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Ivan Iljin, in the lap
of mother Russia

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE FORMER EASTERN BLOC

by **Maria Brock**

The Wende Museum of the Cold War in Los Angeles

Can a museum located thousands of kilometers away from East Germany or the former Eastern Bloc provide a nuanced representation of life under socialism? This was at the forefront of my mind as I paid a visit to the Wende Museum¹ of the Cold War in Culver City, Los Angeles, in April 2018. Having visited and written about a number of museums of GDR “everyday history”² or *Alltagsgeschichte*, all of which are based in East Germany, I was curious to learn more about how this museum seeks to contribute to an understanding of the GDR- and the Cold War history.

The Wende Museum was officially inaugurated in 2002, but its history dates back to the 1990s, when founder Justin Jampol, a US academic working towards a PhD in modern European history, lived in Germany and became concerned with “the wholesale neglect and rampant destruction of Cold War material culture in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989” (from the Museum’s website). The Museum’s collection originated with items acquired by Jampol in the mid-1990s, expanding in 2000 with a significant donation by activist Al-

win Nachtweh and his partner Ulrike Wolf. In 2004, the Wende received a grant of \$1.4 million from the Arcadia Fund, established by Peter Baldwin and Lisbet Rausing, which has since contributed more than \$10 million and become the Museum’s largest funder. Additional funding for the museum comes from individual, corporate, and foundation gifts, plus government grants and other sources. In 2006, the Museum expanded its collecting mission to include documenting personal histories from the era. The “orphaned objects” in the collection, as Jampol refers to them, include Eastern Bloc art and artifacts, such as textiles, photographs and home movies, furniture, restaurant menus, mixed tapes, paintings, and sculptures. In terms of the collection’s composition, around 50% of the objects are from the former GDR, 25% from former countries of the Soviet

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Union, and 25% originate from other East Bloc countries, predominantly Hungary and Romania. Currently, only a small part of the over 100,000 artifacts is on display. However, the full collection is accessible to scholars and other interested parties by appointment.

The Museum’s site has recently undergone a major change. In 2017, it moved to the Armory building in Culver City, a former atomic bomb shelter built in 1949 in anticipation of a World War III Soviet air strike and formerly occupied by the National Guard before standing empty for many years. It was in this hangar-like structure with its surrounding garden, which will house a piece of the Berlin Wall once completed, that I met up with the Wende Museum’s chief curator Joes Segal, who took me on a tour of the current exhibition, introduced me to the Museum’s founder, and answered my questions patiently. As alluded to earlier, I was struck by the Museum’s implicit as well as explicit idea that there is value in looking at historical processes not only from a temporal, but also a geographical distance. I was therefore particularly interested in how the Museum differs in both scope and ambition from the many museums of



Exhibition on 'Cold War Spaces'. Interior showing the aesthetics of the period.



Surveillance equipment from East Germany and the Soviet Union.

GDR history with large collections of GDR artifacts located in present parts of former East Germany. Additionally, I wondered whether its focus on Cold War history – an angle not eschewed to the same degree by East Germany-based museums – would lend itself to certain, perhaps simplified readings of life under socialism, especially in the current geopolitical climate.

HOWEVER, DURING our tour of the exhibition I understood that my reservations were mostly unfounded. The current exposition on “Cold War Spaces” (to close at the end of April) takes a spatial perspective of the Eastern Bloc, dividing it not only into expected sections such as the separation between private and public space, but also “alternative” spaces, “shared” and “changing” spaces. Everyday and consumer objects – the focus of so many of the GDR museums located in East Germany – do appear in the exhibition, but the domestic here becomes merely one among many overlapping spheres. And while political repressions and persecutions are acknowledged and referred to, this is not done in order to showcase the triumph of the ‘democratic’ West over the East. Indeed, the highlighting of multiple facets of life under socialism is in many ways representative of the museum’s eclectic approach. Usually, two exhibitions run concurrently. The second exhibition – called ‘The Russians’ – shows photographs of ‘ordinary’ Soviet citizens, many of them humorous, taken by American photographer Nathan Farb

on a cultural exchange trip to Novosibirsk in 1977. Joes Segal explains that “the Cold War is the starting point, not the angle. The angle is whatever presents itself. I am actually more interested in how it is used, and how it is made operational, both in social and political terms, than in what it is in and of itself.” He appears to relish the challenge of confounding expectations and of disrupting dominant narratives. As he put it “There are many people who come here with a certain expectation and get confused, which I very much like.”

Joes Segal is a former Professor of Cultural History at Utrecht University with a special research focus on German art history. He met Justin Jampol while guest teaching a UCLA, and after a stint as guest curator, he accepted the invitation to become the Wende Museum’s chief curator in September 2014. His background and interests mean that a focus on visibility and artistic representation are core elements of current and future exhibitions. The museum showcases art from the for-

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mer Eastern Bloc that operates both within and far outside the tenets of Socialist Realism and juxtaposes it with contemporary art. It actively invites conversations and collaborations with contemporary artists, and it commissions pieces on occasion. Currently, the museum features such a commissioned piece: a video installation, “Vessel of Change”, by artist Bill Ferehawk and multimedia designer David Hartwell, which addresses the end of the Cold War in a comedic reinterpretation of the 1989 Malta Summit with surreal computer-generated renderings of George H.W. Bush and M. Gorbachev.

While saving artifacts from destruction was one of its original missions, the museum is trying to be future-oriented as much as it looks to the past – its official motto is “Preserving the Past – Informing the Present”. The aim, according to Segal, is not to insist on the parallels between the Cold War and current politics, but to utilize any apparent similarities in order to question “how history gets interpreted, what stories are based on the materials we have, and [...] to show them in a way that makes them relevant for now. So they should inspire discussions.” This openness is in fact manifest in the museum’s space and structure, which is light-filled and accessible, offering additional room for performances and concerts. An emphasis on transparency means that visitors can see how and where some of the permanent collection is stored. The museum is also kept open during exhibition changes, giving insight into how curato-



Pieces of the Berlin Wall and boarder guard training materials in the background.



Video installation 'Vessel of Change', with chief curator Joes Segal and author in central panels.

rial decisions are made, presenting history as a construct and allowing museum guests to witness its construction. In Segal's words: "I want to be a bit experimental and adventurous in connecting past and present, but also very transparent."

Another theme that emerged in both our conversation and the way the exhibition is framed is that of ambiguity. Information plaques next to exhibits are kept relatively laconic – an intentional move, as Segal explained, because "things have their own power". The ambiguity of meanings that is inherent in the objects and by extension also present in museums of material culture mandates leaving room to interpretation, to let the visitor engage with the artifacts on multiple levels. "This is one of the fascinating aspects of Material Culture: it seems so objective, but as soon as people start to remember and interpret it, it gets very messy sometimes". This complexity is meant to keep guests engaged, rather than overwhelm them. Of course, artifacts on display are embedded not only in the context of the exhibition, but also the larger context of the museum's location and prevalent historical discourses. The Museum's website informs visitors that its "location in Los Angeles provides independence and critical distance from current political debates in Europe, and also facilitates the questioning of preconceived ideas about our past and present", seemingly implying that preconceived notions about the past do not circulate in the United States. Joes Segal explains that "as a curator, I try

to create something that does not allow for any of those simplistic approaches" – whether coming from those who see themselves as winners of the Cold War, or those who approach 'real existing socialism' with nostalgic projections. The Museum's new location already performs a kind of reinscription by showcasing Eastern Bloc objects and art in a space that was meant to serve as protection from a potential attack by the Soviet Union.

IN GERMANY, GDR museums have a tendency to fit into existing discourses of its history, and thus reiterate notions of the GDR as either an *Unrechtsstaat* or a state with a systematic absence of the rule of law, or as a lost home that inspires nostalgia or "Ostalgie". The former type tends to be seen as explicitly political and with a clear educational mandate, while the latter is more object-centric, aiming to reproduce emotion over reflection. While the reality of museum culture in Germany is of course more complicated, the Wende Museum to a degree escapes such such categorizations merely by being at a large geographical distance. This distance has also benefited the Museum in perhaps unexpected ways. Some donations, such as a collection of border guard materials from Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, or the personal archives of Erich Honecker, were specifically given to the Museum because donors did not want the objects to end up in a German institution, expecting the museum in Los Angeles to be more relaxed and at the same time objective in its

handling and display of the artifacts.

When asked about future plans for the Museum, Joes Segal listed a whole series of exhibitions and collaborations. To mention just a few, upcoming exhibitions will focus on art and culture in Socialist Hungary, the role of ballet in the cultural Cold War, and Soviet hippie culture. These, like events such as future exhibitions on "The War of Nerves: Psychological Landscape of the Cold War" and "The Television Revolution beyond the Iron Curtain" are curated with academics and researchers, utilizing items from the existing collection along with specially purchased or borrowed artifacts. Finally, thanks to a special grant for its "Historical Witness Project", museum visitors along with select individuals will be interviewed about their formative Cold War experiences, further developing the Museum's interest in subjectivity and subjective experience. Clearly, a key aim for the Museum is to showcase the diversity and complexity of cultures and lives in the former Eastern Bloc because, in the words of Joes Segal: "The way to energize people is not by telling them a story and saying 'this is how it was' but by asking questions and showing the complexity of those questions." ✕

Maria Brock is a postdoctoral researcher at CBEES, Södertörn University.

reference

- 1 "Wende" is the German word for "transformation" and pertains to the changes leading up to, and following, the end of the German Democratic Republic.