

RE-EVALUATING THE GDR'S NATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE COLLECTIONS OF THE MUSEUM FOR GERMAN HISTORY IN BERLIN BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

Museums are a source for intentional and often subjective acts of inclusion and omission of knowledge, and for what deserves to be preserved, remembered and valued as national cultural heritage. In line with the current understanding of heritage as a process, discussed in critical heritage studies by authors such as Rodney Harrison¹ and Laurajane Smith², the author analyses how national cultural heritage is dealt with under authoritarian regimes and in the context of major political changes. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms for evaluating the national cultural heritage in the GDR and its contestation following the political events of 1989 and 1990. This paper focuses on historical museums as the subject of constant processes of politicisation, which engage in shaping and exposing a nation's historical memory and identity. The Museum for German History (Museum für Deutsche Geschichte) in East Berlin and the evaluation of its collections as national cultural heritage during the GDR and their subsequent contestation following the political events by the end of the 1980s will be analysed. Within this context, the significance of the collections and the authenticity of the museums' objects will be problematised.

After an introduction to the collecting practices adopted by the newly established history museum in East Berlin (1952), the author questions first the evaluation mechanisms by which museum objects were identified as part of the GDR's national cultural heritage. The political events by the end of the 1980s in the GDR were followed by institutional reform and changes in museum collections' narrative and significance. To understand better what was designated as heritage in the context of the regime change, this paper focuses on the reassessment of the museum's collections. This eventually sheds light not only on how selection decisions impact the understanding of the recent past, but also shifting value systems and authentication processes.

THE GDR'S NATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MUSEUMS: CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

Studies have extensively discussed museums dedicated to socialism and to the socialist party. These have their origin not in the post-1989 developments, but in the post-war developments in countries that entered the Soviet sphere of influence, as argued by Simina Bădică³. Equally, the musealisation of the material culture from the socialist past and of its ideology in Central and Eastern Europe was extensively researched⁴. However, only a few studies address how the 1989 regime change impacted the national cultural heritage collected and preserved by museums rooted in the ideology and cultural programme of the socialist countries⁵

Also, new museum developments after 1990 dedicated to the GDR's past have been extensively researched. In addition to museums highlighting daily life and the GDR's history, the role of the art museums and artists from the GDR and their re-evaluation in the course of the political reunification of Germany were analysed

in various publications⁶. History museums and their collections' development under state socialism, as well as their contribution to shaping and preserving the national heritage of the GDR, require further research. Consequently, this paper sheds light on the evaluation of the history museum's collections in the GDR as national heritage and processes of legitimisation of their value and meaning in the newly created political and cultural context after 1989.

The Museum for German History in East Berlin, the main history museum in the GDR, engaged in the national programme of socialist education of the German Socialist Party, was the subject of detailed analyses. These include the doctoral research of Mary-Elizabeth Andrews⁷. The author provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution of the Zeughaus (the Prussian armoury house) via successive museums and collections housed over centuries. Consequently, the Museum for German History is analysed in the wider context by tracing down the evolution of its historically evolved core collections. Also, the author's recent contribution thematised the meaning and significance of specific items via the former Zeughaus collections up to the present⁸. The foundation of the museum was discussed in Karen Pfundt's thesis⁹. Stefan Ebenfeld's research highlighted the Museum for German History (1950-1955) as part of the historical strategies for legitimising the *Herrschaft* of the SED¹⁰. However, these contributions omitted the role of the historical museum in shaping and preserving the national heritage of the GDR and the mechanisms developed for evaluating its collections as national cultural heritage.

THE MUSEUM FOR GERMAN HISTORY (MUSEUM FÜR DEUTSCHE GESCHICHTE [MFDG]). STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATING THE COLLECTIONS' SIGNIFICANCE

Inaugurated in 1952, the MfDG was founded as the first national history museum in the GDR to portray Germany's national history from a Marxist perspective¹¹. Soon it became the »central« museum that the political regime used to export its vision of national German history, namely in the first stage, by enforcing the idea of the contribution of the SED, the workers movements and antifascism to the formation of the German state. In consequence, the museum's narrative and collections display were organised so as to reflect the Marxist approach to the GDR's historical representation. For this, it included sections starting from the pre- and early history and Middle Ages that went through to cover the historical period of 1850-1945. However, presenting contemporary history after 1945 became mandatory, and the museum therefore actively engaged in acquiring assets that were representative of this period¹². During the 1960s, the permanent section dedicated to the contemporary GDR opened and eventually was revised between 1981 and 1984¹³. The period between the 1970s and 1980s was characterised by measures that aimed at increasing the number of displays and acquiring items relating to the GDR's history.

The museum was actively involved in promoting political-ideological education according to the Party, but also engaged in developing methodologies for a »scientific« approach to its collections. Mary-Elizabeth Andrews argued that after joining international organisations such as ICOM, which ensured »better information regarding national and international museum developments«, access was facilitated to the »systematic evaluation of international museum literature« and increased exchange with various museum institutions in the socialist bloc¹⁴. However, the museum was connected from its foundation with museums and developments across the communist bloc that engaged in addressing national and contemporary history or the party's history, such as the Lenin Museum in Soviet Russia. It also exchanged with various prestigious Western museums to facilitate exchange and restitution concerning various artefacts, in particular from its militaria collection¹⁵.

The museum was active throughout the 1960s in developing methodologies to facilitate the systematisation and value assessment of the museum objects and collections considered as part of the GDR heritage of national or international significance. *Gegenstände* (museum objects) were not considered significant for exhibition in their self-representation nor because of their authenticity, whereas the collection was considered the core of the museum. The selection of objects was guided by the principle of establishing relationships between items that would emphasise the historical narrative according to the principles of dialectical and historical materialism. One of the main strategies from the MfDG's foundation was to develop a national museum's fund of the GDR, to implement systematic approaches to its collections, and nevertheless to support the adoption of the legislation in the field. As such, museums in the GDR were encouraged to publish and to set up inventories. For this, a new department was created in the MfDG, the *Fundus*, whose activities included the creation of inventories, catalogues of collections, storage, security, visitors centre, communication, technical support, acquisitions. At the beginning of 1972, one of the major inventories of the museum's collections was finalised. The average of the acquisitions according to collections planning by 1968 was 200-300 assets per year. At this stage, the museum seemed to have reached its storage limit, preventing new acquisitions. Consequently, museum sections changed their acquisition priorities starting 1972 by focusing on the quality of the museum objects rather than the quantity of items collected. As such, the acquisition policies shifted towards prioritising the acquisition of »valuable« assets.

The significance of the museum objects for collections was differentiated by the frequency of their display (in temporary or permanent exhibitions). The collected, acquired or commissioned objects ranged from originals to reproductions, models, facsimiles, documents, newspaper, photographs, prototypes, and so on. A distinction was made between auxiliary (*Hilfsmittel*) objects and the original asset (*Exponat*), which was prioritised. Thus, the selection of the museum objects was guided, as Thomas Thiemeyer pointed out in his analysis on »the multiplicity of authenticity for the museum objects«, as much by the representative value of objects as by the testimonial power that could enhance a specific narrative¹⁶. Moreover, the museum acquired objects or in some cases entire collections from various institutions' or museums' collections in the GDR, such as the Museum for Marine Studies (Museum für Meereskunde) in Berlin¹⁷. Further collections acquired or purchased by the MfDG were the collections Wolf and Sachs (posters), remnants of the collections of Dr. Könnecke and Wäscher (documents), the Bonsack collection, and collections of the former Hohenzollern Museum (militaria)¹⁸.

The main sections organised by the MfDG starting the 1970s included: arts and material culture, documents, militaria, production technologies, film and image, and a restoration workshop¹⁹. The collections were evaluated according to their national and international significance. As part of the systematic approach to the museum's collections, the primary focus was on the natural-scientific, social or artistic significance of the museum's assets and their documentary value, without any historical period being prioritised. These had to reflect typical and characteristic traits according to which items could »objectively« testify to various historical processes²⁰. Their significance had to be established based on their unique character, or by comparison with similar assets or collections of various national or international institutions. The economic assessment of the collection value was individually assessed. The acquisition price of the assets was considered as a starting-point for the calculations. However, this procedure encountered difficulties where assets had been acquired not by purchase but donations, gifts, or property transfer²¹. Such details had to be included in the inventories, together with the short description of the asset, its provenance, and former owner's contact details²². Also, part of the documentation provided in the inventories was the state of conservation of objects. Recommendations were made to the *Fundus* department, either to ensure their retention and restoration, or their cassation²³.

A few examples of collections' evaluation will be detailed. The art collection included paintings, graphics and sculptures. The collection included artists from the 16th century until the present, such as Rembrandt, Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Leo Haas, Käthe Kollwitz, but also contemporary artists such as Willi Sitte, Walter Womacka, Lea Grundig. All were considered of having an intangible value for their artistic and historical significance, while the financial value of the collection could not be estimated due to the major differences between the individual works of art. However, the entire collection was not considered of having national or international significance, and only the graphics collection »Revolutionäre Deutsche Graphik« was considered of national significance for being unique in the Republic²⁴. It was nevertheless considered that the GDR collection was poorly represented, and the museum had to systematically cover such gaps in line with the acquisition plan.

THE GERMAN HISTORICAL MUSEUM (DHM) AND THE RE-EVALUATION OF THE GDR'S NATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

In the course of the transition between 1989 and 1990, the inherited legacy from the socialist period was submitted to a process of re-evaluation, questioning the significance of the institution as such and of its collections. As such, after the political events of autumn 1989 the GDR collections were systematically revised. By November 1989, the GDR collection was removed from the MfDG permanent exhibition being considered as insignificant (*nichtssagend*), or not relevant (*überflüssig*).

In August 1990 the GDR's Council of Ministers (*Ministerrat*) decided to dissolve the MfDG and to legally transfer its collections and the building Zeughaus to the German Historical Museum (DHM 1.45/1990). In addition, the normative framework (Law of 1980), which ensured the preservation of national cultural goods during the GDR²⁵, was discarded. In consequence, museums were responsible for setting the conditions for protecting and preserving their objects. Furthermore, the concepts of the centralised museum and museums' national cultural heritage were dismissed, just like the division between objects and collections of national and international significance.

Thus, more detailed research is required to identify what has been lost from the GDR's national cultural heritage housed by the Museum for German History during the transition between the two institutions. To illustrate briefly how the DHM dealt with the inherited MfDG collections, we point out the fate of the poster collection after November 1990. This collection was discussed by M.-E. Andrews, in particular in relation to the restitution issues raised after 1989 of the formerly Jewish-owned Sachs collection²⁶. The MfDG poster collection included three main categories, according to the inventories issued in 1968: political posters until 1945 (6709 in 1968), posters after 1945 (18954 in 1968) and the *Sonder Sachs* collection (10268 in 1968, after 1989 only approximately 4200 were restituted), considered of political, historical, cultural, artistic and aesthetic value, and of national and international significance²⁷. Immediately after 1990, besides the claims of restitution eventually achieved by Sachs family members (2012), the poster collection was reorganised by the DHM to include categories such as international and German posters until 1914, international and national posters from the First World War, of the Weimar Republic, political posters 1933-1945, of the Soviet and western occupation, GDR posters. Basically, the entire poster collection was reordered without initially maintaining, for instance, the integrity of the Sachs collection that within the MfDG was preserved. The criterion according to which the reorganisation was initially made is not clear, but according to the current official description of the poster collection's history provided by the DHM, the poster collection is ordered chronologically with a focus on political, economic and cultural themes, while the Sachs' collection is no longer part of it²⁸.

This demonstrates that, contrary to opinions expressed by DHM curators, the MfDG was not only engaged in large-scale acquisition²⁹, but often revised its collection policies and was active in developing systematic approaches and mechanisms to evaluate its collections, which have been acknowledged for having national and international significance. Thus, despite the established inventories for the MfDG collections and the systematic approaches according to which these were assigned the status of being part of the national cultural heritage, in the course of shifting political conditions its collections were revised according to the priorities and acquisition policies of the DHM.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to address the politics of heritage-making under authoritarian regimes and following their dissolution. By focusing on the GDR's national cultural heritage, the author discussed the Museum for German History's acquisition politics and the evaluation of its collections as national cultural heritage. The impact of political events from 1989 and 1990 highlighted practices of re-evaluation of the MfDG collections. These were eventually integrated in the newly established history museum in Berlin, the German Historical Museum (DHM), or dismissed. Yet the historical evolution of the collections and the national heritage of the GDR were subjected to decision-making processes that strongly impacted the way of dealing with the recent past, raising the question of how other museums dealt with the officially acknowledged national heritage of the GDR in the course of the 1989 and 1990 events.

Notes

- 1) Harrison 2013.
- 2) Smith 2006.
- 3) Bădică 2013.
- 4) Petkova-Campbell 2011, 69-81. – Apor 2011, 569-587.
- 5) Demeter 2014; 2017.
- 6) Rehberg/Kaiser 2013.
- 7) Andrews 2014.
- 8) Andrews 2018.
- 9) Pfundt 1993/1994.
- 10) Ebenfeld 2001.
- 11) DHM-HA: MfDG/16: Thesen. Die Aufgaben der fortschrittlichen deutschen Historiker und der Aufbau des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte, 16.01.1952, Bl. 06.
- 12) DHM-HA: MfDG/132: Entwurf des Rahmenperspektivprogramms der Museen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Rat für Museumswesen beim Ministerium für Kultur der DDR, Bl. 15.
- 13) DHM-HA: MfDG 497/1964-65.
- 14) Andrews 2014, 358.
- 15) DHM-HA: MfDG 221.
- 16) Thiemeyer 2016, 80.
- 17) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Vorläufige Bestandsübersicht, über museale Exponate des ehemaligen Museums für Meereskunde Berlin, die 1963/1964 vom Museum für Deutsche Geschichte übernommen wurden, S. 123-156.
- 18) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Analyse der bisherigen Prinzipien und Methoden bei der Bestandsbildung zur Geschichte der neuesten Zeit und Grundsätze und Perspektiven zu deren weiteren Entwicklung, Arbeitsgruppe Zeitgeschichtliche Sammlung, Mai 1968, S. 219.
- 19) DHM-HA: MfDG 221: S. 82.
- 20) DHM-HA: MfDG 218: Entwurf von Thesen zur Museumswissenschaft, In: Diskussionsbeiträge zur Museumswissenschaft, Neue Museumskunde 7/3, 1964 Beilage, Bl. 24.
- 21) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Einschätzung der Bestände, Plastik, Abt. 1789-1900, 29.01.1969, S. 121-122.
- 22) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Einteilung des Inventarbuches, Bl. 158.
- 23) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Bestandseinschätzung der Sammlung historischer Uniformen (einschl. Ausrüstungsstücke), Orden und Auszeichnungen, Fahnen, und Standarten sowie Militaria-graphiken und Zinnfiguren, 28.10.1969, Bl. 58.
- 24) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Graphik. Komplex: Werke großer Künstler des 16., 17., 18., 19., 20. Jahrhunderts, S. 182-183.
- 25) Gesetz zum Schutz des Kulturgutes der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 3. Juli 1980, GBL. I Nr. 20.
- 26) Andrews 2014.
- 27) DHM-HA: MfDG 208: Die Plakatsammlung des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte, Sektor Dokumente, 23.04.1968, S. 211-212.
- 28) History of the Collection: <https://www.dhm.de/sammlung-forschung/sammlungen00/bild/plakate/geschichte.html> (26.06.2020).
- 29) Interview with Rosmarie Beyer de Haan, Curator DHM Berlin, August 2014.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Neubewertung des nationalen Kulturerbes der DDR:

Die Sammlungen des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte in Berlin vor und nach 1989

Museen sind eine Quelle für intentionale und oft subjektive Akte des Einbeziehens und des Vergessens von Wissen und für das, was es verdient, als nationales Kulturerbe erhalten, erinnert und geschätzt zu werden. In Übereinstimmung mit dem gegenwärtigen Verständnis von Erbe als Prozess analysiert die Autorin, wie mit nationalem Kulturerbe unter autoritären Regimen und im Kontext großer politischer Veränderungen umgegangen wird. Der Beitrag befasst sich mit historischen Museen als Gegenstand ständiger Politisierungsprozesse, die das historische Gedächtnis und die Identität einer Nation formen und enthüllen. Im Rahmen einer Fallstudie werden dazu das Museum für Deutsche Geschichte in Ostberlin und die Bewertung seiner Sammlungen als nationales Kulturerbe während der DDR und die anschließende Auseinandersetzung nach den politischen Ereignissen von 1989 und 1990 analysiert. In diesem Zusammenhang werden die Bedeutung der Sammlungen und die Authentizität der Museumsobjekte zur Diskussion gestellt. So zeigt der Artikel, wie sich Auswahlentscheidungen auf das Verständnis der jüngsten Vergangenheit auswirken, ebenso wie sich verändernde Wertesysteme und Authentifizierungsprozesse.

Re-evaluating the GDR's National Cultural Heritage:

The Collections of the Museum for German History in Berlin before and after 1989

Museums are a source for intentional and often subjective acts of inclusion and omission of knowledge, and for what deserves to be preserved, remembered and valued as national cultural heritage. In line with the current understanding of heritage as a process, the author analyses how national cultural heritage is dealt with under authoritarian regimes and in the context of major political changes. This paper focuses on historical museums as the subject of constant processes of politicisation, which engage in shaping and exposing a nation's historical memory and identity. As a case study, the Museum for German History (Museum für Deutsche Geschichte) in East Berlin and the evaluation of its collections as national cultural heritage during the GDR and their subsequent contestation following the political events of 1989 and 1990 will be analysed. Within this context, the significance of the collections and the authenticity of the museums' objects will be problematised. Thus, the article shows how decisions of selection impact the understanding of the recent past, as much as shifting value systems and authentication processes.