later, theaters would stage the plays he wrote. Despite the suppression of the Prague Spring by Warsaw Pact troops, Havel continued to harshly criticize the regime. The Communists were none too pleased by his actions and had him sent to a brewery in Trutnov to work as a laborer. His dissident activities culminated in 1977 when Charter 77 was published. In 1979 he was sentenced to prison for four and a half years for his attitude towards the regime. But the Communists did not break him. The moment he got out, he involved himself in the dissident movement once again. Havel became Public Enemy Number One; he was imprisoned anew and was under constant StB surveillance.*
>
> *Display 67,* Václav Havel

Significantly, Masaryk and Havel, as bookends of this narrative thread, are not represented in isolation from one another but are in fact linked in the closing displays. More specifically, Masaryk's image is invoked alongside that of Havel to create the link between Czechoslovakia's democratic foundation and the political changes that took place in 1989. For example, in the penultimate display, *Velvet Revolution*, the main text panel describes the street protests as follows:

> *A crowd of several thousand people, mostly students, chanted slogans such as: "Put an end to the Communist Party monopoly!" and "We want free elections!" and sang the praises of Charter 77, Masaryk and Václav Havel. When the procession reached Národní třída Avenue, the Communists lost patience and security forces brutally broke the demonstration.*
>
> *Display 66,* Velvet Revolution

Havel's role as a dissident was established in two previous displays within this same corner of the exhibition, so the museum appears to be encouraging visitors to acknowledge his

importance to a society yearning for an end to Communism, and thus why his name was chanted during these protests. In mentioning Masaryk, the museum invites visitors to draw a connection between the country's founding – a celebrated event within the context of the museum – and the throwing off of Communism and subsequent return to democracy.

Aesthetically, this association between Masaryk and Havel is repeated in the latter's dedicated display (Fig. 29 above). The display components in the final display include Havel's bust, a photograph of him, and a floor-to-ceiling photo of him speaking to a crowd of supporters, echoing the bust, photograph, and oversized wall decal of Masaryk at the start of the exhibition. This underscores the link between the country's democracy under Masaryk and new democracy under Havel first hinted at in the Velvet Revolution display, once again reiterating the continuity between the two eras of democracy. In this way, the components act as literal "material intersections between past and present" (Eckersley 2020a: 294), allowing visitors to draw comparisons between the two figures and their respective roles in Czechoslovakia/Czechia. By opening and closing the museum with these historical figures, the MoC mobilizes both hidden (the memory of Masaryk and Havel) and explicit (the busts and photographs of these men) expressive symbols (Smith 1991: 77) to make visible the message that there was a clear opposition to the values held by the Communists which dominated life in Czechoslovakia for four and a half decades.

What this achieves is two-fold. Firstly, it demonstrates an alignment with many other museums of Communism, which view the Communist regimes as imposed from the outside by the Soviet Union (see chapter 2, section 2.3.1), situating themselves as resistant to the former superpower. Secondly, this resistance is used as an origin story for contemporary Czechia. In her analysis of national museums, Watson asserted that it is "the antiquity of their original independence as a nation state and the nobleness of their struggle against their rulers" (2021: 69) that has been used in museums around the world to develop a national identity that differs from those of former colonizers (ibid.). The memory of Havel, and more specifically, its reification within the photo of him speaking to a crowd of supporters, thus comes to stand for a Czech national identity characterized by a resistance to Communism (Smith 1991). The photo stresses Havel's popularity with the people and concretizes the theme that Communism was not welcome in the country, as the people wanted a leader who would fight for their freedom and human rights.

The expression of such democratic ideals made clear within the museum's ending leaves visitors with the impression that Czechia triumphantly returned to democracy, free from the influence of its colonizer. We can see a similar narrative in the Polish museum as well, where the beginning and end of its exhibition draws on Poland's opposition groups to lay the groundwork for how to understand Polish identity. But where the MoC does this to propagate a message of Czechoslovakia as oppositional to the Soviet Union and Communism, the PRL Museum uses its foundational figures to encode a deep sense of pride in what it means to be Polish.

6.2.2 Solidarity and Opposition: a collective Polish story

The Polish trade union Solidarity constitutes a significant presence in the PRL Museum. It is a central focus in the first few displays, where the exhibition starts not with the beginning of Communism in Poland but rather the end. This can be seen as a direct reflection of the owner's priorities, which he explained when asked in 2019 to describe the museum's mission:

> Our mission is to say all the story of Solidarity also. Because this is, in my opinion, the brightest story that we had in last many years. It's amazing to see that, to explain that, to talk about August 1980, to talk about all the Martial Law story, and the elections. So that story for me is just amazing to talk about, and that's important to talk about (*Telewizja Republika* 2019a: 6:00-6:36).

Patla's explanation of what he deemed significant to display reflects previous arguments made by scholars such as Ferguson (1996) and Hooper-Greenhill (2000). Both authors advocated for considering exhibitions as something informed by what is significant to their creators, with Ferguson asserting that every exhibition features a plan, "a will, or teleological hierarchy of significances" (1996: 179). This latter notion of teleology is of particular importance in my analysis of Solidarity's presence in the PRL Museum, as its placement at the start of the exhibition signals the role we *know* it played in an outcome we *know* occurred.

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Before examining this, it should be highlighted that despite the importance Patla places on Solidarity, the museum actually does very little to explain what it is or why it was founded. The only exceptions are the text panel for display 5, *Opposition*, point number four of the audio guide, and a short label for an "August 1980 calendar" in the stairwell leading to the main exhibition space. The first briefly introduces the trade union as having been founded in 1980, that 10 million Poles were members, that Lech Wałęsa was its leader, and that it resorted to non-violence "in their fight for democracy" (display 5, *Opposition*). The audio guide addresses the August 1980-themed calendar on display. It states that mass demonstrations were held that month which led to the August Agreements, which included the legalization of Solidarity and a limitation on censorship, Additionally, it lists who the key figures were and claims that the events "mark a symbolic beginning of the end of communism in Poland" (audio guide 2:14-3:06). This is echoed by the calendar's short label, which also explains the outcomes of the strikes in 1980. Solidarity is indeed mentioned several more times throughout the exhibition, though always in relation to other topics and lacking any historical context.

The limited information provided may reflect the fact that the museum is only one in a city – and country – full of institutions that address the history of Solidarity in great detail, and thus it does not feel the need to provide this information. But it may also speak to the nature of who the Patlas and their team want to visit their museum. Though its foundation was linked to the curiosity of foreign visitors regarding Poland's Communist past, the owners may nonetheless want it to be a space for Poles as well. In this regard, the PRL Museum is marked right away by a degree of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) in so far as it appears to rely on a shared understanding of Solidarity amongst the Polish people in order to forgo the basics. This demonstrates one of the key characteristics of the PRL Museum, which is that it approaches Communist history from the bottom-up, at times situating its interpretation against an expected backdrop of common knowledge, including the history of the Solidarity movement. I will therefore give a brief outline of this history in order to contextualise the following discussion.

The trade union was founded following strikes at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk in August 1980 which broke out after the firing of Anna Walentynowicz, a popular crane operator and trade union activist (Kemp-Welch 2008: 237-238; Prazmowska 2012: 207). These, in turn, followed several weeks of strikes around the country sparked by an increase

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in basic food prices (Kemp-Welch 2008: 230-231; Davies 2005: 482; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019: 396). The quick expansion of the strikes – up to 50,000 people in the Gdańsk region alone, according to A. Kemp-Welch (2008: 241) – forced the Communist Party to negotiate with the workers. The result of this was the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement, which contained twenty-one demands on the part of the strikers, including allowing the establishment of free trade unions (Kemp-Welch 2008: 248-249; Davies 2005: 484; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019: 398). Solidarity emerged from these new freedoms conceded to the people, led by some of the main negotiators in Gdańsk, including Lech Wałęsa, whom I will discuss below.

Solidarity played a much larger role in Polish society than being a simple trade union, however. According to Konstanty Gebert, "For lack of a better term, it was – given its 10 million membership in a nation of then 37 million – simply the nation organized" (2019: 137). It should be noted that the museum does cite this number in the main text panel in its *Opposition* display but it does not explain how the importance of Solidarity expanded into Polish society more widely. According to Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, "it was evolving into a mass social movement committed to the democratization of political life, the dismantling of the command economy, and the introduction of autonomous production units. […] an effective state of 'dual power' was emerging" (2019: 399). The threat of this growing influence led the Communist government to declare Martial Law in Poland on 13 December 1981, during which Solidarity was banned and its leaders arrested (Kemp-Welch 2008: 327-328; Davies 2005: 491; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019: 401-402), forcing the trade union underground. When Martial Law was lifted on 22 July 1983, Solidarity continued to constitute a presence in Polish politics, though to a much smaller degree (Kemp-Welch 2008: 338).

Finally, following more strikes in 1988 and the government's weakening hold on power, Solidarity, with Wałęsa at the helm, emerged as the main opposition negotiators in what became known as the Round Table Talks in early 1989. A crucial outcome of these negotiations were the first semi-free elections in over four decades, which were held on 4 June 1989. Many members of Solidarity ran for office, winning almost every available seat (Prazmowska 2010: 229; Kemp-Welch 2008: 404; Lukowski and Zawadzki 2019: 408). The significance of this outcome can be found in Lukowski and Zawadzki's concise analysis of the event: "the Polish elections of 1989 proved to be the first key move in the dismantling of the

communist system in east-central Europe" (2019: 407-408). It is with this latter point that the PRL Museum opens its exhibition, with Solidarity positioned as the driving force that made it happen.

Figure 43 Opposition documents lining the staircase
Source: Samantha Vaughn
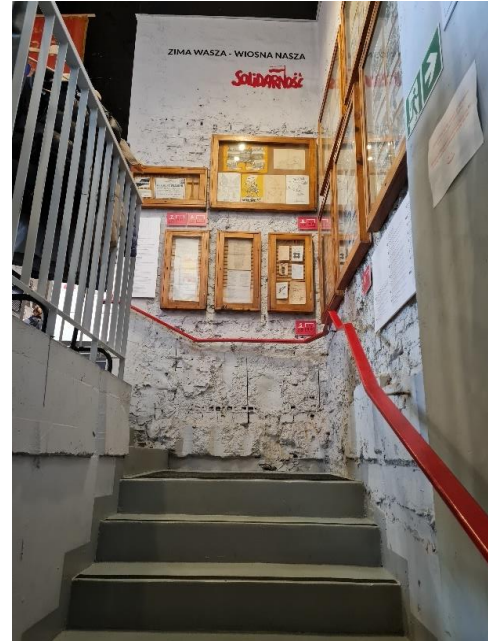
Figure 44 Opposition documents lining the staircase
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 45 Opposition documents lining the staircase
Source: Samantha Vaughn

As was briefly noted in the previous chapter (see chapter 5, section 5.1), despite the museum's focus on everyday life, the topics on display do not shy away from the brutality of the Communist regime, even if this is done in a more muted manner compared to its Czech

counterpart. For example, the text panel at the top of the main staircase (Fig. 17 in chapter 4) tells of how political opponents of the Communist Polish Worker's Party were forced to leave the country or murdered, and that the people, in exchange for "social advancement and power [...] were expected to be blindly obedient in return". Given its location, with visitors passing by an array of opposition-related documents (Figs. 43-45) on their way up the stairs, this commentary allows for a narrative to be established that foregrounds the work of opposition groups in an atmosphere of oppression and control.

Figure 46 Display 5, Opposition*, with Chris Niedenthal's photo of the first day of Martial Law at the centre*
Source: Samantha Vaughn

This continues into the fifth display, where visitors find themselves in front of a large-scale print of Chris Niedenthal's iconic photo of the first day of Martial Law in 1981 (Fig. 46). Dwarfing the photos around it, the image of an armoured personnel carrier in front of Moscow Cinema in Warsaw, which is hung with a banner advertising the film *Apocalypse Now*, emanates a feeling of despair about the absolute power the Communist Party yielded.

Adding to this is the accompanying label, which describes the risk Niedenthal took not only capturing the photo but also smuggling it out of Poland to be published abroad:

> *No other photo could better render the apocalyptic atmosphere of fear and uncertainty felt by the Polish nation at that time. At that time you could go to prison just for having the camera on you while being in the street. Taking a picture of soldiers was therefore even more dangerous. Niedenthal was just passing the "Moscow" cinema in the car. When he realised what an amazing scene he had just witnessed he started looking for a place where he could take the picture from. He found a staircase with a very good view of the cinema. After he took the photo, the next biggest problem was how to send it to the West. Allegedly, just one hour before the curfew he managed to talk a student from Germany waiting at the railway station into smuggling the film abroad. The picture was published in the German "Newsweek" and made history.*

But while the texts and Niedenthal's photo serve to construct this atmosphere of oppression and control, that is not the main point of the opening displays. To understand this, we need to return to the beginning of the exhibition, starting with the second display – the first being a text panel next to the ticket desk describing the museum's mission as showing "everyday life in the Polish People's Republic" and to "tell the story of how the policy of 'people's rule' influenced the daily lives of citizens" (display 1, *About the Exhibition*). Ascending the staircase to the main exhibition space, visitors come to the second display (Fig. 47), which focuses on the aforementioned semi-free elections held on 4 June 1989. Each element in the display works together to convey an appreciation for the Polish fight for democracy, the pride felt for having achieved it, and Solidarity's role in bringing down the regime.

Visitors are compelled to stop on the first landing to watch a short video clip of a woman speaking in Polish, identified as the actress Joanna Szczepkowska. Below the TV are two brief text panels, one with information about the elections and the other containing a transcript of a 2009 interview with Ms. Szczepkowska. The video dates to late October 1989, and features Ms. Szczepkowska declaring that Communism had ended in Poland on 4 June. Her experience of saying this – unprompted, we learn – on live television is detailed in the transcript below the screen, which explains her hesitation and fear of retaliation for what she had said. For those who listen to the audio guide, they will also hear of how her action was celebrated by the people, whom she found waiting for her at her home when she returned from the TV studio (audio guide 00:58). With this added information, Polish

citizens are represented as having been decisive in their vote five months earlier and that no one needed fear retaliation for speaking freely anymore. By opening the museum with such a brave declaration, there is an impression that these elections are not only crucial to Polish history, but that they are also a foundational moment for contemporary Poland and its shared identity over the last three and a half decades. It is within this framework that we are now invited to view Solidarity.
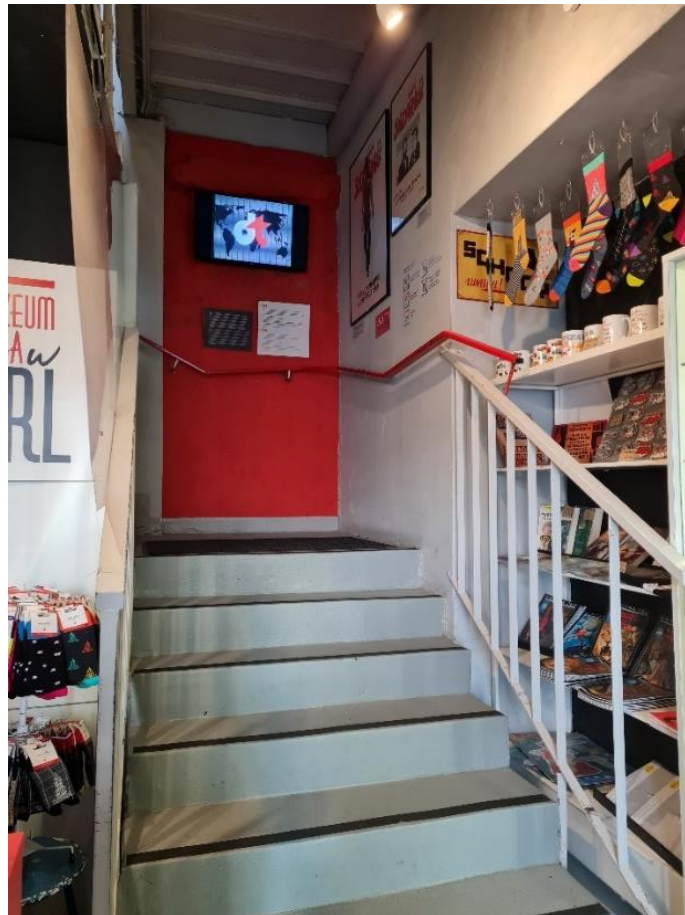
Figure 47 Museum of Life Under Communism, Warsaw, entrance
Source: Samantha Vaughn

To the right of the screen are two posters: the now-famous Solidarity election poster depicting American actor Gary Cooper in *High Noon* holding a ballot in his hand, and Juliusz Jan Braun's parliamentary election poster, showing the candidate standing next to Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa (Fig. 48). The brief contextual information provided about the election aids in further framing Solidarity, specifically as an organization whose establishment and continued fight throughout the 1980s paved the way for the fall of Communism in Poland. Signifying its role in late-Communist Poland are these two posters, which underscore this message of fighting for Poland's freedom.

The first poster, with Juliusz Jan Braun and Lech Wałęsa, is significant as an authentic object serving as a "valuable witness" (Display 1, *About the Museum*) to the elections, but it is actually the depiction of Wałęsa that is of true importance here. As previously discussed, he played a key role in securing the agreement of the Communist Party for Solidarity to operate following the Gdańsk Shipyard strikes in August 1980, and was later a prominent participant in the Round Table Talks, which resulted in the June 1989 elections. According to my tour guide, Kacper, candidates wanted to take pictures with Wałęsa because they believed it would have increased their chances of getting votes (personal tour: 02:09). Braun's poster, then, authenticates Wałęsa's popularity in the 1980s. Following the elections and the collapse of Communism, he became the first democratically elected President of Poland in over six decades (Kemp-Welch 2008; Prazmowska 2010). Wałęsa's status as a highly regarded trade union leader, and later politician, is thus drawn upon by way of the explicit expressive symbol (Smith 1991) that is the election poster, transforming his memory into a reified notion (Edensor 2002) of Polish exceptionalism.

Figure 48 Display 2, Solidarity
Source: Samantha Vaughn

The second poster, featuring a twist on the famous image of Cooper in *High Noon*, holds equal significance. The film centres on the character of Marshal Will Kane as he finds

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himself standing alone against a gang of outlaws. His journey, it is implied, reflects Poland's status as the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to throw off the bonds of the Soviet Union, standing alone in a sea of Communist regimes. Its power as a propaganda tool is thus readily understandable. With regards to its importance to the Polish people, Wałęsa himself spoke about it when paying tribute to US president Ronald Reagan after his death in 2004. He wrote,

> I have often been asked in the United States to sign the poster that many Americans consider very significant. [...] It was a simple but effective gimmick that, at the time, was misunderstood by the Communists. They, in fact, tried to ridicule the freedom movement in Poland as an invention of the "Wild" West, especially the U.S. But the poster had the opposite impact: Cowboys in Western clothes had become a powerful symbol for Poles. Cowboys fight for justice, fight against evil, and fight for freedom, both physical and spiritual. Solidarity trounced the Communists in that election, paving the way for a democratic government in Poland. It is always so touching when people bring this poster up to me to autograph it. They have cherished it for so many years and it has become the emblem of the battle that we all fought together (Wałęsa 2004).

That Wałęsa described the *High Noon* poster as an "emblem" of a battle that Poles "fought together" encapsulates the very essence of constructing a national identity in the museum. It serves as a unifying force (Watson 2021), an intangible belief about Polish resistance to Communism translated into an "identifiable, material and visible presence" (Mason 2004: 18). It also aids in constructing an imagined community (Anderson 1983) of the Polish nation, which Wałęsa himself alluded to in his assertion that all Poles fought together against evil and for freedom. In installing the poster in the exhibition, the PRL Museum – through the authority it possesses (Anderson 1983; Whitehead 2016a) – has contributed to the construction of this community, drawing on the memory of both Solidarity and the poster itself to sustain a sense of belonging amongst Poles.

On the memory of the poster, Wałęsa's 2004 quotation shows that there has always been a clear importance placed upon it, even 15 years after the elections. It is perhaps no

surprise, then, that Patla would have chosen to display the poster in the museum more than three decades later. Something much deeper is occurring, however, and it has to do with the role the *High Noon* poster played during the elections, or rather, the lack of a role. For those who listen to the audio guide, they will learn that the poster did not actually arrive in Poland until the night before the election, which means people would only have seen it on their way to the polls. This undermines the narrative of its electoral influence, but it simultaneously speaks to the power the poster holds in representing the elections and communicating their importance for the Polish nation. I return here to the notion of authenticity explored in the chapter 5. As the audio guide clarifies, the reality of experiencing the poster on 4 June 1989 was very limited, and so its ability to tell the history of the elections lies not in its role on that day, but rather in its staging inside the museum as an emblem of Polish resistance to Communism. In view of Wałęsa's comments, the poster thus becomes a blank slate available to be invested with meaning long after the fact, a task Patla and his team duly undertake, mobilizing it to construct a triumphant and heroic representation of Solidarity.

The combination of these display components – the short text panel with information about the elections, the posters, and Ms. Szczepkowska's video – work in conjunction to set up how Solidarity is to be thought of throughout the exhibition. By opening the museum with Ms. Szczepkowska's brave declaration, Wałęsa's memory, and the *High Noon* poster known throughout Poland, the elections become an origin story for the contemporary Polish state (Watson 2021). This is particularly the case when considered through a lens of national pride: pride in resisting the Communist authorities, and in being the first country to remove them from power. The PRL Museum thus opens with an enduring narrative of the Polish spirit, not unlike the way the people are represented as thriving despite the bounds of censorship and difficult housing conditions, as discussed in the previous chapter.

As a final note before closing this section, there are two key commonalities to note about how the museums mobilized their national heroes; that is, *where* and *how* they go about doing this. As was discussed in chapters 4 and 5, much of of the Prague museum contains messages of victimization and suggests the inherently democratic nature of the populace, just as the Warsaw museum approaches its history from the perspective of the

everyday throughout the whole of its exhibition. But with regards to defining the identity of their respective citizens, this is at its strongest at the start and end of the exhibition routes. This is not coincidental. Both museums have chosen starkly anti-Communist stories to tell at these points. Where the MoC links the beginning and end of its museum with the foundation of and return to democracy – creating an invisible thread that is supported at various points throughout the exhibition – the PRL Museum's layout means visitors must start and finish their tour on the same staircase, allowing the story of Solidarity and the elections to frame their visit as well as their final conclusion about Polish Communism.

Such staging could be considered an act of "covert" interpretation, as Sarah Ganz Blythe and Barbara Palley (2011) called it, arranging their objects to silently weave a narrative about identity. Covert or not, Moser (2010) asserted that analyzing museum exhibitions necessarily entails considering the layout of its components. The decision behind this, she wrote, "can create meanings about the relevant importance of objects and their identity as markers of cultural development" (Moser 2010: 27). Rather than cultural development, however, I would assert that the figures mobilized at the start and end of the case study museums are markers of *identity* development, framing and summarizing the rejection of Communism in these two countries which sits at the root of their contemporary origin stories and, by extension, their national identities.

With respect to *how* the case studies go about mobilizing their countries' national heroes, we must consider the entanglement of the collective and individual; or rather, using the individual to represent the collective. Though both museums elevate the most prominent figures – contributing to their canonization in the national story – the fact that they are used to stand in for the characteristics of the citizenry is telling. This reflects Tim Edensor's position that social and individual identities should not be considered as a dichotomy, arguing instead that the two are "utterly entangled" (2002: 24). Though the memories of these individuals and their roles in Czech and Polish society have been foregrounded, in an effort to construct a national identity they must inherently be linked to the people to whom this identity belongs. In other words, the unifying force they represent "remind their citizens of what they have in common" (Watson 2021: 73). In doing so, the MoC offers Czech visitors the opportunity to identify with the most prominent figures in their country's history, seeing themselves as a part of its democratic trajectory. There are, of course, many other ways in which such commonalities amongst people can be defined

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beyond national heroes. In the following section, I turn to the mundane to examine the ways in which nation-building occurs in everyday life.

6.3 Building a national identity through everyday life

The first section laid out how both the MoC and the PRL Museum define their identities through self-definition, be it by way of their positioning in relation to the Soviet Union or through an elevation of their respective characteristics. The same occurs on a more mundane level; that is, elements of national identity that play out in the everyday have been captured to signify ways of being that are affected by more than the grand historical moments of a country's history. Billig's (1995) notion of "banal nationalism" is influential in this regard. Writing in the midst of what Marco Antonsich and Michael Skey described as an era of scholarly research which investigated the "how" of the nation, "i.e. the ways nations are discursively narrated and reproduced" (2017: 2), Billig questioned how Western nations were able to sustain a sense of nationalism that could be drawn on in heightened political moments. Observing that nationalism did not emerge out of nothing in these moments, he posited that nations are continually reproduced through the "banally mundane" reproduction of "a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices" (Billig 1995: 6). In his view, the nation is being "indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry" every day (ibid.).

There is naturally an overlap here with Anderson's imagined community, for Billig also argued that to investigate banal nationalism means to examine "widespread and common habits of thinking, which transcend individual differences" (1995: 9). Edensor (2002) further examined some of the key themes put forth by Billig, agreeing with the latter's position that national identity is constructed as second nature. Edensor argued for considering the construction of national identity beyond the wider levels of social, political, and economic practices because it is in everyday life which "looms the national, a common-sense framework which provides a certain ontological and epistemological security, a geographical and historical mooring, and a legal, political and institutional complex which incorporates (and excludes) individuals as national subjects" (Edensor 2002: 29).

Both Billig (1995) and Edensor's (2002) work are useful for analyzing the way national identity is constructed in the case study museums, for they both "flag" their

respective nations through the representation of a range of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices. In the following section, I draw on two examples from my case studies to demonstrate how the representations of things one might consider second nature, or not consider at all, support the museums' statements about their respective national identities. The MoC in Prague makes much of Czechs' sense of humour as a mechanism which sustained them throughout their years of Communist rule. I will show how this is demonstrated through Pavel, in his status as an authentic Czech citizen, as well as the museum's gift shop, which leans heavily into these traits in an act of reproduction (Billig 1995). Additionally, I argue that emphasizing this trait also serves the purpose of limiting any potential hold Communism has over contemporary Czechia, echoing Mark (2010b). In Warsaw's PRL Museum, I instead turn not to abstract personality traits but to material culture, drawing once again on the exhibition's foregrounding of objects to show how their popularity has transformed them into symbols of an imagined community (Edensor 2002; Anderson 1983).

6.3.1 Universalizing Czechness: the gift shop, Pavel, and a sense of humour

As the MoC represents the history of Czechoslovakia's regime through a wider lens of the country's social, political, and economic conditions, there is far less of an explicit focus on the mundane compared to its Polish counterpart. References certainly exist – the *Reality* section of the exhibition, for example, includes a variety of topics dedicated to everyday life (see chapter 4) – but even these are interpreted against a backdrop of the wider social, political, and economic policies of Communist Czechoslovakia and are often told in the most explicit of ways. What interests me here, however, are the banal reproductions of identity, the ones far less explicit but as prevalent as the messages of suffering and victimization. In this regard, I turn to the various references to Czech humour which are woven not only into the displays but also into my tour with Pavel.

Humour has been part of the MoC since its foundation. Its original location was famously located above a McDonald's and next door to a casino, a feature it quickly became known for (Newsweek 2002; Kahn 2009). Though the museum can now be found elsewhere, the trait is still an integral part of both the museum's branding and its representation of Communism. As regards the former, the gift shop exemplifies this (Figs. 49-52). For example, the matryoshka dolls in figure 38, featuring an angry expression and spiked teeth,

were a mainstay of its advertising posters for many years. Its postcards are usually humorous as well, such as one that depicts a woman with the words, "You couldn't get your laundry detergent but you could get your brainwashed" (Fig. 50, top left). The gift shop (more a series of shelves than a dedicated shop) is located on the ground floor, across from the ticket desk. For visitors who peruse the trinkets before ascending to the main exhibition space on the first floor, these items thus set a particular tone for engaging with the topics upstairs.

Figure 50 Gift shop at the Museum of Communism, Prague
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 49 Gift shop at the Museum of Communism, Prague
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 51 Gift shop at the Museum of Communism, Prague
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 52 Museum of Communism advertisement
Source: Alejandro Forero Cuervo, Flickr

Once again, this humorous tone is not as prominent as the narrative of victimization and suffering, but it nonetheless offers a useful framing to consider how those who decided on the offer in the gift shop think of their country's relationship with Communism, or at least what version of this relationship should be sold to domestic and foreign tourists. Setting aside the likely commercial benefits of humorous souvenirs, I propose that these objects demonstrate an effort on the part of the museum to paint citizens as "over" Communism, making fun of it as a way to disavow it. But this sense of humour is not to be seen as something that developed after 1989. As visitors will soon learn, it has always been an inherent part of who they are, even under Communism, and was crucial to how they dealt with their regime.

According to the museum, the absurdity and inefficiency with which the Communist regime governed did not go unnoticed by its citizenry, who seemingly coped with it with a characteristic sense of humour. There are a number of instances throughout the exhibition which reference this. These include display 10, *Stalin Monument*:

> *"People were not overly fond of this monument and jokingly referred to it as 'the line for meat'."*
>
> *Display 10,* Stalin Monument

Display 11, *The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)*:

> *"The bizarre scope of COMECON was not lost on people, and the Czechs came up with several jokes about it, including a humorous backronym for Comecon's Czech abbreviation (RHVP). When translated into English, it reads 'Do you know what Comecon stands for? "Let's rejoice, let's be merry, we don't have shit, so let's share"'."*
>
> *Display 11, The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)*

Display 19, *Urbanization*:

> *"People began to sarcastically, but nonetheless accurately, refer to [prefabricated tower blocks] as 'rabbit hutches'."*
>
> *Display 19,* Urbanization

Display 28, *Police*:

> *"During Communism, the best candidates for joining the police were Party members dedicated to the idea of Communism and those who did not mind harassing people just for having long hair". And in reference to the Public Security Auxiliary Guard, "The acronym, PS VB, was jokingly referred to as (loosely translated): 'An Idiot Standing Next to a Fool' ('Pitomec stojí vedle blbce')."*
>
> *Display 28, Police*

And display 50, *Persecution and Cadre Screening*:

> *"According to one legendary joke, President Antonín Novotný released his fury on a maintenance man who was taking a long time to repair an ordinary door lock; he told the worker than he could have done it himself in no time. The maintenance man's response could not have been any truer for the time: Well yes, Mister President, because you are a locksmith, but I'm a university professor."*
>
> *Display 50, Persecution and Cadre Screening*

These examples are a small subset amongst an exhibition of 67 displays, and even then, they are but brief references within the lengthy text panels they belong to, but they are still potent reminders of the ways in which a common identity can be flagged in even the most "banally mundane" manner (Billig 1995). Billig himself did not explicitly bring humour into the "beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices" (Billig 1995: 6) with which he considered nations to be continuously reproduced in everyday lives. And yet, humour and national identity have been linked across a range of disciplines, including linguistics (Maleková 2017), media (Mills 2022; Irwin and Tominc 2023), foreign policy (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovo 2019), and tourism (Zhanga and Pearce 2020). Equally, these scholars did not make reference to Billig's seminal work, but in examining the way humour is presented in the MoC, it becomes clear that theoretical parallels can be drawn between them.

Billig (1995) argued that banal nationalism operates as a mechanism through which power is maintained and legitimized within a nation-state, and that flags, national anthems, language, and other similar things which are engaged with and reproduced daily serve to naturalize the idea of the nation and its associated ideologies, thereby reinforcing existing power structures. Indeed, as he wrote, "The aura of nationhood always operates within contexts of power" (Billig 1995: 4). There are two ways which humour overlaps with this.

The first is the role of mockery and its links to a sense of superiority, which is common thread throughout the studies on humour and national identity. I have shown how nations are often constructed through distinctness and creating "us vs them" narratives, and according to Carol X. Zhanga and Philip Pearce, "[it] is the enforcement of similarity, through differentiating ourselves from others, that makes interactive superior jokes important to nation-making" (2020: 31). Where we see this in relation to the MoC is that the museum showcases historical jokes to demonstrate how citizens differentiated themselves from the Communist regime *and* the Communist past. In effect, the museum asserts that Czechs took back their power in a context of powerlessness by mocking the Communist government in order to undermine its power. Humour, then, can be seen as having provided Czechoslovaks with an "ontological and epistemological security" (Edensor 2002: 29) which sustained Czechs in an era of profound brutality and victimization.

But we must also consider the security such references provide in the present day. The second way humour overlaps with the power reinforced through instances of banal nationalism is that the museum itself is using humour to reinforce and legitimate the country's contemporary democratic identity. As Brett Mills argued, in order for such humour to work, "[There] must be an 'us' and 'them' that is culturally-agreed" (2022: 351). Through the MoC's continual positioning of Czechia as an inherently democratic nation, it has created the contexts in which visitors can see the "us" as democratic Czechia and "them" as the former Communist regime. It is within this framework that the jokes included in the exhibition, as well as, returning to the previous point, through the objects on sale in the gift shop, enable the museum to "other" its Communist past. Once again, this exposes the museum staff's need for that same "ontological and epistemological security" (Edensor 2002) today, tapping into these ingrained traits to make a statement about Czechs' relationship with their Communist past. In short, they have drawn on their opposition to

Communism *then* to reiterate their anti-Communist stance *now*, framing this as universal amongst all citizens.

My tour guide Pavel further authenticated the notion of a shared sense of humour amongst Czechs, substantiated in large part by him being both an authentic voice from the era as well as a Czech citizen. Although the themes and topics present in the exhibition necessitated a particular framing of his stories (de Jong 2018; Shenker 2015), a banality and everydayness in many of his anecdotes was evident, such as his story about working the potato harvest as a teenager (see chapter 5, section 5.2.2) and the ingrained habits he has retained from growing up under Communism, including being able to speak Russian to this day. What was woven into each of these stories was a casual expression of his identity as a Czech, a "flagging" of nationhood (Billig 1995) through his personal experience of having *been there*, which was, in turn, linguistically supported by his continual usage of the "crucial words of banal nationalism" (Billig 1995: 94) such as "we" and "our" when describing life in Communist Czechoslovakia.

These expressions, acted out "mindlessly, rather than mindfully" (Billig 1995: 38), gave Pavel a degree of authority that ultimately endorsed the Czech sense of humour he brought to the tour. Recent work on everyday nationalism is particularly intriguing in this regard. Eleanor Knott (2015) addressed the criticism levelled at Billig's thesis that it overlooks human agency, and built on it to argue for an approach which more explicitly understands "how national identity is talked about, experienced and given meaning in different ways by the ordinary people it affects" (2015: 2). Jon E. Fox and Maarten Van Ginderachter (2018) further examined this notion of agency in nationalism studies, contending that "[o]rdinary people think the nation, talk the nation, enact the nation, perform the nation, consume the nation – and of course reject, resist, ignore, and avoid the nation – all in ways that contribute to the reproduction and legitimation – or dismantling and undermining – of national forms of belonging" (2018: 546). Having positioned himself as a representative of his country's "ordinary people," Pavel thus talked, enacted, and performed Czechness, actively reproducing and legitimizing a national form of belonging as he recounted Communist-era jokes whilst also demonstrating facets of the very humour he was talking about (Mills 2022).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Pavel was acting "mindlessly" at all times. I previously spoke about the framing of his tour in relation to the exhibition, and this,

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too, can be thought of in terms of the agency Knott (2015) and Fox and Van Ginderachter (2018) were writing about. As a guide to a museum whose overarching narrative revolves around the terror and oppression of Communism, Pavel unsurprisingly *rejected* the pre-1989 nation (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018) at various times on our tour. As was discussed in the previous chapter (see section 5.2.2), he told his anecdotes at particular moments to communicate a specific message about life under the former Czechoslovak regime. He drew on this same sense of belonging, of having *been there*, to communicate how in his and the museum's view, the sense of humour with which citizens coped with the Communist regime positioned them as anti-Communist.

Pavel claimed early on that though there existed resistance to the regime, "more typical of the Czech character is the passive resistance, and in frame [sic] of this resistance, we told political jokes" (personal tour 24:03). He went on to recount two of these jokes, the first about Czechoslovaks being defiant in the face of typical Communist greetings and the second about a woman painting her house white:

An American, Frenchman, and Czech are arguing in which country is the best echo. And the American says, "Well, if I call 'Hello America!' from the White House in the direction of Capitol Hill, I will receive twice back 'America! America!'". And the Frenchman said, "Oh, it's better in Paris. If I call 'Vive la France!' from the Victory Arch in the direction of the Louvre Palace, I will receive back four times, 'France!' 'France!' 'France!' 'France!'. And the Czech gentleman says, "Absolutely nothing. If I go out in front of my apartment in our panel house and I greet other inhabitants with these Communist greetings, I will receive back 23 times 'fuck you'" (personal tour 24:24-25:18).

Try to imagine a special architectural style of small houses in the south of Moravia. A small house with its little roof, white walls, with the crossing wooden, brown beams. A municipality of a small town decided to distinguish an old lady. She painted each dirty stain on the wall this white colour. There is an official ceremony and official speeches. And after the speeches, the distinguished lady took the floor and explained, 'Oh guys, you have misunderstood. I didn't do it for the beauty of our town. I listened to a

broadcasting of Voice of America, and Mr. President Reagan said, 'the Communists will never get into the White House'" (personal tour 25:28-26:20).

In recounting these witticisms, Pavel was creating an imagined community (Anderson 1983) of Czechs which is defined by a seemingly universal disdain for Communism. In the context of the museum's overarching message of Czechoslovaks being inherently anti-Communist, Pavel used his role as a tour guide to thus actively reproduce a sense of humour that supposedly existed under Communism, conceiving of them as part of an imaginative Czech character based on a common experience of passive resistance. In so doing, he has legitimized a sense of belonging for "his" people (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018) marked by an attitude of anti-Communism both then and now.

The combination of souvenirs in the gift shop, the jokes referenced in the text panels, and Pavel's own account of a Czech tendency to tell political jokes as a form of passive resistance all define and emphasize a particular way of being that helped Czechs survive the Communist era. To put it another way, Czech as an identity could be found in their everyday reactions to Communism, that is, their joke-telling and overall sense of humour, rather than the unified nation propagated by the regime in power. This further underscores the message that citizens were intrinsically anti-Communist, but by integrating this banal facet of the Czech character into the exhibition, the museum's designers were also attempting to disavow any previous relationship Czechia had with Communist ideology on even the most mundane level. They are, in effect, adding a further layer to the distancing between the Czech people and their "aberrant" past (Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci 2008; Kuusi 2008; Mark 2008; Main 2008). In the following section, I turn the focus back onto objects, examining how everyday, banal items can be as linked to national identity as intimately as a more intangible sense of humour.

6.3.2 A simple, yet symbolic, washing machine

Chapter 5 demonstrated how the PRL Museum in Warsaw utilizes historical objects to authenticate an everyday approach to Poland's Communist era, a significant number of which can be categorized as consumer products, though this could be defined more widely as domestic products when expanded to the furniture on display in the mock flat. As "things," these objects demonstrate a shared way of living under Communism and all the

habits Poles possessed during this time, providing an "epistemological and ontological basis" (Edensor 2002: 20) for how the museum represents Polish identity. To borrow from Vukov, they can represent "the unique spirit of the people as creator of unique cultural products and to distinguish it from other groups with which it has come in contact" (2011: 147). How, though, may we begin to evaluate the ways in which these things are used to represent a collective pride in Poland and the Polish people? If we consider the objects from the perspective of both their prior use and their place within an existing cultural system (Dant 1999; Edensor 2002), a clearer picture starts to emerge.

Firstly, it is worth drawing attention to the status of these domestic products as museum objects. Chapter 5 (see section 5.3.1) examined this in relation to the value the PRL Museum's owner placed on his country's cultural outputs under Communism, arranging them to construct a narrative about these thriving industries and the perseverance of the Polish people. The consumer products on display can be viewed through a similar lens. This particular category of objects makes up the majority of the museum's collection, so easy they were to amass owing to their proliferation in everyday life. This alone reflects Fox and Van Ginderachter's argument about national forms of belonging addressed above, in so far as it considers the quotidian practices which "reproduce the nation in daily life" (2018: 546). I consider "practice" here to be what J. Paul Goode, David R. Stroup, and Elizaveta Gaufman defined as relating to "specific forms of knowledge that render them recognizable, demarcating communities by their performance" (2022: 62). Where this applies to the PRL Museum's collection lies in the owner's comments about Poles' relationship with things.

In his 2019 interview with *Telewizja Republika*, Patla claimed that the Polish mentality is to always keep things, even if they are no longer needed. He was addressing the myriad objects installed in the mock flat, saying, "so if you got this box for any occasion […] you wouldn't throw it out. You would use it further for other stuff […] after chocolates, you use it for pencils or so on. You never waste things in Communist times" (2019c: 7:41-8:05). Here, we can draw a direct link between this constructed essence of Polishness and the everyday as displayed in this museum. Patla stated more than once that it is thanks to this mentality of keeping seemingly mundane objects, objects that were perhaps rendered superfluous in the decades since the collapse of the regime, that allowed him to source so much material for his museum. In short, the existence of his collection is rooted in this fundamental element of what it means to be Polish.

On a much more intimate level exists Poles' relationship with individual objects themselves. This overlaps with the issues addressed in the previous chapter as regards the values which shape the selection of objects for display. I demonstrated how the culture-related objects as well as the knick-knacks assembled in the mock flat (see section 5.3) reflected the museum owner's wish for Poles to be seen as having thrived and persevered under Communism. To this end, the objects and photographs on display were presented as a collective which, when brought together, constructed a particular message for a particular purpose (Lidchi 1997). Rarely in the PRL Museum are individual objects honed in on, made to stand for something on their own as potently as they do when part of a wider group of components. The "Frania" washing machine (Fig. 53-54) on display in the mock flat is one of these.

Figure 53 Frania washing machine in the mock flat
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Figure 54 Frania washing machine in the mock flat
Source: Samantha Vaughn

This household device appeared across the majority of my datasets, indicating its importance in the museum's collection (Mason 2005; Whitehead 2009; Moser 2010). The audio guide, for example, goes into detail about how the washing machine functioned:

"The basic equipment of these rooms was naturally Frania washing machine, the most popular rotor washer of PRL. The drum was filled with hot water and the cleaning agent, and the rotor put the washer container into rotary motion. On the top is the ringer. That is the element used to squeeze the excess water from the freshly washed clothes. Motors extracted from the washing machines were often used to create home mowers due to their high power."

Audio guide, 22:52-23:24

Its popularity was also referenced by the text panels throughout the space, including an extended one dedicated specifically to the washing machine:

"When it first appeared in the market in the 1950s, it revolutionised people's life. It was the first rotor-operated washing machine manufactured in Poland on a mass scale. It was every housekeeper's dream come true. The demand for it in the first production period was so high that special vouchers were introduced in production plants and factories which entitled people to its purchase.

Its design was simple with not much that could break down in it. "Frania" didn't use a lot of water and was effective in removing stains. You would pour the water in by yourself, so you could do the laundry practically anywhere. In addition to its basic function, "Frania" had a wide range of other applications: you could use it to wash your feet, churn butter or mix moonshine mash (bimber), to name just a few. The clothes wringer on the other hand was a device frequently used in illegal printing houses.

Display 20, Own Place

That mention of the Frania should appear many times is, of course, not surprising, as the language of each were likely chosen by the museums' founders and staff. Indeed, the owner even stated in his 2019 interview that the washing machine was "the dream of every Polish lady" (*Telewizja Republika* 2019c: 1:51). What this indicates, though, is how the museum has used an object to craft a narrative of supposedly shared lived experience, one that is rooted in a seemingly innocuous piece of machinery utilized in everyday life. To return to Watson (2021: 73), the Frania thus serves remind Polish visitors of what they have in common, identifying with one another as well as the larger Polish experience of life under Communism.

What is of particular interest is how the museum frames the ingenuity of the washing machine. It is lauded throughout most of the datasets as being used for many purposes over the years, including in "illegal printing houses" (text panel, *Own Home*). In his *Telewizja Republika* interview, Patla informed the journalist that a "Frania" washing machine was "not only used for washing but also to make alcohol or to copy illegal materials. In the eighties you could put here all the illegal newspapers and copy it [sic] here. So not only for drying but also for doing other stuff. Not only for washing but also for making other things. We were creative in these times" (2019c: 1:55-2:12). Similarly, my tour guide, Kacper, spoke about the device being used to churn butter during times of economic crisis. In highlighting the multifunctional nature of the washing machine, the museum is constructing national identity in two ways.

The first is through the device itself. The exhibition repeatedly highlights the ingenuity of the objects on display. Despite the worsening condition of its consumer industry, the PRL is shown as nonetheless producing innovative products which helped the lives of its citizens. The second is through these same citizens. In shining a light on the adaptability these people demonstrated, the "Frania" washing machine is therefore being drawn on to symbolize an imagined community (Anderson 1983). The focal point here is the ingenuity of the Polish-produced Frania *as well as* the ingenuity of the people in finding ways to use the machine to adapt to difficulties. What Patla and his team have done in their framing of the washing machine is illustrate how, in using the device in their home, ordinary people engaged with the "creation and maintenance of nationhood through their everyday act" (Ichijo 2017: 261). Through the object's physical presence, its accompanying text panel, the audio guide, the owner's own words, and my tour guide, the washing machine thus comes to stand as a signifier of what it meant to be Polish in the PRL: clever, adaptable, persistent. There is a powerful emotional pull in this signification, in so far as it gives fellow citizens something to assign to themselves in their encounter with the washing machine, as well as other similar objects in the museum. In the final section, I examine the ways emotion is tapped into in nation (and identity) building process.

6.4 Encouraging perceptions, encouraging emotions

The previous two sections have considered how Czech and Polish national identity are constructed in the MoC and the PRL Museum at both the wider sociocultural as well as

more mundane levels. In performing an act of self-definition (Macdonald 2005; Watson 2021) through the representation of national heroes whilst also bringing to bear the quotidian practices and associations which reproduce and legitimize national forms of belonging (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018), these museums wade into matters of something which thus far has only been hinted at; that is, the role of emotions in constructing the nation. In drawing on origin stories which "encourage feeling as well as thinking" (Watson 2021: 65), the case study museums are effectively leveraging emotion (Varutti 2023) in order to craft a representation of both the nation and Czech and Polish national identity. If we consider the role of national museums in shaping the state (Anderson 1983) and claiming recognition for that state's identity (Mason 2004), it becomes clear that the emotion of such stories – actively constructed as they are – are one of the unifying forces which link the people of a nation, made all the more believable thanks to the authenticity and truth supposedly rooted in the museum's objects and authority (Watson 2021: 64).

Emotion can be harnessed literally also in non-national museums, as in the case of the Nightmare section of the MoC (see chapter 5, section 5.2.1), where the atmosphere of the space invites feelings of being unsettled, or it can be much subtler, such as the Warsaw museum arranging historical toys in a mock nursery (see chapter 4, section 4.3), which may evoke a nostalgic recollection of one's childhood. In both cases, emotional responses are encoded through the design of the spaces (Varutti 2023: 65), which brings together a selection of "accepted factual information, objects, stories rooted in objective evidence, personal testimonies and romantic imagination" (Watson 2021: 78). If we return to the realm of the everyday, for example, we can see how emotion sits at the heart of using objects which stand as symbols that signal a nation, to borrow from Billig (1995). Shanti Sumartojo has adapted Sara Ahmed's writings on affect and stickiness in relation to precisely this, claiming that things are sticky,

> in the sense that affective meanings, associations and feelings — pride, embarrassment, nostalgia — can be thought to cling to them and in turn help structure our lives as national, normalising these structures. Such things also structure our relationship with the state, with each other, and with those we are invited to think of as either co-national or foreign (Sumartojo 2017: 198).

Such a notion is evident in how the PRL Museum positions the Frania washing machine, to offer but one example, associating an object around which much of one's life was structured with feelings of national pride for Poles' ability to persevere and adapt to life under Communism. Sumartojo's emphasis on objects, however, leaves room for expansion. That is, such stickiness can adhere to more than just everyday materials, clinging as well to the memory of national heroes and supposed shared personality traits that bind a nation of people. The affective force of centring ideas of democracy at the beginning and end of the MoC, for instance, helps to shape the contemporary relationship with the Czech state as well as the other democratic nations. In the following section, I make a case for how emotion is tapped into to underscore the museums' truths of what it means to be Czech and Polish.

6.4.1 Havel's global reach: inviting reverence, feeling proud

Section 6.2.1 discussed how Havel was spotlighted in the MoC in a way that would leave visitors with an understanding that the former president is a national hero and a democratic idol. Where this evokes a powerful emotional response is in how the museum's positioning of him invites visitors to feel a sense of reverence for him, based not only on what he did for the Czech people but also for global freedoms more broadly. It does this by closing the exhibition with a number of "emotional prompts" (Bozoğlu 2020), including a floor-to-ceiling photo of Havel flashing a peace sign during his speech at the United States Congress on 21 February 1990 (Fig. 55) overlaid with a quote that says:

"Human rights are universal and indivisible. Human freedom is also indivisible: if it is denied to anyone in the world, it is therefore denied, indirectly, to all people. This is why we cannot remain silent in the face of evil or violence; silence merely encourages them."

Display 67, Václav Havel

Figure 55 Display 67, Václav Havel, with wall decal and quote on the left
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Although this quote does not come from Havel's 1990 speech (it is taken from his 1992 book *Summer Meditations*), the curators have nonetheless crafted a thread about Havel's importance on the international stage through the text panel, photo, and quote.

The main text panel for Havel's dedicated display (*Václav Havel*) provides the most evident representation of this link, in its direct statement that Havel's importance extended "beyond the former Eastern Bloc". This is visually underscored with the photograph of him at the US Congress so soon after becoming president. It is a powerful way to close the museum. After establishing Havel as a symbol for the country's democratic ambitions, whose life was marked by oppressive Communist policies, the beliefs expressed in the quote that human rights are universal and that all people deserve to be free serve to reflect the very values held by the museum and the importance it places on ensuring Czechia is seen as a fundamentally democratic nation. The potency of the departing message is, of course, aided by the factual knowledge that the country did indeed transition away from Communism, but it is helped even more so by centring Havel in this fight. That is, the complexity of the transition period is boiled down to a single figure (Watson 2021), thereby enabling him to stand in for the "democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking" (Light 2000a: 158) identity that the MoC is playing a part in constructing.

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Using Havel in this way is, of course, entirely intentional. To draw on Watson (2021), the museum's ending is characterized by a combination of the emotional pull of narrative, myth, and history to "present certain versions of the origins of nations that discourage analysis and deconstruction and enable the nation to endure in the hearts and minds of its visitors" (2021: 86). This "selected telling" (Watson 2021: 82) of Havel's character enables the MoC to adapt the complex history of the transition, combined with the national pride invested in the Velvet Revolution, to create an emotional origin story for the contemporary Czech nation based on an inherent desire for democracy.

The combination of these is neatly packaged into the figure of Havel, who is depicted as triumphant after a lifetime of Communist oppression and who is shown visiting the Soviet Union's foremost enemy as soon the Czechoslovak borders were opened. As they leave the museum, visitors are thus not encouraged to consider alternatives to this supposed finite return to democracy. They are not asked to question the aftermath of the transition away from Communism, nor are they invited to inquire about contemporary Czechia's track record as a liberal democracy. Instead, they are meant to be drawn in by the emotional pull of Havel's global reach, and Czechia's commitment to human rights. In this way, the museum uses the emotional pull of Havel's iconic status to actively frame not only the meaning of him but also the social and political consequences of his legacy for the Czech nation (Smith 2021).

At this moment in the exhibition, I could not help but reflect on my own emotional response to these values. Having been raised in the United States, I am accustomed to hearing discourse opposed to Communism. It is perhaps for this reason that I became increasingly alert to the many references to the USA throughout the museum. This led me to examine the way the United States was represented in the displays, notably as a rival to the Soviet Union and a stand-in for all things "West" (though there are a small number of notable exceptions, including to references to British cultural outputs). Standing in front of the final photo, I was therefore struck by my emotional reaction to the combination of imagery and quote. I at once understood the values conveyed through the photo thanks to my learned response to messages of freedom and anti-Communism instilled in me throughout my upbringing. The emotion that perhaps best describes that moment could be pride – pride in my own freedom and pride in the United States standing with Havel and Czechoslovakia in those early days of its renewed democracy.

What is notable here is that my status as a non-national visitor proved not to be a hinderance to my ability to believe in this narrative of Czech identity. This is because I tapped into my personal frames of reference in order to make sense of Havel's photograph and quote. This will be explored in the following chapter in greater detail, but before doing so, I will offer one final example from the PRL Museum to demonstrate how it attempts to utilize emotional narratives to convince visitors of the country's adaptability to difficult circumstances.

6.4.2 Rebuilding Warsaw: a tale of struggle

While the perseverance of Poles is encoded throughout the PRL Museum, nowhere is it more emotionally presented than in the display dedicated to the reconstruction of Warsaw following the city's destruction during World War II. As far as origin stories go, the reconstruction of Poland's capital perfectly encapsulates Renan's observations about the cohesive power of a nation that has "suffered, rejoiced, and hoped together" (2018: 261). How these sentiments have been harnessed by museums more broadly was addressed by Watson (2021) in her work on emotional myths and narratives in national museums. As was shown in chapter 2, she wrote that museums construct narratives which "identify a struggle and demonstrate how the nation overcame this difficulty" (2021: 78), and that by doing so, they create "powerful myths of origin and survival" (ibid.), not unlike what we have seen in the MoC. The PRL Museum creates its myth of survival in its interpretation of Warsaw's rebuilding efforts, which receives dedicated attention in the display *Reconstruction of the Capital* (Fig. 56).

Here, visitors will find a text panel, four photographs dated between 1950 and 1955, and a window recess devoted to the construction of the Marszalkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa (MDM), a monumental Socialist Realist residential district that was a flagship project in the Communist Party's efforts to rebuild Warsaw, and the location of the museum today. The recess contains three tables with in-depth text panels, photographs of the area being built, a model bas-relief for one the decorative elements still visible in the buildings' friezes, and several sketches for the planned reconstruction of Warsaw. Additionally, the window has numbered stickers that point out key parts of the buildings discussed in the text panels and shown in the historical photographs, thereby explicitly linking the museum's content and its location.

This echoes and builds upon de Jong's (2018) argument about the cyclical nature of museum authentication. As we saw in chapter 2, de Jong asserted that exhibition techniques enable museums to "not only authenticate the objects as originals, pointing out the history that they were involved in, they also authenticate them as adequate representatives of this history, while the objects in turn are meant to authenticate the museums' narratives as genuine" (2018: 120). Where de Jong's focus is on display techniques within the exhibition and the museum objects shown therein, I would expand her argument to include the location of the museum. Indeed, museum scholars such as Lindauer (2006), Mason (2008), and Moser (2010) have argued for a holistic approach to museum analysis that includes taking into consideration the architecture and location of the venue, as these are "key factors in evaluating the epistemological significance of museum displays" (Moser 2010: 24). As such, a cycle of authentication occurs through the PRL Museum's location at the heart of the MDM and the window display's explicit focus on drawing a connection between the museum and its setting. What emerges from this connection is the sense that Varsovians cast aside the difficulties of post-war living to selflessly and collectively come together to rebuild their city after the war. In short, it powerfully legitimates a claim of inclusion (Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018). What we are thus seeing is a blurring of past and present to authenticate the PRL Museum's representation of the Polish spirit.
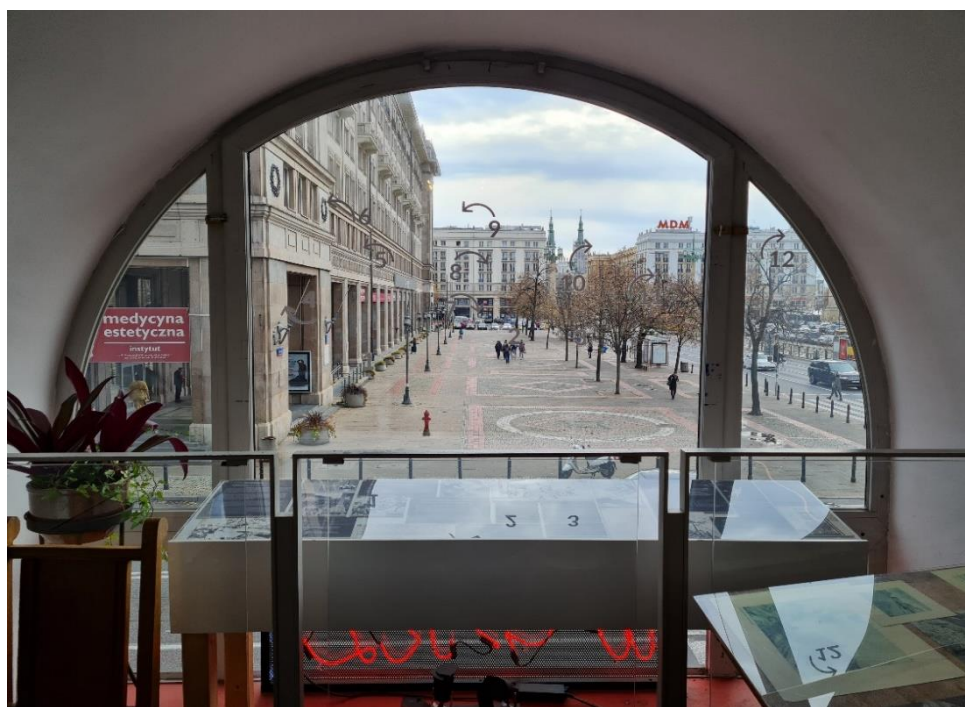
Figure 56 Display 8, Reconstruction of the Capital
Source: Samantha Vaughn

Let us consider, for example, the four photographs as well as a particular text panel in the window recess. Hanging to the left of the window, three of the display's photos depict citizens participating in the reconstruction efforts, while the fourth shows a family sitting down to eat in their bombed-out kitchen (Fig. 57). The in-depth text panel can be found on one of the tables in the recess and accompanies a photo of university students helping on the MDM building site. It states:

"Although from today's perspective such assurances may sound unreliable, the enthusiasm of the public for the reconstruction was such that thousands of volunteers came forward to help with cleaning the rubble on the MDM building site, responding to the announcement in the Życie Warszawy daily."

Display 8, Reconstruction of the Capital

It is a brief sentence, but when combined with the photographs, a narrative is crafted about a destroyed city and a people determined to unite to rebuild it, out of necessity perhaps, but also out of pride for their city. They not only persevered amongst such difficult conditions, as was discussed in chapter 5, they *actively* worked together to recover their city.

The emotive power of this narrative is palpable, and attests to the effectiveness of affective curatorship (Varutti 2023). Reading about and seeing in the photographs how extensively Warsaw was destroyed, even many years after the war's end, sets the stage for trusting in the tale of grief and triumph being told (Edwards and Lien 2014). Driving this home is the link between the display and the MDM outside, where visitors can see the results of such collective efforts. Following Sophie Forgan's claim that location and "particularity of place" can influence a "museum's credibility and relation to knowledge" (2005: 574), the square thus stands as a physical testament to this narrative in which adapting to and overcoming difficulties is a hallmark of the Polish spirit.
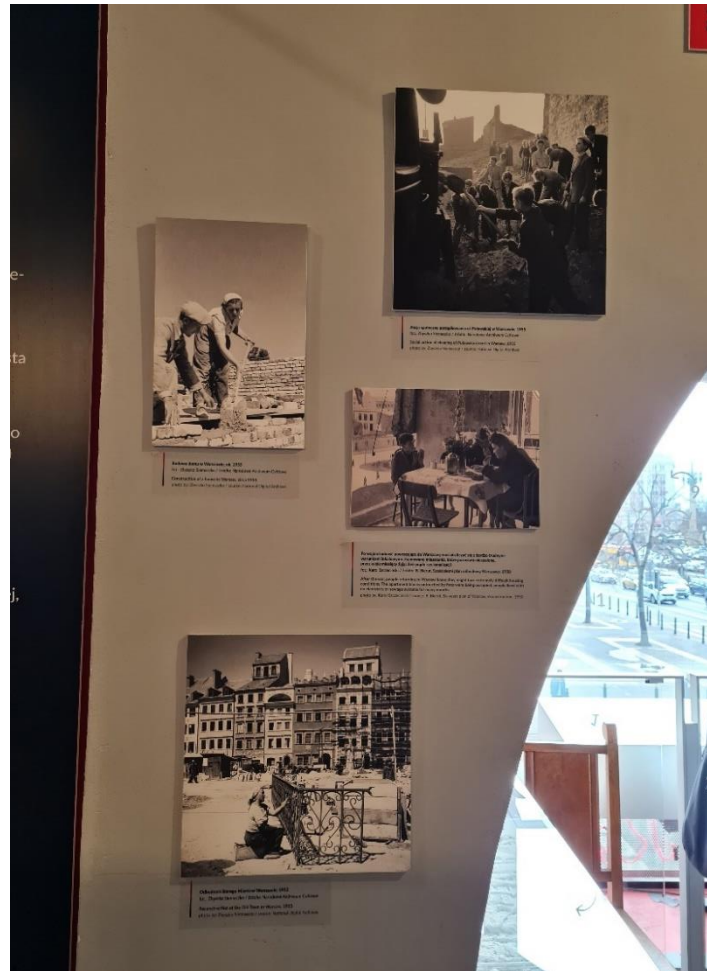
Figure 57 Display 8, Reconstruction of the Capital
Source: Samantha Vaughn

What is served by reaching back into the earliest days of the Communist era is that the museum subtly defines adaptability and perseverance as inherent to the Polish character (Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018). According to this narrative, these traits were not developed as a response to living under the regime, but rather were facets found within Poles which existed even before the inefficiencies of Communist rule set in. The cohesive spirit of post-WWII Varsovians, who struggled to overcome the destruction of their city yet triumphed anyway, thus comes to represent all Poles, all citizens who had to overcome censorship, limited availability of consumer goods, and myriad other difficulties which marked life under Communism, before ultimately returning triumphantly to democracy in 1989 thanks to the work of Solidarity and other opposition groups. In essence, the PRL Museum has created an imagined community by constructing an emotional story which links the MDM to the Polish character.

As I will explore in the next chapter, such a sentiment was picked up on by some of my interviewees, who reported to me feeling moved by the idea of the Polish people

striving to make the best of their lives under Communism. For those visitors, this resulted in a deep sense of empathy for Poles and a change in understanding about their circumstances. Their responses were rooted in the contexts from which they came, however, much the same way I responded affirmatively to the end of the MoC's exhibition. In the following chapter, I examine these responses to both the MoC and the PRL Museum, investigating how their personal contexts and previous knowledge of Communism intersected with the exhibitions, and the myriad meanings that arose from these engagements.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the various ways the MoC in Prague and the PRL Museum in Warsaw construct national identities through their exhibitions. That this occurs is perhaps not surprising, for as Light argued two and a half decades ago, nations across the former Eastern Bloc were engaged in attempts to redefine "senses of national identity" (2000a: 157), of which museums played an integral part. Much of this work was being done in national museums, where beliefs about the special character of their citizens were made material, visible, and, not least, identifiable (Mason 2004). They aided in the creation of an imagined community (Anderson 1983), which simultaneously drew on and constructed narratives around which citizens could coalesce (Watson 2021). Though the case study museums are private institutions, they nonetheless engage in a series of tropes identified by authors such as Macdonald (2005) and Watson (2021). These include tapping into the memory of their countries' foundational figures as well as a raft of national symbols to both set themselves apart from the Soviet Union and define their distinct identities. What emerges from this are powerful stories which can communicate the identities of these nations in what Smith describes as "palpable, concrete terms that evoke instant emotional responses from all strata of the community" (1991: 77.).

As I have shown, the approaches the case study museums take differ, but what they both achieve is largely the same: a focus on the nation as distinct, where Communism was never truly welcomed and where its people either resisted valiantly or survived with pride. The MoC shines a spotlight on its national heroes, Tomáš Masaryk and Václav Havel, to establish a difference between the principles of the Soviet Union and the democratic ideals which existed in the hearts of the people throughout the Communist era in Czechoslovakia.

In so doing, Czechoslovaks are depicted as not only consistently victimized throughout the 20th century, first by Nazism and then by the Communism, but also inherently democratic and contrary to everything the Soviet Union stood for.

What has resulted from this is a message that Czechoslovaks were opposed to any forms of governments that did not align with the nation's democratic ideals outlined at the start and end of the museum. Indeed, as discussed in chapter 4, the MoC opens and closes its exhibition with a message about democracy; that is, the country's founding as a democratic nation in 1918 and its return to democracy after the collapse of Communism in 1989. To this end, the memory of Masaryk, whose political career was unmarked by the fight against Communism, was nonetheless drawn upon to craft a linear narrative that saw Czechoslovakia heralded as an inherently democratic state. This identity is neatly wrapped up with Havel, whose own life and career was deeply defined by Communism and his personal battle against it. In using the memory and words of Havel to end the exhibition, the museum has framed the country's experience under the regime as a four-decade fight for the return to democracy as well as a respect for human rights.

In Warsaw, on the other hand, Poles are depicted as an ingenious and persevering people, as represented through their prolific cultural outputs or their ability to successfully make do against a backdrop of censorship and economic difficulties. The PRL Museum makes use of several authentic objects and photographs as well as the historically important video of Joanna Szczepkowska to emphasize how significant Solidarity was, and still is, in Poland. The absence of references to the Soviet Union centres the museum's story squarely on Poland and the figures who helped to take down the regime. By opening and closing the museum with the history of Solidarity and other opposition groups, the visit is framed in such a way that the people are seen to have thrived within the bounds of their oppression and inefficient living standards. This does result in the fight against Communism being presented in a vacuum of sorts, given the museum's tendency to neglect the wider political circumstances of both the rise of Communism but also how it was maintained for over forty years. And yet, despite this missing information, the narrative that has been created is successfully intertwined with beliefs about Polish identity. It ultimately serves to underscore the distinctness of the Polish spirit more widely. This is thanks both to the domestic quietude of their survival seen in the previous chapter as well as the ultimate achievement of returning to democracy that visitors start and end their tour of the museum with.

Beyond the larger-scale political realm, however, both museums were found to feature instances of national identity development on the more mundane level as well. This was particularly evident in the many references to certain objects and character traits across the various data sets, such as Czechs' sense of humour in the Prague museum and the Frania washing machine in the Warsaw museum. In both cases, their respective nations are being flagged to reproduce various beliefs, assumptions, habits, and practices (Billig 1995) which, in turn, define what it means to be Czech or Polish.

The question, however, is who this serves. If the museums aim to "reinforce messages about national identities to promote cohesion and loyalty" (Watson 2021: 2) amongst its citizens, where does this leave non-national visitors? As Prown asserts, "[A] culture's most fundamental beliefs are often so widely understood, so generally shared and accepted, that they never need to be stated" (2000: 13). Indeed, this is evident in the PRL Museum's lack of contextual information regarding Solidarity. It must be asked, then, how the case studies can convince visitors with "different frames of reference and prior knowledge/understanding to national visitors" (Dodd, Jones, Sawyer, and Tseliou 2012: 125) of the meaning of a washing machine, a trade union, a national hero, or even a personality trait. My personal response to the Havel display is an indication of how this can occur. Indeed, in that moment, I drew upon my own context as an American citizen to make sense of Havel's importance to the Czech people. In the next chapter, I explore visitor responses to the exhibitions, examining how other foreign visitors I spoke with interacted with the displays, made linkages to their own lives, and emotionally connected to the topics of life under Communism.

Chapter 7: Building bridges: visitor experiences in museums of Communism

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters examined the themes, narratives, and display techniques that have been utilized in the MoC, Prague, and the PRL Museum, Warsaw. In particular, chapter 5 presented an analysis of the display components of each case study and the ways in which they authenticated their respective approaches to Communist history. Where the MoC focuses on the top-down victimization of the Czechoslovakia and its people, the PRL Museum presents Poland's time under Communism as an era which can be understood from the bottom-up, specifically through everyday life. What was identified in this close examination of the museums was that both institutions, despite their differing approaches to representing Communism, are overtly nationalist in their messaging, reflecting and constructing a particular understanding of national identity. That is, the Czech museum presents a message of the country being strongly democratic in nature, drawing on national heroes and underscored by a focus on the ground-level resistance of ordinary citizens, while the Polish museum exhibits an identity that is rooted in pride for the country's ability to survive and thrive under duress.

The museum displays are only one part of this story, however. As was discussed in chapter 2, a museum's messaging is only as powerful as the visitors understand it to be. Each visitor will come from different contexts, possess different interests, and focus on different aspects of an exhibition (Falk and Dierking 2000, 2013; Coffee 2007; Diamantopoulou, Insulander, Lindstrand 2012; Schorch 2015). This affects the way they visit, how they engage with and perceive the exhibition, and what meanings they make (Wang 1999; Macdonald 2007; Jones 2010; de Jong 2018). At the same time, Bella Dicks argued that how "people respond to and contend with [museums' institutionalized judgments of value] can illuminate wider concerns: how people understand public history, what value they attach to it, how they relate it to themselves, [and] how the past is different for different social groups" (2016: 53).

I reflected in the previous chapter (see section 6.4.1) on how seeing the closing photograph of Havel in the US Congress triggered within me an emotional response. This response was described as one of pride for belonging to a nation which stood alongside

Havel at this crucial moment in his country's history. Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones, Andy Sawyer, and Maria-Anna Tseliou's (2012) work on the differences between national and non-national visitor responses may provide some reasons for this. Non-national visitors, they wrote, "draw on experiences from outside the nation and make comparisons with other contexts in order to understand the approach of the national museum" (Dodd, Jones, Sawyer, and Tseliou 2012: 14). With the obvious caveat that the museums in this study are not national, the research carried out by Dodd, Jones, Sawyer, and Tseliou (2012) supports the possibility that, in reacting to the Havel photograph, I took from my personal context in order to make sense of the museums' emotion-laden stories about the nation and its people.

As stated in chapter 3 (see section 3.7), my upbringing in the USA garnered within me particular learned responses to the history and ideology of Communism. That is, I received a largely unnuanced portrayal of Communism as the antithesis to American ideals and that the USA was the unequivocal "victor" of the Cold War. The idea that democracy and freedom had won was thus a defining feature of my childhood. Though I consider myself capable of critically analyzing such a perspective, I found these memories nonetheless resurfacing while standing before Havel's photograph. With it coming at the end of the museum, I had had the opportunity to engage with and begin to process the messages of pride and democratic values discussed in the previous chapter. It was in this moment, then, that the overarching message of the museum – that Czechoslovakia and its people had always been inherently democratic, and these 45 years an "aberrant" phase in history (Apor 2012) – collided with my own reference points.

Such a reaction has long featured in visitor studies research over the last four decades, as was addressed in chapter 2 (see section 2.6). Scholars such as Macdonald (1998) and Hooper-Greenhill (2006) advocated for viewing visitors as active interpreters in the museum visit, while others like Doering (1999), Mason (2005), Coffee (2007), and Falk and Dierking (2013) have shone a light on the ways in which visitors bring "outside" information into the museum space, and how this can impact meaning-making.

Does the fact, then, that I and the participants presented in this chapter are non-national visitors impact our ability to engage with and make meaning about Communism? It is within this framing that I approach this chapter, presenting findings regarding a hitherto understudied audience of Communist history museums; that is, foreign visitors for whom

the Communist past in Central and Eastern Europe has not defined their personal contexts. In debates about the "unwanted" (Light 2000a, 2000b) material traces of Communist heritage and how this intersects with identity-building projects after 1989, little attention has been given to the foreign audiences that Light (2000a, 2000b) argued to be obstacles to these efforts. This chapter thus asks how this subset of visitors encounter museums of Communist history and how their positions as outsiders to CEE impact their readings of the case studies' principal messages.

This current chapter presents data from semi-structured interviews with five foreign visitors, three of whom went to the MoC, Prague, and two to the PRL Museum, Warsaw. As discussed in chapter 3, the visitors were a mix of tourists and expatriates, and came from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy. What emerged from my conversations with each visitor was that the museums acted as springboards for much wider conversations and ruminations. These went beyond the topics on display to connect as well with their personal lives. Supported by Macdonald's (2007) notion of "ways of relating" (see chapter 2, section 2.6), the data presented here shows how the participants were able to find their own ways into the museums' narratives which allowed them to authenticate the latter and, additionally, walk away with an understanding of Czech and Polish national identities.

In the first section, I examine the participants' reflections on how they experienced the Communist past, both inside the museum as well as beyond the visit. I draw on the work of MacCannell (1973), Wang (1999) and Landsberg (2004) to investigate the significance of reconstructed environs and the authenticating power of transmitted first-hand accounts. This leads to a discussion about the links participants created between the museums' content and their own lives, in addition to contemporary political affairs. I draw parallels with my participants' observations about the PRL Museum and existing literature on museums of everyday life in eastern Germany whilst also examining how recent work by Wawrzyniak and Pehe (2024) can help address arguably one the MoC's greatest deficits. Lastly, I question whether being a *foreign* visitor to museums of Communism is truly a detriment to understanding the museums' messages about national identity. In this, I explore issues of visitor agency and the importance of social, cultural, and political contexts in meaning-making and the museum experience.

7.2 Experiencing the past and making sense of museal representations

If chapter 5 examined how the case study museums authenticated their representations of Communism, this section asks how the visitors themselves perform a similar process of authentication. Chapter 2 established the turn towards considering visitor agency and museum visits as a negotiated encounter (Macdonald 1998, 2007; Mason 2005; Schorch 2015; Witcomb 2015). With regards to where this negotiated encounter intersects with the process of the visitors authenticating the case study museums, this came most notably in the form of *experiencing* the Communist past; that is, the participants found themselves making sense of the museums' representations thanks to various moments in which they felt they had experienced the past itself. Chief among these were their engagement with reconstructed spaces in the exhibitions as well as their second-hand encounters with Communism.

7.2.1 The affirmative power of reconstructions

That the museums' reconstructed spaces were one of the more prominent points of discussion in my interviews speaks to their effectiveness in piquing visitor interest. This is especially important where it concerns issues of how the Communist past is experienced because if, as noted in chapter 5, the aim of such spaces is to provide an authentic representation of what life looked like under Communism, then physical immersion into a home, an empty shop, or an interrogation room creates the potential for feeling like one has stepped into the past, thereby *experiencing* it. We might ask, however, why experiencing the past so intimately matters. In this, I draw on Bach's analysis of intimacy and authenticity, the latter of which, he argued, is at the root of how value is "created through the representation of the past" (2017: 67). For Bach, authenticity lies in the "elevation of intimacy as part of the visitor experience" (2017: 71), with reconstructed spaces being an environment ripe for this to occur. Though Bach was writing about much more interactive museums of Communism compared to my case studies, such as the DDR Museum in Berlin, there are nonetheless similarities, in so far as they share the "seemingly carefree approach to the objects," where "[v]isitors encounter underwear drying on a clothesline, plates piled pell-mell in a kitchen, toys left in mid-play" (Bach 2017: 71). This is more pertinent to the

PRL Museum in Warsaw, but the MoC does indeed contain similar elements, as shown in chapter 4.

The mock flat in the PRL Museum in Warsaw (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2) most closely resembled the interactive spaces analyzed by Bach (2017), even if it is far less tactile than its counterpart in Berlin. The intimacy of the space, however, proved to be effective for creating a sense of authenticity for one my participants. Carol, an American tourist in her 60s who had concluded a two-week organized tour of Poland with a visit to the museum, reflected on how natural the space felt, connecting it with what guests might find in her own home:

> You know, just walking in... it just, it seemed so real to me. It seemed like this was not just a setup, it was how it was supposed to be. Everything was so small. And then the little toilet area with the... I mean, I couldn't even figure out half of the stuff. I was like, "Dean, look at all this stuff in here!" (laughs). I think there was a washing machine or some kind of a laundry thing, and then all their stuff just hanging on the wall. And, you know, it was just... it was like I got a peek into somebody's life. And it was just really interesting to see that. You know, you come to my house, you're gonna see something similar. You're gonna see all my stuff squirrelled away, you're gonna see all my dishes set up in a way that's easy for me to cook. It was really nice. And then just the living area where you had the newspapers on there and stuff like that. It made it seem like it was real. And so I really felt it was authentic.

Carol's response to the mock flat was rooted in the realism of the space. That is, it was the "stuff just hanging on the wall" and the newspapers in the living room that painted a picture of "how it was supposed to be". Her impression was authenticated through her connecting the flat to her own home, enabling her to trust in the authenticity of the space. There are echoes of MacCannell's (1973) work on staged authenticity in this, specifically his argument that the tourist experience is unharmed by the contrived nature of staged settings such as the PRL Museum's mock flat. Indeed, Carol's comment indicates that she understood the space was only meant to represent a typical home in Communist Poland, such as when she remarked that it "seemed like this was not just a setup, it was how it was supposed to be".

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This did not, though, stop her from declaring that she "really felt it was authentic". But as noted in chapter 2, Wang (1999) has argued that MacCannell's application of authenticity centred around an objectivist, fixed dichotomy of authentic/inauthentic, with no consideration for the possibility that authenticity can be negotiated. Examining Carol's reaction to the mock flat from the MacCannell's perspective, then, would not leave space for the idea that she played a role in determining the authenticity of a staged setting like the mock flat.

Wang's (1999) notion of constructive authenticity can fill in this gap and help to explain how Carol came to declare the flat as authentic. I explored constructive authenticity in chapter 5 in relation to its application within the exhibitions. As regards the mock flat specifically, I discussed how the contextuality of the space – that is, the interplay between the objects, furniture, photographs, and text panels – determines how the domestic sphere in Communist Poland can be comprehended. On the other end of this experience is the visitor, whose "view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers" (1999: 351) play a role in negotiating authenticity as much as those who encode the exhibitions with their respective messages. For Carol, what mattered was the contextual atmosphere of the space, where the intimacy of the domestic sphere enabled her to find links to the past and see her own life reflected, therefore allowing a claim of authenticity to be made and the experience to be authenticated. In line with Jones's argument that authenticity sits at the intersection "between the individual, the medium and social understandings of what constitutes 'real', 'genuine' or 'true'" (2014: 109), Carol's conclusion was rooted in the combination of her as an active agent in the visit, the contextually designed flat, and her understanding of what a genuine domestic space should look like.

But it was not only her ability to relate to the reconstructions that authenticated the museum in Carol's eyes. A chance encounter with a Pole at the museum's mock deli demonstrates how she negotiated the authenticity of the display by observing the space's importance to a single Polish visitor.

> I came around the corner and went up to the little... they had like a deli area, like the meat case. And I walked up into there and right when I walked in there, there was a woman talking to other people. I think she was a tour guide, but I'm not sure. And she did the same thing. She came up those steps and

right when she stopped, she goes, "(*gasps*) This is exactly how it was!" And I stood there like, "wow!" I'm assuming that she lived through it and she knew. And the surprise and the almost delight in her voice, like, "this is exactly how it was!" And I thought, "well, they nailed it." If this person could come in and say... because I've done that, where you go places and you see something from when you were a kid. You're like, "Oh, that's exactly how it was." That's how she was and so it really made it seem even more legitimate to me. I did like that display. The funny thing was that it's empty. And they said, "Well, this is pretty much what you saw as it was."

It is, of course, not possible to determine if Carol was correct in assuming that the woman's reaction was, in fact, linked to the history being personal for her. But as regards her understanding of the deli as accurately represented, what matters is that she believed it (Jones 2014). Moreover, Carol once again drew on personal experience, in this case, encountering something from her youth. Making a connection between the woman's reaction and her personal life experiences led her to conclude that the display was "legitimate".

In both her reflection of the flat as well as seeing the mock deli, Carol demonstrated the centrality of her personal context to how she interpreted the exhibition's content. Specifically, she narrated her biography into the museum experience in the manner Schorch (2015) explored, finding links between her own life in order to make sense of what she was encountering in the museum. In doing so, she ultimately came to view the PRL Museum's representation of the Communist as authentic. Carol was not alone amongst the participants in drawing on observations such as this one to authenticate the museum. In the following section, I examine some of the participants' accounts of encountering the Communist past, which occurred either through meeting with those who lived under Communism or through coming into contact with the past in their daily lives.

7.2.2 Encountering the Communist past through others

All of the interviewees touched upon their personal encounters with Europe's Communist past, not only those living abroad full-time but also Carol, who visited Warsaw on holiday. For the purposes of analysis, I consider these encounters to be "first hand," and

that there are two types: the first concerns experiencing either the physical remnants and/or memory of Communism, while the second regards instances in which participants personally experienced the existence of Communism prior to 1989. Sarah, a British English teacher living in Liberec, Czechia, and a repeat visitor the MoC, was one of only two participants to have had both types of encounters with the Communist past (the other being Carol, who drove through East Germany on a bus tour in the early 1980s). When asked why she moved to Czechia, Sarah's response set the framework for the rest of the conversation, which, it soon became clear, was structured around an influential encounter she had with two Czechoslovak girls in the 1980s:

> I felt like there was a lot of, you know, connections for me here. So that's how I ended up here. But also, when I was 17, or 18, a long time ago, I had a pen friend in Czechoslovakia, in Brno, yes. And when I was 18, she came out, she was allowed out of Czechoslovakia with her friend. So my pen friend was Ivana. And she was allowed out with her friend, Hannah. And they stayed with us for a few days. And I lost touch with Ivana. But we've always kept in contact with Hannah, particularly my mum. And it was such an eye-opening experience to spend time with somebody from Czechoslovakia, because obviously, we only had our own image of what, you know, a Soviet country was like, a Communist country. So to actually meet somebody from a Communist country, and to actually hear what it was actually like, for me, was fascinating. So I've always had that connection to the Czech Republic. And I've always… in that respect, I've always wanted to come back and see her, which thankfully, I was able to do a couple of years ago.
> [...]
> But you know, the moment when they stood, and they pointed at the bananas in the kitchen and said to my mum, you know, "how long did you have to queue for the bananas?" And it really… kind of like, all those stereotypical images that you had of Soviet, the Communist state kind of was like, perhaps they're real (*gasps*), you know, and then you take them into Tescos. And they're kind of like, "oh!" (*gasps*), so it had a profound effect on me [...] So when I met my pen friends, it was a real eye-opening experience because it

made us realise that a lot of what we heard was actually true. And, you know, they were English students, and they... we went to Chester for the day and we took them into a bookshop. And they... my mum wanted to buy them all the books and they couldn't, because, well, no, that's banned and that's banned and that writer is banned and that writer is banned. And it was a real eye-opening experience for us. It made it very real […] yeah, so the visit of my pen friends kind of reinforced what we what we had been told via media.

By her own admission, this encounter laid the foundation for Sarah's understanding of Communism. This was built upon by the MoC when she went 20 years later, which she argued made Communism "very real" just as her time with her Czechoslovak friends did.

Sarah's engagement with the museum thus became a matter of confirming what she encountered in the 1980s, using her friendship with Ivana and Hannah to justify her conclusions. I draw here on Schorch's notion of the "dialogical negotiation of knowledge" (2015: 437), or what occurs when the visitors' prior understandings of Communism encounter curator-mediated exhibitions about the same topic. In essence, Sarah's prior understandings of Communism encountering the exhibition was a negotiation of what she considered to be true about the ideology. What this ultimately led to was Sarah authenticating the museum's approach to representing Communist history as an era of terror and oppression, as outlined in chapter 5. She demonstrated this when recounting one of her visits, which she made with two friends many years her junior. She remarked that they were both "shocked at *what it had been like*" (participant interview: 12:08, my emphasis), which she intimately understood thanks to the two Czechoslovak girls. Her brief time with them thus acted as a guide for how she experienced Communism and the Czechoslovak regime both 40 years ago and today.

It should be noted that Sarah did not make any claims of having experienced Communism herself. Indeed, she maintained a distance between direct and indirect experience at all times, focusing instead on the value of her indirect experiences with the Communist past. For example, she talked about the significance of being able to ask her students what it was like to live under Communism, describing them as "living history":

I teach a group of older students, and they were involved with the Velvet Revolution. And I was very self-indulgent. And I normally have an hour and a half lesson with them. And I said to them, "right, this week, you're going to do the talking." And then I just asked them questions about it, how they heard about it, what they were doing, what impact it had on them. And they basically just talked for 90 minutes. And I wish I'd recorded it. I was such a fool for not doing it. Because it's living history. And, you know, in 1989, I just finished university. I was in my own little world. I remember the Berlin Wall coming down, but you know, I can't tell you where I was when it happened […] So to actually hear from my students about what happened and what it was like and... […] But talking to my students about the Velvet Revolution was amazing, because they, you know, it was living history and the fact that nobody believed, outside of Prague, nobody believed that it was happening. Nobody believed that it could happen. Yeah. And you know, the influence that the theatres played, because that was the only way that they could get the message across was by appearing on stage at the theatre in the evening, and telling people what was happening in Prague and the fact that because it was students people didn't believe, "Oh, they're just students..."

For Sarah, the value of being in a position to speak to Czech citizens who participated in the Velvet Revolution is that it was an opportunity to revisit a part of the past she was aware of but had not engaged with at the time. It became clear throughout our conversation that although she had "experienced" the revolution second-hand, she still used it as a basis for authenticating the MoC and its narratives. This was partly evident in the way she relayed her students' anecdotes, which she did as if they were her own memories, bringing the Velvet Revolution to life with a deep sense of personal investment. That Sarah would behave this way is far from unusual, for there is extensive research in the fields of memory studies and museum studies that have demonstrated how individuals identify personally and emotionally to events in the past.

Arnold-de Simine has addressed this type of reaction amongst museum audiences in her work on the mediation of memory in the museum. In particular, she wrote that even those without first-hand experience of specific events "are able to relate to certain

representations, re-creations, simulations and reenactments of the past in a way which creates not only knowledge, but also a sense of belonging to a past. *This involves a strong emotional investment*" (2013: 27, my emphasis). It is not simply that Sarah recounted her students' stories to me that signifies the deep importance she places on their experiences, but it is also notable how she narrated herself into the story (Schorch 2015). That is, she used her students' stories to fill in the gap about a series of events that she seemingly regrets not committing to memory. She knows they were important, but does not have the capacity to recall them.

Alison Landsberg's seminal work on what she coined "prosthetic memory" is influential in this regard, as it accounts for interactions in which one "takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live" (2004: 2). Although Landsberg is speaking about the transmission of memory through mass culture, in particular two science fiction films that explore the effects of technology on memory (2004: 32), I find overlap between her argument and Sarah's encounter with her students. More specifically, Landsberg contends that "inauthentic" memories can still be valid because they offer a referent for one's own memories (2004: 40). In the case of Sarah, she brought to our conversation a plethora of experiences related to the Communist era, including her time with her students, her friendship with her two Czechoslovak friends in the 1980s, and the museum visit itself. Each one of these served as a referent for one another, outlining and confirming each other at various points in our conversation.

What should be clear from these excerpts is that participants such as Carol and Sarah often moved beyond the bounds of the museum visit to make sense of their times on site as well as to authenticate the museums' narratives. Carol often drew on her personal life when discussing different parts of the PRL Museum's exhibition, while Sarah went even further to talk about experiences outside the museum altogether. This underscores the significance of not only how the museum visit fits into visitors' wider sociocultural contexts (Coffee 2007; Falk & Dierking 2012, 2013), but also how they engage with and comprehend the history of Communism in these countries. In the following section, I examine this phenomenon in more detail, highlighting various instances in which the participants drew links between the exhibitions and personal and political affairs outside the museum.

7.3 Beyond the museum: creating links between the exhibition and the outside world

Whitehead's notion of the "cultural nexus of museum knowledge production" (2016a: 3) has been useful in framing how to investigate the links participants have made between the museums' content and what they have encountered outside the museum. It asks researchers to consider "what kinds of effects and affects display has upon individuals and groups, whether these were intended or unanticipated, and what relations they have with persisting coeval social and cultural forces" (ibid.). Using this as a framework also allowed for the space to take into account prompts within the exhibition (Diamantopoulou, Insulander, and Lindstrand 2012). As was seen in the previous section, the mock flat and deli were significant enough prompts for Carol to begin to contemplate the experience of living under Communism, which she did through drawing on what she knows to be true of the domestic sphere in her own sociocultural context. Sarah, meanwhile, used the wider topic of Communism and her experiences of it outside the museum to draw conclusions about the MoC's approach to representing the era in a negative light.

It must be acknowledged that owing to my inability to speak with the staff at the case study museums, my application of the "cultural nexus of museum knowledge production" excludes one of the three considerations that comprise it, which are curatorial accounts of display production (the other two being display analysis and visitor reception of the displays). But as the aim of this study is not to examine whether the museums' succeeded in ensuring a match between curator intentions and visitor experiences (Whitehead 2016b) but rather how the visitors made sense of the displays (Whitehead 2016a), I believe the "cultural nexus" still provides a fruitful basis for understanding how my participants engaged with the museums. As regards the present section, it is Whitehead's assertion that museum researchers should investigate the relationship between the "effects and affects" displays have upon visitors and "persisting coeval social and cultural forces" that holds the most relevance here. Below, I examine how participants drew links between the case studies' displays and what they have witnessed beyond the museum, demonstrating the centrality of the latter in the meaning-making process.

7.3.1 Using links to affirm and challenge museum narratives

Throughout our conversations, several participants made connections between the museums' approaches to representing Communism and observations about, firstly, how Communism is remembered today and, secondly, the state of politics since the collapse of the regimes across CEE. What stood out in how the participants communicated these links to me is that doing so led them to either affirm or challenge the museums' overarching narratives. Jack, an American history teacher living in Warsaw, made perhaps the fewest references to things outside the exhibition compared to the other interviewees, choosing instead to keep our conversation focused on the museum. This reflected his reasoning for visiting the museum, which he explained to me was because his existing knowledge of Communism centred on the larger political and diplomatic history of the Cold War, and that he was interested in learning about how daily life was "remembered and interpreted by Polish curators of 2022". In one of the rare moments he discussed something beyond the walls of the exhibition, he made a compelling link between the PRL Museum and what he has seen around Warsaw.

In particular, he expressed his surprise at what he thought was a nostalgic interpretation of Communist history, specifically the heavy focus on consumer goods, but ultimately believed that it was a reflection of Polish people today not having an "unrelentingly negative" relationship with Communism. He supported this by drawing a connection to the milk bars and Socialist-themed restaurants and tours he has observed in the city. In making this link, Jack ruminated on the meaning of the nostalgia he interpreted in the exhibits and the nostalgic activities one can partake in around Warsaw. That is, he concluded that both meet the needs of older generations to remember how "there was in daily life things that we enjoyed and appreciated". This judgement demonstrates the necessity of investigating visitors' entrance narrative when researching meaning-making. More specifically, Jack's pre-existing knowledge about the Cold War and his assumptions of what he was expecting to find in the museum was challenged by the exhibition's focus on consumer products, which he thought resulted in a "nostalgic take on life under Communism". He was not opposed to this "nostalgic take" – indeed, he expressed an interest in the array of consumer products – but he ultimately tried to rationalize it over the course of our conversation. He did this by moving in and out of the visit, bringing together what he has experienced in the museum and around Warsaw.

Much of my conversation with Jack revealed a fixation on the PRL Museum's collection of consumer goods, specifically on the way they were used to tell the history of Communism in Poland. This draws interesting parallels with work carried out in *Alltag* museums in eastern Germany, discussed in chapter 2 (see, for example, Berdahl 2008; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Mueller 2013; Bach 2015a; 2015b; Winkler 2015). Indeed, at one point, Jack noted that "[m]any of them [were] produced in Poland, or in the Eastern Bloc, virtually nothing produced outside the Eastern Bloc [...] there's a certain like, appreciation for the domestic industry that produced those things, there's a certain appreciation of the aesthetics of that era." Additionally, he referred to the country's older generation using an "outdated hairdryer" to remember the "beauty and joy of their youth," much in the same way scholars such as Arnold-de Simine have argued that objects can trigger memories of everyday life (2011: 102). In highlighting this, it underscores how such memories, though perhaps not as intimately understood by foreigners as they are by Poles and others who experienced Communism in CEE, are not the exclusive domain of these citizens. They can be, Jack's reflections suggest, equally picked up on and interpreted by foreigners as well.

This does indeed appear to be the case, as can be further seen in Jack's observation of some Polish visitors reacting to the museum's automobile exhibit:

> I did come away with the impression that there's a certain pride in [Polish engineering, craftsmanship, and ingenuity], and I think that's justified, you know. Like, one of the more maybe evocative exhibits that stuck with me was the half of the automobile. I can't remember if it was a Trabant or some other make or model, I can't remember. But yeah, I remember quite a few Polish visitors to the museum taking one another's picture in it. You know, like the husband, like, "here, honey, let me get behind the wheel, take a photo of me, let's put it on Facebook." So there was a sort of.... I mean, it's an objectively bad car, like, it's very tiny and not high quality. But yeah, I witnessed Polish people sort of celebrating and nostalgia-izing that. And fair enough, you know, I can understand and appreciate that. I also enjoyed that part of the museum.

The celebration and "nostalgia-izing" being manifested through the embodied experience of the automobile which Jack witnessed speak to how the sociocultural history of Communism

in Poland is entwined with how it is remembered today (Macdonald 2012: 245). While he may have not been in a position to fully understand this in the same manner as his fellow Polish visitors, he interpreted their behaviour as being rooted in them having a "certain pride" in Polish engineering and ingenuity. In doing so, he grasped at least one facet of the PRL Museum's messaging about pride in Polish identity, which I explored in greater depth in chapter 6 in relation to opposition movements, domestic life, and national struggles. As a result, Jack appears to have affirmed the museum's approach of mobilizing everyday objects to tell the history of Communism in Poland. Moreover, he has demonstrated that it is indeed possible for foreign visitors to understand something about Communist and post-Communist identities without first-hand experience of life in the Polish People's Republic.

Carol also viewed the PRL Museum's consumer goods as indicative of something much wider, linking the displays of technological objects to the Polish spirit as a whole.

> I just had this view of, you know, they sat around and did radios, and they didn't have a whole lot of stuff. I just didn't think that. And so now it changes my mind because they did have... they had hair dryers and they did... they did try to bring themselves into a modern world. It just was neat to see that. I thought that, you know... yeah, maybe it wasn't the greatest technology, but they tried and they kept on it. And they just tried to, you know, do whatever they could to make their life better. And I think that is like... it kind of made me realise that that's the human spirit, we just want to do better. We want to do better for our families and our kids, and that eventually becomes our country as well and our society.

To be able to change her mind about the state of life in Communist Poland, Carol had to reconcile her preconceived notions of what that life looked like with what she had encountered in the museum, albeit not completely. I briefly mentioned in the previous section that Carol had gone through East Germany on a bus tour in the early 1980s, which she spoke about when asked if she had any particular views about Communism prior to her museum visit. She described the country as "dark and dull, and buildings were ugly, there was hardly anybody on the street. In fact, there was even, like, broken buildings still from the war". It was clear to me throughout our conversation that this experience defined her

views of Communism, as it was reflected in the assumptions with which she began many of her reflections ("they didn't have a whole lot of stuff"). She thus drew on this experience when confronting the differences between the museum's content and her beliefs about Communism as we spoke. What resulted from the slippage between these two perspectives was the particular way in which she interpreted what she encountered in the museum; that is, Carol saw these objects as icons of hope and a yearning to be free from Communism.

In what could be considered a reflection of the PRL Museum's choice to open and close the exhibition with the story of Solidarity (see chapter 6, section 6.2.2), Carol framed her appreciation for the Polish spirit almost teleologically. That is to say, she brought into play her knowledge of Communism's end in Poland to interpret the narratives presented in the museum as tales of perseverance. For example, when our conversation turned to the commonalities between her everyday life in the United States and what she was seeing the museum, she remarked:

> I liked looking at the... just what regular people did. And I saw that they didn't have the best living conditions, but they managed and they were able to still do the things in life that you need to do. Raise your family, feed your family. And it added... I think was that they kept fighting to regain what the rest of the world had. And I think that was part of it, too. They just weren't going to give up and say, "Okay, this is our life now". They're just like, "Okay, we're sitting this through until we can get strong enough and be done with it". And I think that's what I left with, was that, man, these people were strong. And they were... they had the big picture in mind. And they had the long-term view in mind that one day, we're going to be out of this and we're going to be able to live freely.

Knowing that Communism eventually collapses in Poland thus arguably coloured how Carol approached the exhibition, affirming at once the PRL Museum's message of perseverance of Poles as well as the museum's approach to opening and closing the exhibition in the manner it does. This same knowledge similarly impacted upon participants who visited the MoC in Prague, who largely affirmed the victimhood approach discussed in chapter 5. One visitor, however, took issue with how this narrative was used to position Czechoslovakia/Czechia

and its citizens as inherently democratic, which caused him to challenge the museum's ending message about Czechia's hopeful return to democracy.

Chris is an American English teacher living in Prague and has visited the museum several times, the most recent of which was with his parents. Having earned a degree in 20th-century history, he approached our conversation from an academic standpoint, starting with an assessment of the MoC's overall layout. In particular, he talked at great length about *why* the MoC was right to open the exhibition chronologically, "because if you don't understand why the Czechs might not trust the British and the French, you might not understand why they did Communism". He was referring here to the loss of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland to Nazi Germany following the Munich Agreement, which is the focus of display 4 (*Munich Agreement*), but he also alludes to the country's suffering during World War II, which, in his view, led to a scenario in which "Communism looked like an alternative for the Czechs".

As a history enthusiast, Chris said he decided to bring his parents to other sites around the city related to the Nazi occupation before going to the museum because he wanted them to be better positioned, in his words, "to understand why the Czechs felt betrayed by the Western Allies. And that was going to have huge, huge ramifications in 1948". Chris was making clear that a holistic presentation of Czech history, including Nazi Germany's occupation prior to the rise of the Communists, is crucial to understanding the country's direction in the 20th century. But more importantly, it is crucial to understanding the politics of today.

It is this point that Chris challenged the museum for not emphasizing. The issue, he argued, is that the MoC delineates the end of Communism as something finite. As was discussed in chapter 6 (see section 6.2.1), the museum's ending implies a triumphant return to democracy, represented by the figure of Václav Havel. In Chris's view, the ending also implies that all has been well in the decades since 1989. Scholars like Mark (2010b) and Mark et al. (2015) have demonstrated the complexities of the transition period, and the many contentious debates that exist around how finite the collapse of Communism truly was. This lends credence to Chris's observations, as he further viewed the MoC's ending as ignoring the reality of politics, or rather, the reality of democracy.

You were asking me what I want in the museum? I would want more about the fragility of democracy, especially right now. Since 2016, mostly, thanks to the US and Britain, I've become very cynical about democracy. Not as in like, there shouldn't be democracy, of course, you know, people should have the right. But in that the voter and the voted are willing to keep it. That is where my cynicism is.

He continued:

One thing you should probably know about me is I have this seething hatred of populism. Because you don't impress me turning a country into an unthinking mob and then screaming, "I'm angry too, give me all the power". It's like, you don't impress me very much doing that. And that also is why I'm so cynical about democracy because you got one side saying the bitter truth and the other side says, "it's his fault. Let's go kick his ass". Who do you think's gonna win that election? It's gonna keep making things worse. So, one thing I would probably have wanted to see more of in the museum is how democracy kind of killed itself in Czechoslovakia, you know. Not so much like... you know, of course, Gottwald just kind of showed up and went, "Okay, we're Communist now". But you know, they put him in a position through elections that he could do that. And especially right now, I think people need to understand how easily a democracy can commit suicide.

It is an important point that is worth raising, and a clear indication of Chris's insistence on paying attention to the path of history, including historical patterns. A significant portion of our conversation veered into political topics, including the rise of the far-right across the Western World in this current moment. Bringing this academic interest to bear not only on his visit but also in the way he narrated it in retrospect, Chris ultimately challenged how the MoC positioned the transition to democracy, in so far as it is not addressed beyond 1989, nor are the three decades of political trends since. To do so would be a much less triumphant story.

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In their 2023 Nations in Transit report, the Washington D.C.-based non-profit Freedom House recorded an overall decline in democratic governance in the regions of Central Europe and Central Asia for the 19th year in a row (Smeltzer 2023: 2). Czechia was reported as having "lingering threats" as "many Czechs have been shaken by the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine, and the country remains subject to prolific disinformation, political polarization, and regular demonstrations on issues such as rising inflation" (Karppi 2023: 17). Though it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the roots of this decline, scholars such as Kubik and Linch (2006), Mark (2010), Mark et al. (2015), and Wawrzyniak and Pehe (2024) have posited that the sudden collapse of Communism and the uneasy transition to democracy have sparked the great many memory debates that have made for a contentious political landscape today.

In their work on the "neoliberal turn" of the 1990s, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Veronika Pehe claimed that "populist and authoritarian political subjects have themselves capitalized on the conflicting memories of the postsocialist social and economic upheavals" (2024: 7). It is this precise point that Chris was trying to communicate when he commended the MoC's opening displays, asserting that one must acknowledge the social and economic circumstances of historical moments to understand the rise of authoritarianism. But it is this same point that left Chris ultimately disappointed with the museum's overarching message of the people being inherently democratic because it ignores the reality of the transition to democracy, which he recognized as leading to the landscape Wawrzyniak and Pehe (2024) and other scholars are examining in the present. Exemplifying this is Vladimir Putin, who loomed large over most of the interviews. In the following section, I turn to the many links that were made between the Soviet Union before 1989 and Russia's contemporary actions in Ukraine.

7.3.2 Communist pasts and contemporary politics

My interviews took place in Autumn 2022, several months after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Given the Soviet Union's role in Communism in CEE, Putin's imperialist aims and the resulting war were mentioned by several participants. This was especially the case with participants who went to the MoC, where the Soviet Union's place in Czechoslovak politics play a significant role in the exhibition.

Prompted by a photograph she took of the display dedicated to the Soviet invasion in August 1968, Sarah, the English teacher living in Czechia, was quick to make a link between the historical event and the current war in Ukraine. Moreover, she did this through a recollection of an exhibition held in Liberec, where she is living, for the 50th anniversary of the invasion, and which included a large Russian tank in the town square.

> It was.... when my mum was here, it was that actual week, it was August. And so they had a display in the square here in Liberec in commemoration of the people that died. Because I think there was 16... 15, 16 people died here? And then there was the Russian tank, and then there was pictures as well of what it looked like when it happened. And, you know, talking about the fact that the Russians, the soldiers didn't know why they were there. And the fact that they felt that they had been a bit like, at the moment in Ukraine, they felt that they'd been tricked and conned into invading Czechoslovakia.

Recalling which topics in the MoC's exhibition she chose to focus on thus became a moment for Sarah to draw on a range of personal experiences that supported what she encountered in the museum (Diamantopoulou, Insulander, and Lindstrand 2012). What is interesting is that in so doing, she retroactively superimposed the war in Ukraine onto an experience dating many years prior to the full-scale invasion, reflecting Falk and Dierking's claim that meaning is built upon, "layer upon layer" (2013: 29). This enabled Sarah's understanding of the August 1968 display, as well as the role of the Soviet Union/Russia in subjugating other nations, to be shaped by ongoing events in her present day.

Gianmarco, an Italian IT specialist newly arrived in Prague after several years in Bratislava, also drew on the 1968 Soviet invasion, which he used to support both the MoC's narrative about the country being victimized by the Soviet Union and his judgements about contemporary attitudes towards Russia. He was insistent that former Communist countries in CEE are "really Russophobic," a claim he made based on experiences living in and travelling around the region. He drew specifically on the war in Ukraine to underscore this, saying, "I was speaking with the people, and they were very worried when the war started in February. Ukraine is still quite far away, but still not so far away. And they were very worried because they were invaded in 1968." In asserting this, Gianmarco made a link

between the historical events showcased in the exhibition and contemporary events, effectively underwriting the "us vs them" narrative (Macdonald 2005; Watson 2021) that Czechoslovakia – but also contemporary Czechia – is fundamentally distinct from its eastern, Ukrainian neighbour.

Chris made a similar argument, using his encounters with older Czechs to support his claim that Czechia does not have "warm, fuzzy feelings about Russia," stemming from its time within the latter's sphere of influence. This later returned as an important point when we were discussing the parallels between the rise of the right in Europe in the 1930s and the political climate today. Prompted by my expressing concern that Putin will eventually be handed the Donbas in much the same way Hitler was allowed to take the Sudetenland, Chris tapped into his conversations with his students, who have spoken to him about living under Communism, to share observations about how ordinary Czechs are responding to this new potential threat.

> The war has been a topic for a lot of my students. In fact, I remember waking up the morning of the war starting and getting like three messages from my students like, "it's happening". One person just simply said, "it's f*cking war" […] And, you know, obviously, because, you know, we're a former Warsaw Pact country, there is a concern that if he had the chance to be doing this here. You know, I mean, remember in one of his rants before the war, he said, "I want all former Warsaw Pact countries out of NATO". So he still obviously considers us his sphere of influence. And, you know, I had other students who were afraid that nukes would come out.

It is interesting to note the direction Chris took the conversation in. As with Gianmarco, he overtly echoed the MoC's message that the Soviet Union was the invader, supporting the perspective that there is a clear boundary between Czechoslovakia/Czechia and the Soviet Union/Russia. But Chris also brought the conversation directly into the realm of geopolitics. He did not just draw on the past to argue Czechs are right to be worried, as Gianmarco did; he also used history to demonstrate how the past can intimately affect what occurs in the present. To put it another way, Russia is painted as a brutal force intent on reinvading

Czechia, and its citizens as innocents who must now live with an unease and uncertainty at the prospect of returning to Russia's sphere of influence.

It is true that when Chris referenced Putin's intentions, we were not speaking about the MoC specifically. What this demonstrates, however, is how museum use must be considered within visitors' biographies. This reflects earlier work by Falk and Dierking (2000, 2013), Coffee (2007), Macdonald (2007), Schorch (2015), Dicks (2016), and Mason et al. (2018), among others, who have all advocated for understanding the museum experience as but one moment in a person's life. With regard to Chris – as well the other participants – knowledge and opinions about the current war in Ukraine and personal memories of and beliefs about Communism played a crucial role in how they engaged with the museums, and how they recounted their visits to me after the fact. More specifically, they have intersected with the exhibitions' content and the narratives constructed through the displays to not only help the participants make sense of the exhibition but also support the museums' overall messages. In this regard, museums like the MoC in Prague and the PRL Museum in Warsaw have the potential to become sites not only of "experience, learning, dialogue and memory, for acts of remembrance, acknowledgement, empathy and understanding" (Eckerlsey 2017: 15) but also where visitors can engage with the past to better understand the direction world events can go in today.

There is an imperative within this to grasp the implications of how such links to things like current political events – but also visitors' own lives – impact one's overall impression of the museum. The previous section examined how participants made and subsequently used these links to affirm and/or challenge the case studies' main messages, whilst this section investigated how the museums served as springboards for connections to the state of politics today. Bringing these two outcomes together – that is, reflections on the museums as well as events beyond the walls of the museums – I will now turn to the participants' own conclusions about their respective visits. In so doing, I demonstrate how foreign visitors – whom Light (2000a, 2000b) claimed were a hindrance to the process of identity construction in the post-Communist era in his influential work on Communist heritage and tourism – have built a bridge to their own positionality to ultimately take on the case studies' messages of national identity.

7.4 Grasping national identity: does being foreign make a difference?

I spoke in section 7.3 of how Jack, who visited the PRL Museum in Warsaw, perceived a sense of pride regarding the Polish people. He picked up on this through the museum's foregrounding of consumer goods, particularly the "Polish engineering and craftsmanship and ingenuity" that went into producing them. This bottom-up approach to representing Communism surprised him given his background as a historian concerned with the social, political, and diplomatic circumstances of the former Eastern Bloc, but it also offered him the opportunity to negotiate his understanding of Poland's experience with Communism. When asked if his views of Communism have changed since visiting the museum, he responded: "what changed perhaps was my perception of how Polish people understand and process that period, you know, what their relationship with it is. And it's one that's not, you know, unrelentingly negative". This indicates that he reinforced the PRL Museum's constructions of national identity by universalizing Poles' sense of belonging, thereby creating a type of imagined community (Anderson 1983) of the Polish nation, even as an outsider. That is, he appears to have assigned the manner in which the PRL Museum's owners and staff "understand and process" the Communist era to the entirety of the Polish people.

What is further interesting in Jack's reflections is that this surprise inspired him to reach out to older Polish friends and colleagues to learn about their "lived experiences of that period". This reiterates that the museum experience does not necessarily end at the exit (Macdonald 2007; Black 2012; Falk and Dierking 2013; Schorch 2014, 2015). But more importantly, it highlights that contrary to the prevailing concerns of the 2000s that tourists can hinder the identity-construction process, foreign visitors like Jack can walk away from a Communist history museum or heritage site determined to seek out first-hand accounts. In so doing, these friends and colleagues have an opportunity to reflect on their own understandings of their personal experience and the self, negotiating and communicating their identity in the process.

I see this as evidence of Fox and Van Ginderachter's (2018) argument on everyday nationalism. As introduced in chapter 6 (see section 6.3.1), the scholars have claimed that national forms of belonging are reproduced and legitimated through the ways citizens think, talk, enact, perform, consume, reject, resist, ignore, and avoid the nation (2018: 546). In giving citizens the opportunity to do this, foreign visitors like Jack are creating moments for

identity to be negotiated and constructed. At the same time, on the visitor's side, this encounter increases the potential of Jack and others to change how they understand contemporary Poland and its citizens. In this manner, sites like the PRL Museum are a starting point for communicating Communist history and inspiring deeper engagement beyond the visit.

Carol did not leave the PRL Museum with a determination to seek out people with first-hand experience, but she did leave with a determination that authoritarianism should not be allowed to come back. I mentioned above how she expressed several times throughout our conversation her admiration for the Polish people, seeing in them a sense of perseverance to get through Communism. Carol was, once again, framing Polish Communism teleologically, confident in the knowledge that the regime would one day collapse. But this knowledge only strengthened what she took away from the PRL Museum, with her concluding that the people's strength and perseverance "really filled me with a lot of good feelings and hope".

I would be remiss not to address how Carol's political stance had an impact on how she perceived what was a message of survival. When I asked if the negative views of Communism she had expressed throughout our conversation had changed since visiting the museum, she was categorical that they have only gotten stronger. In expressing this, though, she did not simply relay what it was about the museum that strengthened her beliefs, but instead brought in several disparate topics, including American politics in the 1980s, the trajectory of the Cold War, Communism in China today, and other museum visits she made while in Poland:

> I think that I have always been pretty much anti-Communist. I was a strong supporter - and still am - of Ronald Reagan and his "tear down this wall" speech. And that whole trifecta of Thatcher and the Pope and Reagan coming together and saying, "let's get this taken care of". I always knew it wasn't a good thing, but man, visiting Poland and visiting the World War Two Museum in Gdańsk and this museum here made me realise it is an evil empire. And it is not a utopia. It's not... you know, people like to think it's something that everybody benefits and it's… no, you're all miserable unless you're in the top ruling tier. And that's even iffy because, you know, look at what happened in

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China just the other day, they hauled the other guy out, you know. It's like, "Ok, you're not in favour anymore. Get out of here." So my eyes have really been opened. I think they always had been, but I really am very determined to not let it go any further than what it's done because it's just not a good thing.

Through this on-the-spot reflection, she negotiated and justified her beliefs about Communism – and perhaps even authoritarianism more generally, though she acknowledged separately that the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk only touched upon Communism towards the end – with her anti-Communist stance acting as a background against which these additional issues operate. This can be seen as evidence of a "dialogical negotiation of knowledge" (Schorch 2015: 437), with Carol actively thinking about and working through her beliefs about Communism as she spoke (Porter Abbott 2002). Ultimately, the strengthening of her disapproval for Communism served to enhance her conclusions about the museum. That is, her engagement with the exhibition did not result in a perception of nostalgia as it did with Jack, but her beliefs about Communism as inherently evil and destined to collapse ensured that she viewed the same objects and reconstructions as symbols of strength, perseverance, and hope.

What is particularly interesting is that Carol was reassured of her anti-Communist beliefs despite the museum not overtly disavowing Poland's former regime. This reiterates what has long been stressed in museological literature; that visitors are active players in the museum visit, with an agency to interpret exhibitions in a manner that makes sense according to their own contexts (Mason 2005; Hooper-Greenhill 2006; Smith 2010, 2015; Falk and Dierking 2013). Indeed, Jack's own interpretations of the museum were quite different. Though Carol did not pick up on the sentimental interpretation through which they were predominately communicated, she nonetheless recognized the messages of Polish pride and a sense of a prevailing Polish spirit. This reveals that even if foreign visitors encounter an interpretation of Communism that differs vastly from their beliefs, they may still be in a position to grasp the overarching messages, doing so in their own way.

In the MoC, one of Gianmarco's greatest takeaways from his visit was in fact one of the key themes identified during my analysis of the exhibition. As was discussed in the previous two chapters, the MoC is encoded with an explicit division between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, emphasizing the "us vs them" narrative described by Macdonald

(2005) in her work on national identity formation. Gianmarco perceived an overt vilification of the Soviet Union, saying on more than one occasion how it was impossible not to leave the exhibition thinking Italy, his home country, was lucky to have been liberated from the Nazis by the USA and not the Soviet Union.

Having perhaps been acutely aware of the danger of authoritarianism owing to his country's history with Fascism, Gianmarco was highly receptive to the way the Soviet Union was framed throughout the exhibition. This recalls how Diamantopoulou, Insulander, and Lindstrand argued that different interests will produce "different sequences of attention" (2012: 23), while Mason contended that the meaning that may arise from where the visitor places their attention is rooted in his or her historical, geographical, or cultural contexts (2005: 224). In response to my asking how he viewed Communism prior to visiting the MoC, Gianmarco launched into a lengthy description about the state of politics in Italy after World War II as well as the influence of the Cold War structure on his country. From this, I surmised that he has a deep interest in 20th-century politics and his country's place within this which impacted how he interpreted the exhibition's representation of the Soviet Union. By drawing on his own interests and background, Gianmarco not only recognized the MoC's narrative of victimization discussed in the previous chapter, he effectively affirmed the museum's closing message: the quote by Václav Havel which states that if human freedom "is denied to anyone in the world, it is therefore denied, indirectly, to all people".

Sarah came away with a very similar understanding, bringing into play the accounts she heard from her Czechoslovak friends in the 1980s, her conversations with her English-language students, and her knowledge about life in Czechia today which she had witnessed as a long-time expatriate in the country. At the end of the interview, I asked her if there is anything else she would like to add, to which she replied that she thinks all Czech children should be made to go to the museum:

> ...sometimes they don't know how lucky they are. And I know we all say that, but... Speaking as a Brit who's just lost my freedom of movement because of Brexit, I think they need to appreciate what they have. Not just Czech kids, but kids everywhere, young people everywhere, I suppose. And you know, when I was that age, you know, I didn't appreciate what I had at all either, but just so that they can understand what their parents and their grandparents went

through [...] So, you know, we don't talk about things that were part of our day-to-day life because we didn't know any different. And so I think it's important that they do understand and they do realise how lucky they are to have a very nice fancy Škoda and how lucky they are to have, you know, a factory that makes fancy Škodas and, and to be able to go to not just Croatia on holiday, but other places, because everybody goes to Croatia on holiday. You know, and that they're very, very lucky.

For Sarah, the museum is not just a place to learn about the history of Communism in Czechoslovakia, but an important tool for educating about the values of freedom and democracy. She took a moral position on how Communism should be remembered as well as what it should *mean* for the people of today. In other words, the regime should not only be acknowledged as the repressive apparatus it was; the memory of it should also remind us not to take freedom for granted. Returning to that closing image of Havel in the United State Congress and his quote about human freedom, we see this very message. It is symbolized by a national hero of modern, democratic Czechia, someone who Sarah herself said continues to be an icon who "lived up to that image" until his death in 2011.

At the same time, in an arguably more overt expression of this message, Sarah's takeaway from the exhibition is echoed in the museum's feedback form. At the bottom, there is a call to visitors to follow the museum on Facebook and Instagram, saying, "If you believe in democracy and freedom as we do, if you believe that the past cannot be erased, if you believe that we must learn from history, then please support us on social media." It is a marketing ploy designed to encourage engagement, but its message is impactful. In one sentence, the MoC has positioned itself as a site where the values of freedom and democracy can be encountered, facilitated through a juxtaposition between today and the darkest period of Czechia's history, when these values were suppressed by the Soviet Union. It is exactly this that Sarah took away from her visit, encouraged along the way by a raft of personal experiences beyond the walls of the museum.

What each of these examples demonstrate is how being foreign did not stop these visitors from picking up on the museums' messages of national identity. They may not have been in a position to understand these identities as intimately as a Polish or Czech visitor, but the museums' respective approaches to representing Communist history were

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nonetheless effective in communicating what it means to be of their countries. At the same time, how the participants engaged with these exhibitions was equally vital. In her work on heritage centres and social history museums dedicated to "ordinary life," Dicks contended that these "more 'ordinary' forms of heritage" involve judgements about the "*social value* of the displayed subject" (2016: 53; emphasis in original), which is what grants legitimacy to a social identity. In borrowing from Dicks, I assert that the participants' engagement with the exhibitions – that is, the judgements they made and conclusions that arose from them – granted legitimacy to the museums' approaches, but, more importantly its nationalist messages as well.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the varied responses visitors had to the representation of Communism present in the case study institutions. In particular, it investigated how participants, all of whom were not from former or current Communist countries, engaged with the history on display and what came out of this encounter. A key theme of this chapter has been how participants drew on personal experiences, preconceived beliefs, and contemporary political events, underscoring the inherent links between the museum visit, one's personal context (Falk and Dierking 2010, 2013; Schorch 2015), and what occurs beyond the walls of the museum. I opened this chapter by discussing the many ways my participants felt they had *experienced* Communism, to the degree that they felt in a position to authenticate the museums' representations of Communism.

Carol, for example, focused her attention on the PRL Museum's reconstructions, notably the model flat, seeing this space as an authentic representation of a Communist-era home. It is important to note that she did not, at any time, believe she was stepping into an authentic flat with respect to it as *real* or *genuine* (MacCannell 1973). Rather, she drew on her own understandings of what a home should look like to negotiate her interpretation of the space as authentic. In concluding this, Carol found herself in the position to authenticate the PRL Museum's approach to Communism from the perspective of everyday life. Where this became important was in the capacity this trust afforded her to affirm the museum's overarching messages, as was shown in section 7.3.1.

Other visitors felt they had experienced Communism through encounters *outside* the museum, which they then brought to bear on how they viewed the exhibition. Sarah's

conversations with Czechs both today and in the 1980s informed her understanding of Communist history and later served as a guide for how she engaged with the MoC as well as what conclusions she drew about it. That said, what is of primary importance in cases such as Sarah's is that the museum and its contents is secondary to her reflections about how she experienced Communism. That is, unlike Carol, who felt she had experienced it *within* the museum, for Sarah, this experience occurred outside her visit but ultimately affected her engagement with the topic while on site and in our conversation many years later. In both these cases, the participants drew links to their own lives in order to make sense of the exhibitions. These links became a crucial theme across many of the interviews, especially as they were used to affirm and/or challenge the museums' main narratives.

Both Carol and Jack made repeated references to the PRL Museum's use of consumer goods as a way to represent Communism, as both were equally surprised to see them featured so heavily in the exhibition. Given their existing knowledge about Communism was rooted in more negative aspects of the regimes, the foregrounding of engineering, production, and the consumer industry required a degree of reconciliation between these two understandings. How they ultimately affirmed the museum has to do with the links they made to life beyond the exhibition. More specifically, Jack rationalized the "nostalgic" interpretation, as he described it, by seeing it as an extension of a widespread relaxed attitude towards Poland's Communist era. His assumptions were supported by the behaviour of his fellow Polish visitors, who he observed celebrating the country's consumer goods, and which he interpreted as an expression of pride in the country's outputs in the Polish People's Republic.

That same focus on consumer goods was not, however, interpreted in the same manner by Carol, who saw these particular objects as symbols of hope and freedom. Tracing a link between what she observed traveling through East Germany in the early 1980s (where everything was "dark and dull," according to Carol) and knowing that Communism eventually came to an end, she saw in the consumer goods the story of a nation that thrived under duress and came through the other side. Not all the participants affirmed the museums' messages, though. I spoke of how Chris, pleased as he was to see the MoC represent the context surrounding rise of Communism in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and 1940s, took particular issue with the museum for not affording the end of Communism, and the post-Communist period, this same level of context. In his view, the museum ignored the

reality of the state of democracy in present-day Czechia, but also across the former Eastern Bloc.

References to contemporary politics appeared across my interviews, specifically the ongoing war in Ukraine and Putin's imperialist aims. This was particularly the case amongst those living in Czechia, who saw the events as threatening the current world order and a return to the region coming back under Russia's sphere of influence. What emerged from this was an upholding of the MoC's "us vs them" narrative (Macdonald 2005), in so far as the participants underscored the idea of the Soviet Union as an invader and occupier then by making comparisons with similar behaviour on the part of Russia today.

In each of these instances, the participants ultimately legitimized the nation- and identity-building projects encoded into the exhibitions. By trusting in the contents of the exhibitions (such as the reconstructed spaces) or drawing on experiences with citizens who could offer first-hand accounts, they authenticated the museums' approaches to representing Communist history, which was of critical importance when asked to reflect on their takeaways from the museum. That is, the participants found themselves taking on board the messages identified in chapter 6 regarding national identity, pride, victimhood, and perseverance. These same conclusions were found to have been aided by the links participants made between the museums and their own lives or world events today. The current war in Ukraine proved to be the strongest of these links, demonstrating a key finding in this study. That is, though the participants did not come from Polish and Czech backgrounds, they were found to be very receptive of the messages encoded into the exhibitions because there are events, experiences, and/or understandings from their own lives that could be tapped into in order to read them.

This leads to the question of whether being a *foreign* visitor to museums of Communism is of any detriment to understanding messages of national identity and the nation. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, it would appear that this subset of visitors is in fact capable of grasping these messages, precisely because they were able to find ways into this history and into these messages that were rooted in their personal contexts (Falk and Dierking 2000, 2013). Moreover, their interests in engaging with Communist history and heritage must not be considered a hindrance to identity construction, as was claimed a decade on from the transition (Light 2000a, 2000b). Rather, foreign visitors can play a crucial role in the continued reiteration of post-Communist

identities, even thirty-five years after the collapse of the regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. In the final chapter, I continue this discussion into how foreign visitors can find their way into these messages before reassessing how Light's (2000a, 2000b) arguments can be thought of two decades on.

Chapter 8: The Western gaze thirty-five years on: concluding thoughts on post-Communist identity and foreign curiosity

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has investigated the ways in which Communism has been presented in two museums in Czechia and Poland, and how foreign visitors have engaged with these exhibitions to make meaning about the topic. Chapter 5 analyzed the practices the case study museums make use of in order to authenticate their version of history. It was shown that the MoC in Prague draws on authentic objects, witness testimonies, and photographs that corroborate their representation of the era as one marked by terror and oppression. This was further supported in the research by the first-hand account of a tour guide, whose anecdotes about living under Communism painted a picture of daily state control and a lack of freedom. By contrast, the PRL Museum in Warsaw approaches the history of its regime through the lens of the everyday. It does this by focusing on the mundane aspects of daily life, such as industries of culture and the home. Like its Czech counterpart, the Polish museum makes equal use of authentic objects and photographs, but where the MoC does so in pursuit of a narrative of victimization, the PRL Museum instead foregrounds messages of ordinary achievements, minimizing the totalitarian elements of the Polish regime in favour of a focus on the people who persevered in spite of their circumstances.

Chapter 6 examined the outcome of these differing approaches, which resulted in an overarching narrative about Czech and Polish national identities. Across the displays, the Prague museum has constructed a story about the country's inherently democratic character, drawing on national heroes who best exemplify this and a common sense of humour which underpinned their fundamental opposition to Communist ideals. At the same time, it also employs a largely chronological approach to its history that traces Czechoslovakia's founding as a democracy in 1918 to its descent into totalitarianism, and its return to democracy in 1989. This positions the country as deeply resistant to Communism and triumphant in its return to its democratic roots. The PRL Museum, on the other hand, does not so much focus on Poland's transition to democracy as it does to the citizens' attempts to live a respectable life within the bounds of their oppression. What shines through is a pride for how they managed to make do with the situation they found

themselves in, which is represented by some of Poland's most iconic figures and objects from the Communist period.

Chapter 7 switched focus to the museums' foreign visitors to probe their engagement with the exhibitions. The results of my conversations with visitors demonstrated a significant degree of reflection about their life experiences and sociocultural contexts. Additionally, they created important linkages between past and present as well as considered the implications of showcasing Communist history today. It was discussed how of these reflections, very few focused on particular displays in the museum. Rather, the displays and their components sparked conversations about wider social, cultural, and political discussions, providing invaluable insight into the process of meaning-making during museum visits. What follows is a reflection on these findings and how they contribute to research on museums of Communism.

8.2 Research findings

Several findings have emerged from this research which relate to the manner in which the case study museums assemble their display components to authenticate their respective approaches to representing Communist history, the construction and reinforcement of dominant narratives of identities through the exhibitions, and the place of foreign visitors in the discussions surrounding museums of Communism. National identity is key among them, and as such, the following two sections summarize what this study has discovered as regards both its encoding and decoding. The final section returns to the question of foreign visitors in these processes, offering some conclusions on how we might consider them going forward.

8.2.1 The poetics and politics of exhibiting national identity

I stated in chapter 1 that identity construction was a major project in the transition to democracy following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The musealization of Communist heritage aided in this process as the authoritative power of museums enabled the creation and solidification of existing narratives about the countries' relationship to their recent pasts. A large part of this was instilling the notion that Communism was an aberrant era in their pasts, enabling the countries to begin to construct

an "us vs them" narrative about identities (Macdonald 2005; Watson 2021), which was doubly reinforced and created within museums of Communism across the former Eastern Bloc.

How they go about doing this has much to do with the authenticating practices the museums employ. Museums benefit from being in a position of authority (Vergo 1989; Stam 2005; Mason 2005; Whitehead, Eckersley, and Mason 2012; Jones 2014; Whitehead 2016a; Watson 2021), which lends a degree of authentication in and of itself. As regards the case studies, both are the only ones of their kind in their respective capitals, thus making them an authoritative and influential source of information about Communist history to those visitors who seek out knowledge about life in Czechoslovakia and the Polish People's Republic. They are, in short, in a powerful position to fill this gap in the museal landscape. But as was discussed in chapter 2, the last four decades have seen a paradigmatic shift in how we consider museal authority and, consequently, how much stock is to be placed in their claim to present the truth. It is here that we can look at the authenticating practices that are utilized to construct truths about Communism in such museums.

Chapter 5 examined the myriad display components deployed in the MoC and the PRL Museum, and, in particular, how they were brought together to authenticate the museums' respective truths about life under their Communist regimes. In doing so, I responded to Whitehead's call to decode the museums' communication in order to investigate the political nature behind the epistemological choices made by the case studies' staff as well as the positions they took (2016a: 2); or rather, how each museum assigned value and ascribed certain visions of Communist history (Ferguson 1996; Macdonald 1998). What emerged from this decoding was that each museum indeed presented deeply political claims about what Communism was like under their respective regimes, with the MoC in Prague interpreting the era as one of terror and oppression and the PRL Museum in Warsaw using their collection to represent their history through the lens of everyday life.

When linking this back to the desire to build themselves anew following the collapse of their regimes, there are deep echoes of Lidchi's (1997) seminal work on politics of exhibiting, in which she argued that museums "*appropriate* and *display* objects for certain ends" (1997: 198; original emphasis). The "certain ends" (Lidchi 1997: 198) for which the museums display their objects is to contribute to the construction *and* continual reinforcement of a (seemingly singular) Czech and Polish identity, even three and a half

decades on from the collapse of Communism. As was demonstrated in chapter 6, both museums, despite the differing approaches explored in chapter 5, engage in acts of identity construction. Though they are not national museums, where much of the literature on national identity construction in museums has been concentrated, they nonetheless employ many of the same tropes and narrative techniques as their national counterparts.

My intention here is not to equate wholesale the practices of national museums and small, privately-run institutions, for the former are bound to cover a much lengthier timeframe and a broader set of national stories. Rather, I mean to draw attention to the similar strategies which small-scale museums such as the MoC and PRL Museum make use of in order to authenticate their representations of identity. Indeed, chapter 6 examined the manner in which both case study museums have interpreted their Communist pasts through the lens of "us vs them" narratives (Macdonald 1998), in which Poland and Czechoslovakia/Czechia are positioned as distinct, sometimes even the antithesis of the Soviet Union in their ideals and national character. Additionally, both institutions draw on the "expressive symbols" described by Smith (1991), such as national heroes and material culture (Edensor 2002) to craft a unifying force which can "remind their citizens of what they have in common" (Watson 2021: 73).

What is significant about this occurring in private museums like the MoC and PRL Museum is that it breaks through the divide highlighted in academic literature between public and private institutions. Research into private museums of Communism has highlighted the freer position these museums are in to pursue their own objects and narratives (see chapter 2, section 2.3), which has led to them being seen to be at odds with the official state narratives about Communism presented in public institutions. As was shown, this has been extensively examined in Germany, where museums of everyday life began to emerge at the turn of the millennium as a form of pushback against "dominant state narratives about East Germany as expressed in the few state-sponsored museums dedicated to recent history" (Bach 2015a: 124).

In researching private museums in Poland and Czechia, this study thus expanded the Germany-dominated discourse surrounding such institutions. This is particularly relevant given the existing gap in Anglophone research surrounding museums of Communism in these two countries. But unlike their counterparts to the west, the MoC and the PRL Museum have constructed their respective visions of national identity not as a counter to

state-dominated narratives but rather in support of them. It is worth noting that this difference serves to highlight the diversity of experiences with both Communism and the post-Communist era across Central and Eastern Europe.

Matthew deTar has criticized the way former Eastern Bloc countries have often been written about as a kind of single bloc, with a "more or less unified set of characteristics" (2015: S136). DeTar traced this way of thinking to George Schöpflin's (1991, 1995) framework of post-Communism, which, deTar argued, assumes that "the end of the Cold War marks an identifiable rupture in national identity" and features "a desire to adopt Western democratic institutions" (ibid.). In deTar's view, this post-Communist framework within which the histories of ex-Communist states have been studied thus "relies on an explicit teleology that puts all postcommunist [sic] countries on a path toward Western capitalist democracy" (ibid.). The issue, he wrote, is that this framework "overlooks a number of salient differences in the historical and cultural contexts of different formerly-Soviet countries" (deTar 2015: S150).

This overlaps with the work of scholars such as Michal Kopeček (2008), Mark (2010b), and Mark et al. (2015) regarding the fractured debates which surround the issue of how the Communist era is to be remembered, yet it also pushes the question further. DeTar's position requires us to examine these debates in the context of the state within which they occur. By doing so, we can acknowledge their existence whilst also better understanding how the different transitions from Communism and the legacies of the regimes have overlapped with and deviated from one another over the last three and a half decades. I acknowledge these differences in order to allow for an understanding as to why not only the MoC and PRL Museum differ in their approaches, but also why the national identity constructed and reinforced by the institutions reflects narratives found at the state level rather than subverts them.

8.2.2 Foreign visitors and decoding national identity

While the case study museums have engaged in the poetics and politics of exhibiting (Lidchi 1997; see chapter 2, section 2.2) to authenticate their truth claims about life under Communism and construct knowledge about Czech and Polish national identity, this study has equally tried to understand the role of visitors in this process.

Returning to the paradigmatic shift in how we consider museal authority, it is clear that no museum can assume their claims will go unchallenged, or, at the very least, unnegotiated. Chapter 7 examined the reactions of five foreign visitors to the case study museums, in line with one of the main aims of this study; that is, to understand how foreign visitors engage with museal interpretations of this era in history. What emerged was that through our conversations, the participants not only engaged in meaning-making about what they had encountered in the museums, they also made sense of it by tapping into both the visits themselves as well as their past experiences. To this end, they employed a number of authenticating practices. In particular, they negotiated the authenticity of the knowledge they were being given through a combination of encounters with Communism both inside and outside the museums, perceptions of Communism based on their respective personal contexts (Falk and Dierking 2000, 2013), and links made to their own lifeworlds. Each of these drove the meaning- and sense-making processes, which enabled them to grasp the museums' interpretation of national identity. In doing so, they simultaneously authenticated the museums' approaches to Communism as well as their representations of those identities.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that each visitor interviewed was from the West, and therefore, this finding is not representative of a global audience. Though views of Communism can and do vary even amongst citizens of Western nations, it is important to recognize that a broadly similar anti-Communist framework has shaped Western understandings of the Cold War and of the ideology more widely. As such, it cannot be presumed that these views would be held by visitors of all nationalities, nor can it be assumed that the meaning- and sense-making processes which are impacted by these views would be the same. At the same time, it should be noted that each of those interviewed also had some degree of experience with Eastern Europe. This was especially the case with those living in the region, though Carol's visit to CEE in her youth was shown to be equally impactful. Given the centrality of the personal context (Falk and Dierking 2000, 2013) to my analysis of the participants responses, the strategies they employed cannot be separated from their experiences, as they will have undoubtedly coloured how they interpreted the exhibitions.

As regards this finding, this study confirmed existing research in visitor studies regarding the nature of museum visiting. More specifically, it was found that the

participants engaged in significant negotiation to make meaning about the content of the museums. This negotiation, in part, revolved around the notion of authenticity, or more specifically, how they negotiated their understanding that the museums were offering an authentic representation of Communism. Chapter 2 explored claims made in recent decades regarding authenticity being thought of as negotiable, not only from the museum's side (Cohen 1988; Jones 2010), but also by the visitors themselves (Wang 1999; Jones 2010). In their encounter with the objects, video testimonies, and photographs placed on display in the exhibitions (as well as, on two occasions, with local Poles), the participants projected their pre-conceived images and expectations onto the display components (Wang 1999), passing judgement on their authenticity in the process.

Overlapping with this was how the visitors I interviewed also negotiated their understanding of the museums' narratives, specifically how this occurred through the ways they related to the exhibitions. As I examined in the previous chapter, the data showed that visitors to the MoC focused more on the information provided in the exhibition as well as broader ideas about the ills of Communism, the role of the Soviet Union, and parallels with Russia today, while visitors to the PRL Museum placed much greater attention on the physical objects, relating to their familiarity in the process of making sense of life under Communism. In viewing these points of attention through the lens of Macdonald's "ways of relating," I was able to take into account the encounter between the exhibitions and participants' personal lives prior to the visit *and* after (Macdonald 2007; Falk and Dierking 2012).

This was particularly noticeable in the way that almost every person I spoke with reinforced the Polish and Czech identities presented in the case study museums when discussing the parallels between the Soviet Union's actions in Czechoslovakia and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All but one of my participants visited the museums prior to the ongoing war in the former union republic. It is important to note this because it illustrates how Macdonald's (2007) argument on "ways of relating" in the meaning-making process, of which negotiation is an integral part, can be applied to experiences which occur long after the visit is over. To put it another way, the centrality of Russia's invasion to my interviews highlights that even though their visits to the case study museums occurred prior to this major political event, their accounts of that same visit were deeply influenced by it and

ultimately shaped their understandings of the experience of Communism in Czechia (but also Poland) in a particular way.

Where this has implications for how the participants who visited the MoC grappled with messages about Czech identity is in how, by retroactively superimposing Russia's war in Ukraine on their encounter with the museum, they came to authenticate the MoC's message about the Soviet Union's role in stripping Czechoslovakia of its democracy and subjecting it to oppression for over four decades. They affirmed the museum's messaging about Czechs as having suffered victimization, and that the fears they examined amongst locals of Russia extending its imperialist aims to contemporary Czechia (see chapter 7, section 7.2.1) underscores the MoC's positioning of the country and its people as fundamentally separate from Russia; any threat to its borders is thus a threat to its hard-won democracy, spearheaded and represented by figures such as Václav Havel.

These examples reveal the way in which participants' understandings of Communism have intersected with and been influenced by the case study museums' interpretations of their respective Communist histories. I posited above that the outcome of these interactions – that those who went to the MoC spoke of broader narratives while visitors to the PRL Museum focused on the familiarity of everyday life, particularly as it relates to consumer goods – could be explained by Macdonald's (2007) use of "ways of relating," or how "visitors 'assemble' impressions and ideas, and considering how these interconnect with the exhibition design and other aspects of their lives" (2007: 153). In both museums, participants related to the topic of Communism through a blending of exhibition content and outside factors.

In some ways, this finding resists the characterization of foreign visitors as being unable to inherently "read" the messages within museums of Communism (Petkova-Campbell 2010; Arnold-de Simine 2011; Paver 2013; Apor 2014). Though they will perhaps not have read them in the same way a Polish or Czech visitor will have done, they nonetheless found their own ways into the content. My participants' responses also push back against recent claims made by scholars like Monika Płaziak (2020), who has argued that tourist offerings related to Communist history which are aimed at foreign visitors are often shallow in nature. According to the author, foreign visitors "experience the realities of that era at a basic level" (Płaziak 2020: 359) which discourages visitors from investigating the topic at a deeper, more meaningful level.

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Marta Derek (2020) noted a similar sentiment amongst the older tour guides she interviewed for her research on post-Communist heritage and tourism in Warsaw. When addressing the impact guides' ages had on their views of Communism, Derek observed that it was often those who were older and had experienced the regime first-hand that were most critical of superficial interpretations of the era. She quoted one interviewee who remarked that attractions such as driving around Warsaw in a Communist-era vehicle are targeted primarily at international tourists, who, in her view, find it "more difficult to go deeper into the problem. (…) and I feel that they don't always want to go deeper, they prefer to stay in their bubble" (Derek 2020: 142). Derek herself did not provide an assessment of the guide's comment, but the above finding leads me to challenge it. While I would agree that the broad overviews of the Communist era offered at both case study museums has necessitated a rather shallow interpretation, I did not find that participants "stayed in their bubble" (ibid.). On the contrary, as has been shown, they did a great deal of work to make Communism *make sense* to them. With the obvious caveat that five visitors are not a representative sample, this does indicate in some way that foreign visitors can negotiate meaningful and educational experiences regardless of how "shallow" the exhibition content is.

8.2.3 Reconsidering the role of foreign tourists in post-Communist identity construction

In light of the conclusion that my participants had meaningful and educational encounters in the case study museums, it seems imperative that we reconsider the way foreign tourists should be thought of with regards to the conversation around national identity construction and Communist heritage tourism. As was discussed in chapter 1, Light (2000a, 2000b) claimed a decade on from the transition to democracy that the desire to move on from Communism and focus on creating new "democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking" (Light 2000a: 158) identities had been frustrated by the prevailing presence of what he defined as "unwanted" heritage; that is, the monuments, memorials, toponyms, and other like remnants leftover from the Communist era that continued to populate the landscape. Moreover, a further obstacle in the intent to move on was the Western tourists who had been coming to "gaze" upon Communist heritage (Light 2000a). Such tourists, according to Light, were proving to be problematic for states which

wanted to promote heritage and history which reflected their new democratic identities, such as that of their "pre-socialist 'Golden Age'" (Light and Young 2013).

It is not my intention to cast doubt on Light's claims of CEE countries' rush to distance themselves from the material remnants of their Communist pasts, nor would this be possible, as the efforts to decommunize are well-documented (see, for example, Verdery 1999; Kopeček 2008; Mark 2010b; Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014; Light and Young 2015a, 2015b; Watson 2018; Derek 2020; Płaziak 2020, to name but a few). What I am instead interested in is Light's claim that foreign tourists disrupt identity construction. Many scholars have written about the links between identity and tourism, both domestic and international, including Light himself, who has examined these many times over the years (2001, 2006, 2012, and 2015). Indeed, he has stressed that tourism is "frequently intended to project (and legitimate) a particular national self-image or political identity" (2001: 1054); he further stated that "tourism is one of a number of ways in which these countries can seek to demonstrate their post-socialist identity to the international community" (ibid.). This assertion in fact leaves room to consider the centrality of tourism in post-Communist identity construction *even* in cases where Communist-era heritage is the object of attention. This is because, as the present study has shown, such heritage can be used to create the "democratic and Westward-looking" identities Light (2000a: 158) was speaking about.

If, as Rasa Balockaite contended, "foreign tourists can be told the 'national story,' presented in such a way as to affirm and reinforce the national identity and self-image" (2012: 42), tourists who visit museums of Communism need not be considered obstacles in this process. That is, far from visitors dragging museum staff into their Communist pasts unwillingly, obstructing their attempts to build new, democratic identities, the staff are using their "unwanted" heritage to reflect, construct, and reinforce these very identities (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018). Indeed, in her research on tourism in the planned socialist town Nowa Huta, outside Krakow, Balockaite found that,

> Continuous exposure to the tourists' interest and discourses imposed from the
> outside (Western tourists and Western travel guides) foster self-reflection and
> articulation of one's own past. These are the empowering effects of tourism;
> it allows positive identification with one's personal past and softens the effects
> of the dramatic experiences of disjuncture, discontinuity, and displacement

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without relocation [...] The tourism narratives unveil the complexity of socialist life (pre-socialist, socialist, and anti-socialist narratives), and the local population, instead of being a passive victim of the tourist industry, actively engages in constructing the image of socialist Nowa Huta, thus reclaiming their power and legitimizing their histories (2012: 58).

Drawing on Balockaite's work, Milka Ivanova and Dorina-Maria Buda similarly concluded that Western interest in Communist heritage *creates* opportunities for locals "to produce new and creative ways to reckon with the recent and often traumatic past" (2020: 5). It is to here that this project has taken me. Far from the assumption that there is no value in the intersection between Communist heritage and Western tourists beyond the economic considerations referenced by scholars such as Light (2000a, 2000b), Janinović (2022), and Banaszkiewicz (2023), more must be asked about how additional priorities on both sides – whether that be identity building or having authentic experiences – can be developed in this encounter and what the benefits of this may be. The case study museums have gone to great lengths to use their heritage to represent the identity of their respective populations, and the participants in this study, five individuals with no (or in two cases, very little) first-hand experience of Communism, were found to have reflected quite deeply on this, as well as its implications for the world today.

8.3 Reflections on aims and objectives

This study set out to examine two separate but overlapping research questions. The first was how contemporary museums of Communism construct, reflect, and reinforce post-1989 identities, in line with the drive to build new democratic identities following the collapse of Communism (Light 2000b; Mark 2010b; Mark et al. 2015). The second was how foreign visitors engage with and make sense of the museum content. This subset of visitors has often been overlooked in discussions around Communist heritage and museums, which is usually examined from the perspective of locals. Though it is recognized that tourism – of which museums are an integral part – was and still is one of the driving factors in promoting these new "democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking" (Light 2000a: 158) identities, as was discussed in the previous chapter, there is a surprising dearth of research into the reception of such identities on the part of foreign visitors. In particular,

this study aimed to question if Light's influential words, published a decade after the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, still hold relevance. That is, are foreign visitors truly a hinderance to post-Communist identity construction, or can they be a part of the identity-building process?

The aims and objectives laid out in pursuit of these questions were addressed throughout this thesis, though, on the whole, they were fulfilled chapter by chapter. The first aim sought to explore the role of the museum in the construction of knowledge about Communist history, which was investigated in chapters 2, 3, and 5. In chapter 2, I reviewed the existing literature surrounding the exhibition development, authenticity, and representational approaches in Communist history museums. As regards the first, I took particular interest in Lidchi's (1997) notion of the poetics and politics of exhibiting as well as the inherently political nature of curatorial choices (Whitehead 2009, 2016a, 2016b; Ferguson 1996; Macdonald 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 2000). These were addressed again in chapter 3, where I discussed them through the lens of social constructionism. Overlapping with this, authenticity emerged as an equally central point of focus for this first aim, as it played an important role in the construction of the case study exhibitions and how the museums authenticated their respective representational approaches. I surveyed the many different definitions of authenticity to determine that material, verifiable authenticity and authenticity as negotiated were the two most critical to this study. Lastly, I reviewed the studies carried out over the last three and a half decades regarding museums of Communism, identifying the dominant trends and narratives present within them, namely that the era is represented as one of terror and oppression or through the lens of everyday life.

In chapter 5, I brought these together to examine how the MoC and the PRL Museum made use of authenticity in all its forms. More specifically, I demonstrated how the museums engaged in the poetics of exhibiting by selectively arranging materially and verifiably authentic objects, photographs, and video testimonies (the latter, exclusively in the MoC) to create authentic interpretations and narratives about Communism in Poland and Czechoslovakia. What the staff ultimately constructed were two museums which fall on the existing divide between Communism as an era of terror and Communism as an era which can be told more positively through stories about everyday life.

My second aim set out to critically assess the role of museums of Communism as sites for creating identity. In my literature review, I examined the role of museums in national identity construction in particular, due to the authoritative power they possess in creating a "unifying force" of narratives (Watson 2021: 73) about a nation. I identified some of the key tropes in the process of building national identities, such as the "us vs them" narrative aimed at highlighting the distinctiveness of the nation, the types of "symbolic images, rituals, sites and objects" (Edensor 2002: 25) museums draw on to create an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), and stories of heroism and suffering which elevate the nation. This served as a framework with which to investigate how national identity is constructed in the case study museums. Chapter 6 analyzed how the aforementioned tropes were deployed in the MoC and PRL Museum, intersecting the discussion with the previously explored notions of authenticity and exhibition development. I examined how the museums drew on national heroes, past glories, mundanity, and emotional tales to authenticate their respective claims about Czech and Polish identity. In so doing, I concluded that although the case studies are not national museums, where much of the museum-focused literature on national identity construction has been concentrated, they nonetheless adhere to many of the tropes found within their national counterparts. This leaves open the possibility to explore the value of private museums of Communism in building and promoting post-1989 (national) identities. While this has been explored at length in relation to countries such as Germany and Hungary, Czechia and Poland have not received the same level of attention in English-language research.

My third aim endeavoured to investigate how and in which ways foreign visitors recognize messages of identity in the case study museums. This was explored in depth in chapter 7, where I analyzed the interviews I carried out with five participants, two of whom went to the PRL Museum in Warsaw and three to the MoC in Prague. Chapter 2 introduced literature on meaning-making and foreign tourism in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989, respectively, which provided a useful background to how I engaged with the interview data in chapter 7. I was chiefly interested in understanding the personal contexts of the participants in order to better grasp how these impacted on their engagement with the museum exhibitions and the topic of Communism more broadly.

In particular, Macdonald (2007) and Schorch (2015) were influential in guiding my analysis. Their respective work on ways of engaging and narrative engagements allowed me

to see the complex web of links the interviewees made between the exhibition content, their lifeworlds, their perception of Communism, and even events unrelated to the museums, such as Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and contemporary threats to democracy around the world. As a result, it would seem that foreign visitors do not ignore or avoid engaging with claims related to unfamiliar national identities. On the contrary, they deploy their own frames of reference to make sense of them. Though they may never connect with Czech and Polish identities as intimately as citizens of these countries do, they were found to be wholly receptive and sympathetic to the museums' constructions of national identity because of the myriad links they made.

8.4 Reflections on methodology

The philosophical position, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis chosen for this study were the best suited for pursuing the aims and objectives laid out in chapter 1. As this thesis sought to understand how knowledge about Communist history is shaped in the museum, it necessitated the perspective that exhibitions are not mirrors of the existing world but are instead constructed by institutions which engage in the "management and proposal of truths" (Whitehead 2016a: 3). Social constructionism, as defined by Crotty, thus served as an optimal position from which to examine the case study museums because it allowed for me to consider the knowledge presented within the exhibitions as being "constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (1998: 42). My analysis of the case studies thus hinged from the beginning on viewing them as constructed for the express purpose of ascribing certain visions of Communism.

The diverging narratives surrounding Communist history in CEE (see chapter 2, section 2.3) and how museums must therefore authenticate their respective narratives are evidence of this. Chapter 5 thus sought to elucidate the primary ways the case study museums brought together a variety of display components in order to construct a view of Communism as an era defined by terror, oppression, and victimization of citizens (in the case of the MoC in Prague) or one marked by domestic pride and perseverance in everyday life (as in the PRL Museum in Warsaw). In the process, the displays ascribed values and applied meaning to material objects and immaterial narratives based on the social circumstances in which they were operating (Crotty 1998; Smith 2010). This was built upon

in chapter 6, which was underpinned by overlaps in the social nature of social constructionism and identity construction; that is, both have been shown to be collective, socially mediated, and rooted in sociocultural contexts (see, for example, section 3.2 for Smith's [2010] definition of weak constructionism, and section 6.3 for my application of Fox and Van Ginderachter's [2018] everyday nationalism). Chapter 6 therefore offered an assessment of the authenticating practices carried out by the museums in order to construct narratives surrounding Czech and Polish national identity.

The data collection methods chosen for this study were deployed with a social constructionist approach in mind. That is, they allowed me to read the exhibitions as a form of media actively constructed within the myriad sociocultural contexts of post-Communist Poland and Czechia (as well as, more widely, Central and Eastern Europe) and to capture the development and transmission of meaning (Crotty 1998) on the part of visitors as a result of both the visit itself as well as their personal contexts (Falk and Dierking 2000, 2013). As regards the method of display analysis, the copious photographs, videos, tour notes, and fieldnotes taken during the visits were useful for being able to approach the exhibitions holistically, as they offered a way of seeing the interconnections between different displays and the narrative threads that run throughout them. I found this to be the best means for evaluating how the museums constructed a "political, public production of propositional knowledge" (Whitehead 2016a: 2) about Communist history in their respective countries, which further enabled me to understand how each case study contributed to the wider discussion about museums of Communism and their role in identity-building projects.

Alongside analyzing the displays, the guided tours I participated in provided additional insight into the construction of knowledge and identity. In undertaking these tours, I was able to observe how certain understandings of the Communist era were "verbally enshrined" (Ferguson, Walby, and Piché 2016: 479) in the museum space through the guides' focus on specific information and stories. At the same time, with the guides being Czech and Polish citizens, respectively, I gained a deeper awareness of subject-object relations (Ballis 2022: 2) and the impact of these on authenticating museum messages. These ultimately served to shape my interpretation of the case study museums' messages, including those related to (national) identity.

As this study revolved around speaking to foreign visitors about their time at the museums, interviews were naturally a fruitful method for collecting this data. In order to

understand their motives for visiting, their experiences in the exhibition, and the meanings that arose from their visit, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be the best course of action, which proved to be the case. Unstructured interviews would not have allowed me to steer the conversations towards the information I was seeking, and fully structured interviews would likely not have produced the depth of responses needed to investigate the meaning-making process.

Upon reflection, however, I found that the open-ended nature of the conversation presented an issue. When I requested in the main part of the interview that they tell me about their visit, I instructed them to begin with whatever came to mind first and to talk about whatever parts of the museum they wanted to. The aim was for their thought process to develop naturally and to observe what *they* wanted to focus on. I found that far from providing the space for participants to speak about certain parts of the exhibition, most of them appeared overwhelmed by such an open-ended question. It seemed that they felt concerned with the "right" answer and hesitated if they did not know what that was. This became a learning opportunity to reflect on my interview skills and ways I could acquire more information without steering the conversation too deliberately.

With regards to the methods of data analysis utilized, thematic analysis (TA) was chosen because it enabled me to identify patterns within the data. This was applied to both what was collected during my site visits and guided tours as well as my interviews. As mentioned above, the data gathered from the museum were analyzed holistically, entailing a cross-referencing of narrative patterns at various points within the exhibitions. In approaching the data thematically, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of how messages are constructed *across* the exhibitions, observing where different elements of the larger story are introduced and how these are maintained through material objects, text, and even the work of tour guides.

Similarly, using thematic analysis to analyze my participant interviews offered the opportunity to examine how meanings are made organically during the course of a conversation. Having chosen semi-structured interviews, participants were largely free to steer the conversation towards what interested them. At the analysis stage, I applied TA to investigate the patterns of their focus, during which I took note of the influence of their respective personal contexts – as communicated to me – on these patterns and where this manifested a negotiated construction of meaning. As previously stated, the interviews could

have benefitted from somewhat additional structure, but on the whole, the open-ended nature of my main question did still provide fruitful results.

8.5 Research limitations

This study was beset with a number of limitations which risked negatively impacting the research and its outcomes, even if, as explained in chapter 3 (see section 3.5), I strived to consider such limitations as opportunities for new directions. The most impactful of among these was the Covid-19 pandemic, for a number of reasons. As this project required international travel, my ability to visit the case study museums was inherently affected. The continual changes to travel bans and border closures, along with the unpredictability of the pandemic, meant that I held off on enacting changes to the study – whether that be research focuses or alternative data collection plans – in the hopes that things would change for the better. As a result, I had very little time to change course when issues did arise, such as the aforementioned complications with participant recruitment (see chapter 3, section 3.3.4) as well as my inability to make contact with the museum staff.

As regards the subsequent silence on the part of the staff, this had significant implications for the claims made throughout this study. First and foremost is that this limited my ability to make more holistic conclusions about the case study museums. As a result, chapters 5 and 6 are based entirely on my own interpretation of the exhibitions, leaving open the possibility that I made claims which would not be endorsed by the museums themselves. This is, of course, the nature of academic research, but I maintain that input from the staff about the missions of their respective museums as well as their personal views about Communism could have enriched my conclusions.

I spoke in chapter 3 of the issues faced with participant recruitment. This became a significant limitation to this study, the main goal of which is to investigate the oft-overlooked place of foreign visitors in research on museums of Communism. The challenges in recruiting a sizeable pool of interviewees were due to a number of factors, including post-pandemic travel, financial and time restrictions, and the expectation of compensation for participation. As the original intention was to join participants on their visit to observe how they engaged with the exhibitions, following this with a post-visit interview, it goes without saying that the impact of the pandemic on travel – both that of potential participants and mine – was a driving factor in the direction my interviews ultimately took. Similarly, it

became clear early on in this phase of the project that the time and money required to carry out on-site walkthroughs and interviews would have made it impossible for me to do this.

These two factors – participant travel and limited time and money – led to the decision to conduct my interviews over Zoom, but even this pared down plan was not free of issues. Namely, the gap in travel to Warsaw and Prague during the pandemic and the limited reach of my recruitment poster (see chapter 3, section 3.3.4) led to a lower than desired response rate. As discussed in chapter 3, there were many factors beyond my control that limited how widely I was able to distribute the recruitment poster, including my requests to join relevant Facebook groups which were ignored or rejected and my posts on TripAdvisor and Reddit being flagged as spam. Additionally, it was clear that the choice not to offer compensation (itself a decision based on university policy regarding compensation for research participation) negatively impacted how many people were willing to participate. Though this study was never intended to make generalizing claims based on a handful of interviews, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the impact the small number of participants had on the results of the overall project.

Overall, these limitations had an effect on the course and outcomes of this study, but as mentioned, they also became opportunities. My inability to travel for the first two years of this project offered the chance to familiarize myself with the existing news sources and online staff interviews concerning the case study museums before my visits, which ultimately proved invaluable when it became clear that I would not be able to communicate with the museum staff. Moreover, I was in a position to explore in-depth many different methodologies and research methods as I waited for the travel bans to be lifted. This meant that when I was able to begin collecting data, I was confident in the direction I was taking.

The lower-than-expected response rate of foreign visitors to my request for an interview gave me the time and space to dive deep into each individual interview, getting to know each participant intimately though their words, and telling their stories as they told them to me. While I am aware of the dangers of generalizing conclusions about the experiences of foreign visitors based on a limited pool of interviews, having only five interviewees to work with meant that I was able to investigate my aims and objectives in a more targeted way.

8.6 Directions for future research

Given the limitations above, there remain several fruitful avenues for future research. The most obvious among them is ensuring communication between the researcher and the museum staff, as this could open the door to insider knowledge about the decisions and factors that determined the final outcome of the exhibitions. Having this additional dataset would mean that the study can fully investigate Whitehead's notion of the "cultural nexus of museum knowledge production" (2016a: 3); that is, the combination of display analysis, *curatorial accounts of display production*, and audiences' reception of displays (2016a: 3; my emphasis). Additionally, the topic of engagement and meaning-making amongst foreign visitors at museums of Communism could be expanded to include a greater degree of collaboration with the visitors themselves. Specifically, conducting walk-throughs, observations, and on-site interviews, as well as one or more follow-up interviews could offer a great deal of insight into the process of meaning-making over time.

A further suggestion for future research could be to expand this type of study to other museums of Communism, both private and public. As previously explained, the MoC in Prague and the PRL Museum in Warsaw were chosen precisely because they have been understudied to date, but now applying these research questions more broadly could yield knowledge about how foreign visitors engage with the history of Communism and national identity more widely across Central and Eastern Europe. Much of the focus regarding museums of this type has been on either the display techniques and the messages deployed by these institutions or how local citizens engage with them, as was discussed in chapter 2 (see section 2.3). Yet, given the centrality of tourism to the identity construction project of the post-1989 era, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to this group of visitors. There is thus ample opportunity to further explore their engagement in future research. Similarly, work on Communist heritage sites more broadly can also be examined from this angle, as much of the current focus remains, like for museums, on the meaning of the sites or on the actions of the staff.

A final suggestion relates to the notion of national identity development. This study did not explicitly examine the concerns surrounding the desire to build new, democratic identities after the collapse of Communism, which were instead introduced to contextualize the research project. That said, it is worth examining the state of these identities three and a half decades on. The present study has taken the position that museums are sites in which

(national) identity is both reflected and continually reinforced, and as such, it stands to reason that post-Communist identities are continuing to be built even today.

Studies have explored the fragmented responses to the fall of Communism and the transition to democracy in CEE; from the opening of *Alltag* museums in the east of Germany in the early 2000s to recent examinations of the deindustrialization, privatization, and social reorganization of life after 1989 (Pehe and Wawrzyniak 2024), these have brought into question the narratives of a clean break with the Communist past and a successful transition to democracy (Mark 2010b; deTar 2015; Mark et al 2015). Thirty-five years later, it bears asking what those democratic identities look like today. This is perhaps even more important in the current geopolitical climate, with the overall decline in democratic governance in Central Europe for almost two decades in a row (Smeltzer 2023: 2), notwithstanding the recent change in Poland's leadership away from the right-wing Law and Justice Party in the autumn of 2023. Moreover, with Vladimir Putin expressing imperialist sentiments towards states formerly within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence – exemplified by the ongoing war in Ukraine – it is worth investigating the impact this has had, and will have, on the democratic identities these countries have built since 1989.

8.7 Concluding remarks

This study is but one in a complex web of discussions and debates across a range of disciplines to try to grasp the Communist past in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the ramifications of the second half of the 20th century over the last three and a half decades. This is particularly important when, as this thesis has shown, the Communist past continues to be central to contemporary national identities in the region. As we have seen, it is this past, and the states' attempts to separate themselves from it, that has allowed the latter to establish a set of national characteristics through opposition and craft their respective origin stories rooted in the very collapse of the regimes. In this regard, it is imperative to continue investigating the complexities outlined in chapter 1 if we want to understand the political, social, cultural, and economic paths of these states. It is my hope that this study has contributed to one part of this extensive conversation, and that consideration of how foreign tourists engage with and understand not only Communist history but also national identities in CEE will be given greater attention in future research.

I opened this thesis with a personal anecdote about my own encounter with the Communist past on my travels. It has been a long twelve years since my first visit to Poland, with my interests only growing deeper, but also my defence for this interest growing stronger with each new trip to the region and conversation had with locals. Over the years, I have faced many questions from citizens of CEE about why I would take an interest in – and dedicate a PhD to, nonetheless! – Communist history. Some of these have been in jest – what could an American possibly have to say about Communism?! – though others have been more serious, expressing concern that I might dredge up memories of an "aberrant" past and risk trivializing an "evil" regime. But what I want this work to reiterate is that far from exoticizing Central and Eastern Europe's experiences with authoritarian regimes through some kind of uncouth "gazing" (Light 2000b), outsiders like me may in fact be precisely the audience through which debates about the past, and its impact on contemporary identities, can occur.

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Appendix A – Display analysis guides

Guide #1
Margaret Lindauer's 'Critical Museum Visitor' framework
Published in: **"The Critical Museum Visitor," in Janet Marstine, ed.,** *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* **(Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 203-225**

Architecture, location, setting:
- How does the architecture relate culturally and historically to the display?
- Does the style of the building emphasize a cultural contrast between the "host" or custodian of the collection and the objects on display?
- Does the architecture assign an integrity or authority to the display, or indeed undermine it?

Space
- How many rooms are there?
- What is the size and shape of the rooms used?
- Is there a clear demarcation between primary and secondary display spaces?
- What kind of entrance space is used?
- Are different parts of the collection accorded different types of rooms?
- Do visitors see the entirety of displays at a glance or are some displays obscured so as to enhance their impact?

Design, color, light
- Is the collection housed in a major gallery endowed with strong design features, or in a smaller room or set of rooms with less ornate decoration?
- Have new decorative elements been introduced in association with the installation of the collection?
- How does the decoration relate to the objects on display?
- Has a style of decoration been used to enhance the aesthetics of the display?
- How are the ceilings, floors and walls decorated?
- Was a particular colour chosen in order to elicit a response from visitors or as a neutral backdrop?
- Does the choice of colour represent general trends in museum design or contemporary design, or is it based on the nature of the topic?
- What type of lighting arrangement was provided for the collection?
- What effects do both artificial and natural lighting have on how the objects appear (e.g. top-lighting, side-lighting, windows, skylights)?
- How are particular objects or groups of objects singled out through lighting strategies?
- Does the lighting lend a particular interpretation of the displays?

Subject, message, text

- To what extent has text been used in the exhibition?
- Who has written the text and is their authorship apparent?

- What are the sources for the text?
- Is the style of writing scholarly or more creative and prose-like?
- Is the text informative and descriptive or does it offer interpretations and opinions?
- Has visitor input informed the writing of the text?
- What kind of titles and subtitles are used – descriptive, catchy, or questioning?
- What is the graphic style of the text?
- What is the nature of the introductory or orientation text and how does it set the tone of the exhibition and give a sense of what lies ahead?
- Have supplementary leaflets, floor plans and visitor guides been used and, if so, how do they advance the message of the exhibition?

Layout
- How are displays arranged within the room/exhibition space?
- How are the surfaces of this space used (e.g., walls, ceiling, floor)?
- Are the objects aligned or associated with each other via a particular formation (e.g., are they in rows or clusters)?
- Is the space between the objects regularized or is there no pattern?
- Are the objects distanced from each other or positioned very closely?
- How are particular objects or sets of objects connected or separated?
- Are the objects arranged aesthectically (e.g., is symmetry a guiding principle for object layout)?

Exhibition style
- Is there a clear sense of exhibition style or have a combination of styles been used?
- How does the exhibition style confer meaning upon the objects on display?
- Is the style compatible with the subject?
- Does the learning style create understanding through association more than through the display of collections of objects?

Audience and reception
- How do visitors engage with the displays?
- Are they deferential or do they appear comfortable and familiar with the subject matter and objects?
- How does visitor behavior affect other visitors viewing the galleries?
- How do visitors, both professional and nonprofessional, write about the displays?

Guide #2
Rhiannon Mason's Museum Exhibition Analysis Model & Evaluation Tool (Unpublished)

Space, Layout, and Display
- What messages/impressions does the overall architecture of the building convey?
- Is the physical and conceptual orientation of the exhibition clear?

- Are there any obvious 'cold spots' in the exhibition space?
- Is the exhibition well-paced?
- Are themes clearly indicated?
- Are exhibits appropriately displayed within the space?
- Is the space inviting and does it encourage exploration?
- Which circulation patterns does the exhibition use?

Interpretation, Design, and Media
- Which parts of the interpretation work best for you? Why?
- Can you see examples of text layering or chunking?
- What kind of language does it employ? (e.g., specialist, generalist, formal, colloquial etc.)
- Is it evident who is speaking in the interpretation? Is authorship indicated?
- Is the interpretation polyvocal? Does it include multiple perspectives? To whom do they belong?
- Is the overall design strategy coherent?
- Which are the 'landmark' exhibits and how do you know?
- If there is sound, how is it managed within the space?
- Is smell or touch used as an interpretive device?
- Do the interactives enhance the interpretation and exhibition overall?
- What types of media does the exhibition use? (objects, labels, text panels, leaflets, photographs, voice-over, oral history, digital media)
- Which type of display is this? e.g., aesthetic, didactic, emotive, chronological, thematic etc.

Messages and Cultural Politics
- What do you think are the main messages the exhibition intends to convey? How have you identified them?
- Are these key messages reinforced throughout the exhibition? How?
- Whose point of view (voice) comes across mostly strongly in the exhibition? e.g., curators, artists, community representatives etc.
- Can you identify any unintended messages? e.g., does the arrangement of space and layout and the inclusion or exclusion of certain objects or events create a particular story that might not be the intended one?
- Is the representation of specific or minority groups separated from the representation of 'mainstream society' or integrated within it?
- Does the exhibition present mainly a positive or negative view? How balanced is it?
- If the type of display is chronological or thematic, what impression of the subject matter does this create? How would the messages alter if you changed from one type to another?
- Is it clear who is funding/sponsoring the exhibition? Does this matter given the subject?
- Do the different elements of the exhibition tell different stories? If you focus on the images/objects versus the text do you get a different message?
- If the exhibition contains material of a sensitive or controversial nature, how is this handled?

Engagement and Interest
- Who are the potential audiences for this exhibition?
- Does the exhibition encourage social interaction between visitors?
- Does this exhibition hold your attention throughout? If not, why?
- How would you describe this exhibition: provocative, stimulating, exciting, controversial, informative, fascinating or bland, dull, overwhelming, too difficult?
- Did the marketing and the promotional information (leaflets, front desk information, guide book, website) catch your attention and did it match up with the exhibition itself?

Appendix B – Interview guide

Background

1. Can you tell me a bit about how long you've lived in P/C and what brought you here?
2. How did you view Communism prior to moving to P/C?

The visit

3. I'd like to turn to your museum visit now. Can you tell me what drew you to the museum? Is there any particular reason you chose to visit?
4. Ok, great. The next question is quite open-ended. I'd like you to tell me about the visit. You can start wherever you'd like, talk about whatever you'd like, and take however long you'd like. I just want to hear about the visit in your own words.
5. Follow-up questions
   - General follow-up questions
     - I would like you to tell me more about that.
     - What did that make you think about?
     - What did you do then?
     - I would like to hear if you know of more examples of that.
     - Could you walk me through that?
   - Focused follow-up questions
     - What did that mean to you?
     - How did you feel about that?

Reflections

6. Was there anything you'd like to have seen or learned that wasn't in the exhibition?
7. Would you say your views of Communism have changed since visiting the museum?
   - If yes, is there anything specific in the museum that changed your views?
8. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Appendix C – Information Sheet (Visitors)

Title of study: Communicating Communist history in the museum and the making of meaning among non-national visitors

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study sets out to examine two phenomena. The first is how museal representations of Communism construct knowledge(s) about the Polish and Czechoslovakian regimes. The second is how non-national visitors respond to these displays and how they make meaning from the knowledge presented to them during their visit. This will be explored through the use of two case studies: the Museum of Life Under Communism, Warsaw, and the Museum of Communism, Prague.

What does taking part involve?

By participating in this study, you consent to be interviewed over Zoom. These interviews will be semi-structured and will focus on your experience of the museum. Additionally, you may be asked to provide up to five photographs from your visit, which will be discussed by you and the researcher. The interview will be around 30 minutes long.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study because you answered a call for participation. As required in this call, you are over the age of 18 and have visited the respective museum in Warsaw or Prague at their current locations. Please note that you can remain anonymous if you wish.

What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?

A site analysis was conducted in November 2021 and November 2022, which focused entirely on the museum's displays, collections, and promotional material. Information collected during semi-structured interviews with museum staff members include participants' role in the museum and the development of the museum. The third phase of this study is be dedicated to interviews with non-national visitors living in your country and will gather information about their experiences in the museum.

Interview recordings and transcripts, including very limited personal data that you have provided (name, nationality, place of residence, job role, etc, for example), as well your personal photographs will be stored on Newcastle University's OneDrive to ensure data is secure. Individuals at Newcastle University will have access to the information, which will be included in a doctoral thesis, as well as future publications and presentations. Any

personal identifying data that you provided (such as name, nationality, place of residence, for example) will be destroyed within 24 months after the data has been collected.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
      Participation in this study is voluntary and is not recompensed financially or otherwise. However, participating in this research will contribute to better understanding the influence of museums on non-national visitors' knowledge about Communism and Communist history in Eastern Europe. Your contributions could help lead to an expansion of research into Communist history museums, with real-world effects in the realm of visitor studies.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
      No risks of harm or disadvantages in taking part in this study are expected. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point, should you wish to.

Has the study received ethical approval?
      Yes, this study received ethical approval from Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 8th of April 2020.

Who should the participant contact for further information relating to the research?
Samantha Vaughn
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Appendix D – Consent Form for Semi-Structured Visitor Interviews

Title of study: Communicating Communist history in the museum and the making of meaning among non-national visitors

By signing this form,

1. I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet provided.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

2. I agree to voluntarily take part in this research project.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

4. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the research information and ask questions.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

5. I consent to being interviewed on Zoom and for the call to be audio recorded.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

6. I consent to my personal photographs being used in the researcher's doctoral thesis, as well as future publications and presentations, and that credit to me will be included.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

7. I understand that the recordings will be stored on Newcastle University's OneDrive and that they will be destroyed within 24 months after the data has been collected.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

8. I consent to the processing of my personal information (including name, job title, and contact details) for the purposes of this research study and for being re-contacted if needed.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

9. I understand that my answers will be looked at by individuals from Newcastle University, where it will be included in a doctoral thesis, future academic publications, and presentations.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

<div align="center">☐ I would like to remain anonymous</div>

Participant

Name of participant	Signature	Date

Researcher

Name of researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix E – Information Sheet (Tour Guides)

Title of study: Communicating Communist history in the museum and the making of meaning among non-national visitors

You are being asked invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study sets out to examine two phenomena. The first is how museal representations of Communism construct knowledge(s) about the Polish and Czechoslovakian regimes. The second is how non-national visitors respond to these displays and how they make meaning from the knowledge presented to them during their visit.

What does taking part involve?

In your role as a museum tour guide, you gave a guided tour to the researcher in November 2022. By signing the consent form, you consent to allow the recording made during the tour to be used in a doctoral thesis, as well as future publications.

What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?

A site analysis was conducted in November 2021, which focused entirely on the museum's displays, collections, and promotional material. A second visit was made in November 2022, during which the researcher participated in guided tours. The recordings of these tours contain no personal data beyond the guide's name. These recordings will be stored on Newcastle University's OneDrive to ensure data is secure. Individuals at Newcastle University will have access to the information, which will be included in a doctoral thesis, as well as future publications. The recordings will be destroyed within 24 months after the data has been collected.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Allowing the use of the recordings is voluntary and is not recompensed financially or otherwise. However, participating in this research will contribute to better understanding the influence of museums on non-national visitors' knowledge about Communism and Communist history in Eastern Europe. Your contributions could help lead to an expansion of research into Communist history museums, with real-world effects in the realm of visitor studies.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No risks of harm or disadvantages in taking part in this study are expected. Allowing the use of the recordings is voluntary and you may withdraw permission at any point, should you wish to. You are also entitled to a preview of the excerpts used before the final thesis is submitted.

Has the study received ethical approval?

Yes, this study received ethical approval from Newcastle University Ethics Committee on the 8th of April 2020.

Who should the participant contact for further information relating to the research?
Samantha Vaughn
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Main Supervisor
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Appendix F – Consent Form for Using Tour Recording

Title of study: Communicating Communist history in the museum and the making of meaning among non-national visitors

By signing this form,

1. I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet provided.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

2. I agree to allow the researcher to use the recording of my tour in a doctoral thesis, as well as future publications.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw my permission at any time without giving any reason.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

4. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the research information and ask questions.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

5. I understand that the recordings will be stored on Newcastle University's OneDrive and that they will be destroyed within 24 months after the data has been collected.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

6. I consent to the processing of my personal information (including name, job title, and contact details) for the purposes of this research study and for being re-contacted if needed.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

7. I understand that my answers will be looked at by individuals from Newcastle University, where it will be included in a doctoral thesis, future academic publications, and presentations.

    Yes ☐   No ☐

    ☐ I would like a preview of the excerpts used before the thesis is submitted.

Participant

Name of participant	Signature	Date

Researcher

Name of researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix G – Hand-drawn map of Museum of Communism, with individual displays listed

12 The Socialist Hero ⟶

Reality Continued ↗

10 The Stalin Monument ✕

11 COMECON ✕

Flag

13 Currency Reform ✕

14 Collectivization ✕

Glass case

Masaryk bust

2 Fathers of Communism

9 Our model and America's rival

SOVIET UNION

6 The Communists Come to Power ✕

Expulsion

5 Division, Liberation

Gottwald bust

Nationalization 7 ✕

1 The Birth of Czechoslovakia ✕

3 The 1930s and Fortifying Borders ✕

4 The Munich Agreement ✕

OCCUPATION

Entrance

8 Victorious February ✕

ASCENDANCY

The Socialist Hero →

Demonstrations of Unity 27

X 28 Police

The People's Army 29

Civil Defence Training 30

Reality Continued ↘

Stalinist 26 Culture

Stalin bust

The Eradication of Voluntary People's Associations 31

The People's Militias 32

Turex 25

Cold War 33

Nightmare ↗

Socialist Stores and Services 24

Emigration 34

15 Iron and Steel Industry

Vacations 23

Motorcycles

16 Environmental Decay and Devastation

Business Before Healthcare 22

Healthcare 21

17 Communist Propaganda

20 Sport

Phone Booth

urban →

The 18 SpartaKiad

Bedroom

ization

19

Reality ⬆

36 The Repressive Apparatus ✗ ✗

Emigration ✗

The Secret Police 37 ✗

35 Tales of Escape

✗ | TV | TV | TV |

Collaboration 38 ✗

✗

44 Gallows

✗

43 Persecuting the Faithful

Operations/ Operation Neptune 39/40 ✗

✗

Guarding State Borders 45 ✗

Political Trials 41 ✗

Border Fence

Capital Punishment and Life Sentences 42 ✗

Keeping Close Watch

Auxiliary Technical Battalions 46 ✗

Labour Camps 47 ✗

MOCK Interrogation Room

The Soviet Union: Our Model and Teacher ✗

The Jáchymov Mines 48 ✗

Punishment

TV

Names of victims etched into the wall

Victim ✗

Dream ⬇

50 Persecution And Cadre Screening ✗

Stalin

Lenin

School 52

Mock School Room

Stairs to balcony

Chemical Protection

East/West Timeline

Momentous

54 The Prague Spring

53 The Golden Sixties

55 August 1968

56 Living Torches Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc

Perestraika: The Beginning of the End 64

Dissidents 63

62 Censorship

Goulash Communism 61

Normalization 60

65 Fall of the Berlin Wall The End of Socialism

The Velvet Revolution 66

Václav Havel 67

Exit

The Chernobyl Disaster 57

Mock Workshop

Cinema

Emergency exit

Socialist Shops

Mock Shop

Six TVs w/ interviews of everyday people

Appendix H – Hand-drawn map of Museum of Life Under Communism, with individual displays listed

Solidarity Posters, 4
Photos, & illegal
leaflets

More opposition materials
but also leaflets by the
Party dissuading
strikes

5 6

7 8

TV

Intro
declaring
end of
Communism

1
2
3

Solidarity
posters

Stairs

Till

Stairs

Souvenirs

Souvenirs

Wall
Panel

Intro text
Panel

Entrance
Stairwell

Window
MDM Description

X 12
Reconstructing
the
Capital

X 11
The Party

Office Cabinet

Desk

Photos of May1 celebrations on
one side & Party members/More PRL celebrations
on the other

Text explaining the introduction
of Communism in Poland

Stairs
to
Main
exhibition

Flags hanging from
ceiling

Terror
X 10
opposition

Stairs to exit/
entrance

Stairs to
Bathroom

statistics about
life in the PRL 9

305

stairs 25

Table w/ Driving Materials

Cafe & nursery ↱ 27

Motor Bike

Phone Booth 24

Window

Fashion Display

26

Fashionable Outfit ✕

23
Car

Automotive   Industry
Coffee & tea   chocolate   sugar

22
washing powders   Cosmetics   Cigarettes
80   80s timeline   1990 1991

21 ✕ What was the queue for?

20 Flat ↘

Window

Sports display

18

79   70s timeline   70
Commercial art   School supplies

19
Household
Vacuum cleaners   ads   Hair dryers
60   60s timeline   69

Sport ✕

17

15 Theatre ↘

59   50s timeline   50
Radio receivers

Tourism ✕

16
Headphones &   Portable
cassette players   radios   Turntables
44   40s timeline   49

14 Culture

chair
Desk

13
Stairs ↙   Terror

Foldable bed

Table

Chair

Cabinet

Table

Kitchen cabinet

Oven

Wash basin

Washing machine

TV Cabinet

Desk

Chair

Bookshelf

X

Own Place

307

Appendix I – Details of 3D digital sketches (chapter 4)

Software Used: SketchUp Pro 2023

Software source: Newcastle University Software Centre

Used Version and License: SketchUp Pro 2023 Newcastle University Educational License (Network 200 seat maximum) expiring 11 September 2024.

Hardware used: hass-514045.campus.ncl.ac.uk, Intel(R) Core(TM) i5-6500 CPU @ 3.20GHz 3.19 GHz, 16.0 GB (15.9 GB usable), 64-bit operating system, x64-based processor, Device ID: AF1E8EAC-ECDE-4431-9610-85C9ED032FB5

Output: 3D digital sketches, model created on sketch up by Haidy Elmesiry, using some ready 3D objects acquired from 3D Warehouse (sketchup.com).

Working files available for reference.