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"The EU and the Post-Soviet Space"

Liberty and Liberation – Russian Cultural
Diplomacy via Public Monuments

Barnabás
Gádor



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Introduction

The post-soviet sphere and the countries of the former Eastern Bloc are littered with monuments to the Red Army and its generals. While symbols such as the hammer and sickle are banned in some countries and statues glorifying communists have been mostly dismantled, the remembrance of the “liberating” Red Army seems to have survived the democratic transition in more places than it would make sense on the surface.

This paper will present that Russia is using diplomatic channels and opaque warnings to ensure the protection of these monuments. Activists and local politicians have faced threats over their efforts to remove these monuments - but why does the Russian Federation care so deeply about seemingly inconsequential public decoration?

The following paragraphs argue that Russia uses public monuments as a tool of cultural diplomacy throughout its perceived sphere of influence to protect its conceptualization of history. The narrative of the Red Army as the liberator of Europe from national-socialist occupation is foundational to the state-propagated Russian identity, and these monuments can also serve as a tool to divide the nations in which they are found. In this sense, statues glorifying Soviet occupation became signaling tools in the wider geo-political competition between Western liberal values and Russian “traditional values”.

The paper arrives at this conclusion, by establishing the theory and history behind the usage of public monuments for the ends of identity and narrative formation, and two case studies presenting different aspects of this process in action, from Prague and Budapest. Both capitals were occupied by Soviet troops for more than forty years, and both saw violent repression of their reform attempts in 1968 and 1956 respectively. The paper closes with some constructive outlooks regarding the place of these statues in our historical memory and ways to detoxify them from the role the current Russian government attributes to them.

Theory and History

Monuments as Tools of Identity Formation

The usage of public monuments to establish narratives that serve as the foundation of a society's identity and norms is nothing new: the first such preserved monument is the Stele of Hammurabi from the 18th century BC. The stele describes the rules of society, including the famous eye-for-an-eye principle. The longevity of the artifact highlights the role public monuments play in the establishment of historical narratives: while oral history and even written records are susceptible to degradation and oblivion, physical manifestations of the governing ideas such as buildings and objects can linger long past their societies.

Most pre-modern monuments of the world were built to immortalize the grandeur, wealth, and power of the rulers of the era: from the Pyramids of Giza and the Column of Trajan in ancient times to the breathtaking Saint Peter's Basilica and the Palace of Versailles more recently. Some have no practical function at all, but most are constructed to inspire awe or even a sense of smallness in the visitor. In societies, where a large portion of the population was illiterate, monuments became a way to feel belonging to a group and for the elites to communicate their values, norms, and narratives (Bellentani and Panico 2016).

During the establishment of modern nation-states, the same tradition evolved into reverence towards the polity rather than the person of the ruler. When one compares the feeling of stepping inside Notre Dame in Paris and the Capitol in Washington DC, the effects would be similar, as are the architectural solutions that arouse them. Long steps force the visitor to look up and find themselves confronted with the immense height and weight of the buildings. Rich ornamentation showcases the wealth and expertise of the builders. The decoration usually evokes the symbols of the community, be that a statue of Christ or the apotheosis of George Washington in the Dome of the Capitol (Blakley 2022). Monuments are tools to manifest the symbolic power of the country's ruling elite, a material expression of a society's norms and identity (Cudny and Appelblad 2019).

The evolution of identity and public spaces

Statues immortalize certain people and their achievements, so their meaning is expected to evolve as the perception of their subject changes. People and deeds that were found worthy of public admiration are no longer palatable in some societies, causing great controversy over the continued existence of some monuments.

The South of the United States continues to grapple with its Confederate history and the glorification of slave owners: while one side argues that such reverence towards perpetrators of despicable acts is immoral, the other claims that these statues constitute its historical heritage and identity which is worth protecting. On further investigation, it is apparent, that most Confederate monuments were not built during the Civil War era, but during the Jim Crow era

and the '60s as a counter-reaction to the advancements of civil rights, as part of a wider struggle over American identity (FiveThirtyEight; Chamberlain and Yanus 2021).

According to Gill, elites of society “*turn the landscape into a world structured by the legitimating myths and symbols of the regime, projecting a particular view of the past and present onto that landscape*” (2005, pg. 451). The co-optation or redefinition of buildings and monuments can serve to alleviate the contradiction between the past and the present. The Kremlin, a building that served as the symbol of might for Russian tsars throughout centuries remained the seat of power during the communist rule - the ideology of which is diametrically opposed to the luxury of the palace. The new owners, of course, remodeled the place to fit their tastes, removing the tsarist eagles and some of the ornamentation in favor of red stars. This was later reversed by Vladimir Putin, in his quest to restore the imperial grandeur of Russia - and where to start if not at the heart of it all.

The aforementioned public symbols and their evolutions can tell us a lot about a society's self-perception and identity. The changes implemented capture how elites use them to establish historic continuity to lend credibility to their political projects. If monuments are used as symbols of a regime, they are expected to be redefined and changed as regimes wash away in the ebb and flow of history.

Glory to the liberating Soviet heroes!

The Second World War claimed the lives of 27 million Soviet citizens. The Red Army pushed German forces back to Berlin at an incredible cost paid in blood. In their path, they liberated numerous concentration camps and ghettos, saving the lives of countless people. May 9th, the day of Germany's surrender, is celebrated as a holiday in Russia, and in a lot of former Soviet republics, monuments stand throughout the region to commemorate the fallen. Cemeteries and statues were erected to immortalize the soldiers who liberated Europe from national-socialist rule. During the very same march, Soviet soldiers pillaged and raped throughout Eastern Europe and established a military occupation that would not end in most places until the end of the Cold War.

Stalin emphasized the innocence of the Soviet Union, and its role in “saving the world” from fascism, in his project of nation-building following the war, the narrative of “*our glorious patriotic victory*” became a foundational myth (Kapaeva 2009, pg. 366). The Putin regime continued to build on the same “spotless victor narrative” (Mälksoo 2021, pg. 497), purporting the Russian Federation as the rightful heir to the Soviet past and heritage (see Article 67.1 § 1 of the constitution).

The sanctity of this narrative is so central to the regime's self-definition as the defender of normalcy and traditional values, that questioning it is punishable under Article 354.1 of the Russian Criminal Code which prohibits efforts to “exonerate nazism”. Alongside its stated goal, the law penalizes a wide range of statements that could undermine the memory and dignity of the Red Army or the USSR's role in the war (Nekoliak 2023). More recently, in 2020, a new amendment to the Russian constitution proclaimed that “*the Russian Federation*

“honours the memory of defenders of the Homeland” and “protects historical truth” (Article 67.1 § 3)” while it also bans certain forms of speech, stating, that *“diminishing the significance of the people’s heroism in defending the Homeland is not permitted” (Article 67.1 § 3)”* (FIDH Report 2021).

The symbolic usage of space in the post-Soviet sphere

To understand the impact of Soviet monuments on symbolic landscapes, it is important to understand how the physical and the symbolic space relate in the region. The communist rule has left a mark on the urban landscapes of the former USSR and its satellite states, from the unmistakable aesthetic of soviet metros to the distinct ambiance of brezhnevkas. Communism as an ideology promised a radical break from the bourgeois past in all aspects of life, which naturally included architecture and public spaces. For example, hruschovkas and later brezhnevkas were a symbolic break from the familial living spaces, that created uniform living standards with a high degree of comfort - considering that the more modern buildings had central heating, bathrooms for individual flats, and electricity. The goal was to “live in communism”, to render its ideological principles material - and it also does not hurt if one can stick it to the bourgeois in the meantime (Dobrenko and Naiman 2003).

The same principle was applied to street names: in the six decades following the “Great October Socialist Revolution”, more than 700,000 place names were changed in the Soviet Union, including some of the most populous cities, like Leningrad and Stalingrad, or Sverdlovsk (formerly and currently known as Saint Petersburg, Volgograd, and Yekaterinburg respectively) (Peterson 1977). Gill argues (2005), that renaming public places is a symbolic act aiming to bolster the legitimacy of the regime, taking possession of the symbolic realm to complement its control over the material one. With the same stroke, renaming undermines the legitimacy of the preceding regime, and in the case of the USSR, it also erases religious, imperial, and local ethnic or cultural identities.

The communist dictator of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu razed most of Bucharest's historical city center, to make space for the largest parliament building in the world, the People’s Palace. This is an epitome of the symbolic usage of space: traditional buildings and organic communities were disrupted to create a monument to Ceaușescu’s rule. The move was by no means practical: the construction that started in 1984 was never finished, and over half of the rooms sit unused, without the budget to properly heat them. Without practical reasons for such an investment, the construction is mostly symbolic, presenting the grandeur of the communist state and the dictator personally.

Thus, reshaping the physical landscape as a manifestation of political power is a well-established practice in the post-soviet sphere, with the Soviet Union truly mastering its art.

Case study: Konev, the Bloody Marshall

On the 6th of May, 1945 the Red Army surrounded Prague and started a campaign for the city that claimed the lives of 50,000 soldiers, led by Marshal Ivan Konev. His success heralded the era of Soviet occupation, which lasted until 1989. A statue was erected in his honor in 1980, during the period of repression that followed the Prague Spring. The monument was located on Interbrigády Square, in the 6th district of the Czechoslovakian capital.



*The inauguration of the statue,
1980, Novinky*

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the fate of the statue came into question due to Konev's role in suppressing the revolutions of 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The statue was smeared with red paint or otherwise defaced on several occasions. While the municipal government initially took responsibility for the cleaning and maintenance, the situation grew unsustainable. The municipality offered to relocate the statue to the Russian embassy but faced harsh criticism from

the representatives of the Russian Federation and Russophile Czechs alike. In 2018, the municipal government placed signage around the monument, which provided historical context about Marshal Konev's role in Soviet repression, drawing similarly strong reactions from the Russian ambassador, leading to a deterioration of Czech-Russian relations (Kazharski and Makarychev 2022).

After a subsequent act of protest (or vandalism, if you ask the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the municipality decided to drape the monument in protective foliage, however, this was torn down by pro-Russian activists on several occasions. To resolve the issue once and for all, the mayor of Prague 6, Ondřej Kolář took the controversial decision to remove the statue in April 2020 (Reuters 2020). The reaction was exceptionally potent: due to a fear of attempts on his life, he and two other municipal politicians were placed in protective custody and were forced to hide for weeks. Agents of the Russian state have spread the hoax, that an FSB agent carrying ricin has entered the Czech Republic, and the



*“No to the bloody Marshall! We will not forget”
E15, 2019*

Russian Federation started a criminal proceeding for “defiling of symbols of Russia's military glory”, a title punishable under the aforementioned memory laws (Radio Free Europe 2020).



*Removal of the Statue,
Denník N, 2020*

Kazharski used the case of Marshal Konev and the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn, to present divergent regimes of memocracy in Russia and their former sphere of influence. He approached the field of memory politics “*as a battleground of different aesthetic regimes that clash with each other and produce political conflicts*” (pg. 1153). He argued that Russia is a “mnemonic warrior” a term coined by Bernhard and Kubik (2014), as it views historical truths as absolute and attainable, it supports a univocal and authoritative account of the past that is counter-positioned to the multivocal, pluralist, and democratic view of history. As such, the Russian aesthetic regime is vulnerable to critique and cynicism, because any diverging viewpoints would undermine its narrative.

If this narrative is the foundational myth of Putin’s Russia, then perceived opposition to it serves as an attack on the legitimacy of the regime as well. Mälksoo argued that Russia is motivated by “mnemonical status anxiety”, which he defines as being “*concerned about the international recognition and validation of its official national biographical narrative by a relevant memory order*” (2021, pg. 494). In his account, the memory laws serve as a way to maintain a unified view of the past as a driver of national unity. In turn, this account of history is used to create a Russian identity that is contrary to the “West”, and thus places memory politics in the realm of wider rhetorical competition between liberal, democratic, Western values and “traditional”, Christian, Russian values.

Case study: Liberty Square

There lies a remarkable square in downtown Budapest, just a corner away from the Parliament. In the late 18th century, the ruling Habsburgs constructed a military barrack, known as the Neugebaude, which stood there for the next century, temporarily serving as a prison for the participants of the 1848-1849 revolution. Lajos Batthyány, the first prime minister who swore to serve Hungarians instead of the Habsburgs was executed here, the place is commemorated with an eternal flame. After the period of reconciliation and the demolition of the military building in 1900, the area was given the name Liberty Square, in honor of the revolutionaries (Török 2023).

Following the First World War, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and more than half of its population according to the Treaty of Trianon. The decision fueled irredentist and nationalist sentiment, manifesting at the aesthetic level as well: new statues were propped up symbolizing the regions that were “torn away from the motherland”. The country's symbolic flag and a decorative flower bed were installed at the heart of the square. The flowers were arranged to form the boundaries of “Greater Hungary” (ie. the pre-1920 borders) and to spell out the irredentist motto (Török 2023).



“I believe in God, I believe in the Homeland, I believe in a divine, eternal justice”

*Irredentist flower bed, 1938
György Major / Fortepan*

Considering the centrality of the square both geographically, and symbolically, it is no surprise that it was quickly coopted by the communist government installed by the occupying Soviet forces. In May 1945, the irredentist statues were presumably destroyed, and the flowers were replaced by a 15-meter obelisk, holding a red star at its peak, and a hammer and sickle on its torso. The work by Károly Antal displays an inscription in Russian and Hungarian: “Glory to the liberating soviet heroes”. The installation, known as the “Liberation Monument” used to be a military grave and housed the remains of unknown Red Army soldiers, a handful of the over 80,000 who had fallen during

the siege of Budapest. When the statue was erected, the majority of the city was still in ruins, and the Red Army detained and deported 130,000 people to forced labor camps, under the pretense of “malenkij robot” or a “little work”. Most of them perished in Siberia without their families ever knowing their fate or the location of their graves, and under the communist regime even speaking about their fates was informally prohibited. For them, the arrival of the Red Army was not much of a liberation.



Liberation Monument, 1954
József Horváth / Fortepan



The Grateful Hungarian People, 1950
Magyar Rendőr / Fortepan

Shortly after, in 1950 the square received a new addition by Zsigmond Kisfaludi Stróbl with the inscription “The Hungarian people showing their gratitude to the great Stalin”. The statue was placed symbolically in front of the former stock exchange, creating a juxtaposition between the old world and the coming new one by its very presence. As the Cold War was unfolding at the time, it is also noteworthy that the statue could be perfectly visible from the windows of the US embassy on the other side of the square. The distinct socialist realist style, the symbolic location, and even the positioning of these art pieces showcased the Soviet’s possession over Budapest.

It is no surprise then, that these works were not too popular with the locals. During the revolution of 1956, the square filled up with protesters en route to the Parliament, the former monument was stripped of its communist symbols, and the latter was demolished altogether. The revolution saw the destruction of many similar statues, symbols of Soviet occupation were removed and destroyed amid celebrations. Taking our symbols and our places back was an act of rebellion, a symbolic declaration of independence. Once Soviet troops (including ones commanded by Marshal Konev) crushed the revolution, the “Liberation Monument” was restored - but as the winds were changing in Moscow, the statue praising Stalin was left to oblivion.



Liberation Monument, 1956

Gyula Nagy / Fortepan



The "Grateful" Hungarian People, 1956

Gyula Nagy / Fortepan

The square remained relatively undisturbed for the coming decades until the change of regime brought a reckoning with the communist past. Public spaces were mostly re-christened to their pre-war names and almost all communist statues and monuments praising the Red Army were removed. The decision-makers of the era found a way to preserve these works of art while also robbing them of their symbolical power: they were transported to the Memento Park, a museum exhibiting communist public monuments surrounded by ample historical context for educational purposes. However, in 1995 the Russian Federation and the Republic of Hungary signed a treaty that prohibits any kind of disturbance to the graves of fallen soldiers, hence the "Liberation" Monument was left in its place. As a new underground parking facility was constructed in 2011, the remains of the soldiers were transported to the Kerepesi cemetery - with the expressed consent of the Russian Federation.

Public intellectuals, organizations, and political parties have protested the continued presence of the monument, ever since. The monument was vandalized on multiple occasions by far-right protesters and drew the ire of the Hungarian right (Népszava 2014). In 2017 a liberal activist called Gergő Komáromi threw balloons filled with paint on the statue (Horváth 2017), prompting a quick condemnation from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which called on the Hungarian state to fulfill its duties protecting the inviolability of Russian monuments. In a strange episode, Magomed Daszajev a Chechnian businessman threatened the activists online, and at one point he referred to his connections to the Hungarian and Russian governments - however, Sándor Pintér, the Minister of Interior refused to release the outcomes of the subsequent investigation (Népszava 2017).



*The inauguration of Bush's statue
US Embassy, 2020*

In 2020, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the outgoing US ambassador inaugurated a new statue depicting George H. W. Bush., in the shadow of the Liberation Monument and right in front of the US embassy. During his speech, the Prime Minister said that while the square is dedicated to Liberty, there are two monuments to commemorate the German and the Soviet occupation of Hungary, the latter referring to the Liberation Monument. While Viktor Orbán maintains close ties

with Vladimir Putin, being more apologetic of his conduct and latently supportive of his rhetoric concerning the “special military operation”, the aforementioned sentence drew criticism from Maria Zakharova, the director of the information and press department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. She was quoted saying “*Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has crudely misrepresented the historical truth when he referred to the obelisk at Liberty Square as the monument of Soviet occupation*” (Nagy 2021). Despite the generally amicable relations, “historical truth” is apparently a neuralgic point for Russia, even when it comes from supposed allies.

Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine reignited the dormant debate. In October of 2022, activists of a liberal opposition party, called the Momentum Movement draped the monument in the Hungarian national flag, calling for the relocation of the obelisk (Ághassi 2022). The performance was met with a range of reactions: while some agreed, others preferred to remove the totalitarian symbols or place historical context around the contested monument. A strikingly strong rebuttal came from the Hungarian Jewish community, who pleaded for the monument to be left alone, as it also commemorates the liberation of the Budapest ghetto, which imprisoned 68,000 Hungarian Jews when the Red Army reached it.



*The Liberation Monument draped in the national colors
Gábor Kerpel-Fronius, 2022*

While looking through the Russian foreign ministry's website for a reaction to this incident, I found some further evidence, regarding the priorities of the Russian embassy in Budapest. In 2010, the Intermittent Ambassador published an article titled "On the 65th Anniversary of the Great Victory", regurgitating the main points of the "spotless victor" narrative (Embassy of the Russian Federation). A similar speech was given the following year by the subsequent ambassador, at a conference commemorating the 70th anniversary of Hitler's aggression against the USSR and the "The Great Patriotic War" (Embassy of the Russian Federation). In 2014, the Russian Federation gave an award to 20 Hungarian nationals for their services in "protecting the memory of those fallen in defense of the homeland" (Embassy of the Russian Federation). The Russian embassy participates in every commemorative service involving the graves of Soviet soldiers, supports efforts at the rehabilitation of memorials, and reacts to every instance of vandalism. Other issues under the umbrella of cultural diplomacy, such as artistic exchanges, education, or linguistic programs do not get talked about as much as subjects of memory and the protection of "the historical truth".

Conclusion

The first part of the essay presented how monuments have been used throughout history to assert symbolic power over the landscape and society, and how they are subject to change as their perception evolves. This was followed by an overview of the Soviet/Russian narrative and conceptualization of XXth-century history, and the practices of monument building in the post-communist space.

The second part took a closer look at two cases of Russian cultural diplomacy in the context of history and monuments to the Red Army. The first case, the statue of Marshal Konev in Prague showed how easy it is to trigger an outsized reaction from the Russian Federation, which ranges from the mobilization of the Russophile diaspora in the country to hoax death threats against politicians. The second case, the Liberation Monument showed that issues of remembrance remain deeply divisive due to the plurality of historical experiences, for example, that of the victims of the "malenkij robot" and that of the survivors of the Budapest Ghetto.

In conclusion, Russia holds the monuments of the Red Army near and dear - they understand any kind of transgression against them as an attack on their absolute and univocal conceptualization of history, and thus their identity. They pursue an active foreign policy that reasserts their claim over how the Second World War is remembered, and by extension how the states they formerly occupied define themselves. The statues and the diplomatic responses they give to any perceived violation of the sanctity of "historical truth" continue to divide and polarize societies, tying the practice to the wider ideological competition between the liberal West and traditional Russia.

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39793 - Nagy Gyula - Removal of communist symbols

39788 - Nagy Gyula - Destroyed statue

16566 - Magyar Rendőr - Tőzsdepalota

28338 - Major György - Irredentist flower bed

265659 - Horváth József - Felszabadulás emlékmű

Transparency clause: I am a member of Momentum Movement, a party mentioned in the essay. This has not impacted my analysis whatsoever, but I find it important to note.