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## Layers of Dissonant Heritage in Poland

### Soviet and Russian Memorials after 24 February 2022

As the balance of political power shifts and certain states – in this case, Russia – become perceived as hostile, public anger is focused on material heritage that (seemingly) represents the oppressive country. The destruction of monuments in the context of geopolitical crises is not a new phenomenon, but one so far insufficiently theorised. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted questions about the place and role of Soviet heritage in the whole post-Soviet region once again, and the discussions and direct actions aimed at monuments can be seen as ongoing endeavours entailing the retrieval, superimposition and revelation of significations ascribed to the communist past of countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

In our article, this interpretive framework is examined through the lenses of palimpsests and post-colonial theory. Both palimpsests and the process of decolonisation are characterised by the sequential actions of divulging and reinstating: palimpsests tangibly disclose latent historical imprints, while decolonisation endeavours to expose and revive suppressed narratives and meanings. Palimpsests accentuate the notion of stratum-laden histories within a specified spatial or cultural milieu. Concurrently, decolonisation encompasses the revelation and acknowledgment of these stratifications. We aim to show the diverse avenues of those debates and their materiality in Poland. While the Soviet monuments have been broadly contested – sometimes as bottom-up, other times as top-down initiatives – paradoxically, tsarist Russian heritage has been treated as almost invisible. From big cities to small towns and villages, the country became a memory battlefield in 2022, adding layers to already palimpsestic memory sites, erasing them from the cultural landscape, or leaving them intact.

The process of the contestation, removal and demolishing of Soviet war monuments in Central and Eastern Europe has been ongoing since the 1990s, in

fact: since the collapse of communist regimes in these countries and the dismantling of the Soviet Union. It commenced as an expression of the common rejection of the communist heritage in post-Soviet countries, and as an element of the wave of decommunisation. It has, however, varied greatly in different countries: there is neither a common international legislative approach nor policies for preserving this heritage in the region.

In the beginning, many actions against material heritage associated with the former political system, both those initiated by regional municipalities and those by individuals or communities, were spontaneous. In later years, some of the actions were carried out through legal regulations on a top-down basis, while others have been considered acts of either vandalism or artistic expression, often unofficially approved by the authorities. In Poland, a law was introduced against the propagation of communism and other totalitarian regimes in 2016<sup>1</sup>. This includes the prohibition of promoting communism or any other totalitarian system through the names of buildings, structures or public utility devices. Various types of memorials fall under this law: from monuments devoted to the Red Army (which are among the most common forms of memorials in Poland) to – in the most radical interpretation – monuments commemorating events from the period 1945–1989.

The Polish legislation related to monuments and the law related to war cemeteries differ significantly. There are a total of 705 burial sites of Red Army soldiers from World War II located within the territory of Poland, all of which fall under the protection of the Polish state. The ongoing maintenance costs, as well as necessary repairs, are financed through the state budget. Additionally, there are several cemeteries under the stewardship of the Polish state containing Russian graves dating from 1919–1921 and, notably, 11 burial sites of Russian soldiers from the Napo-

leonic Wars. The management of these sites is governed by the provisions outlined in the “Act of 28 March 1933 on War Graves and Cemeteries”, which expressly mandates the respectful care and maintenance of graves and war cemeteries, regardless of the nationality, religion or military affiliation of those interred. Furthermore, there are international and bilateral agreements ensuring the protection of monuments and sites of memory, especially when located in cemeteries; Poland is obliged to protect such places by the agreement signed with the Russian Federation in 1994<sup>2</sup>.

After the initial post-communist wave, discussions and actions against monuments usually intensified across the region around 9 May, Victory Day, or as a response to such events as the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. The current great wave of debates began with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Within the first three months, around 30 monuments were officially demolished and at least 50 were vandalised across Europe<sup>3</sup>. Outside of Ukraine, a particularly high number of them are located in Poland and Lithuania.

In Poland, 35 Soviet monuments had been officially removed by August 2023 on the initiative of the Institute of National Remembrance, and many more had been vandalised in grass-roots actions. The institute estimates that there are around 60 such monuments in the country which were put on a list in order to be removed<sup>4</sup>. Some monuments and their surroundings reflect several layers in time particularly clearly, and each of these layers builds on the previous ones while addressing the present. Thus, we think that it is particularly productive to look at such monuments as palimpsests or actions in support of perceived and publicly articulated “decolonisation”, bringing to light layered, palimpsestic memory. In this article, we use this lens to take a closer look at some actions, and a deeper analysis of the situation of monuments in Poznań and Olsztyn.

As a category of analysis, the concept of a palimpsest has traditionally been used in urban studies<sup>5</sup> and memory studies, focusing on cultural landscapes<sup>6</sup>. As Barbara Buchenau et al. define it: “Originally, a palimpsest is a paper or parchment which, in

times when writing material was scarce, was written on more than once, with a first layer of writing being written over in such a way that older layers are still (partly) legible underneath.”<sup>7</sup> This term has also been used in the analysis of cinema and literature. Our understanding is based on Max Silverman’s, who said:

*“of all the figures which connect disparate elements through a play of similarity and difference (analogy, metaphor, allegory, montage and so on), the palimpsest captures most completely the superimposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialization of time central to the work of memory that I wish to highlight. I will, at different times, talk of composite memory, ‘concentrationary’ memory, Gilles Deleuze’s mémoire-monde, noeuds de mémoire, memory traces and a Benjaminian understanding of memory as ‘image’. The link between all these terms [...] is their palimpsestic structure whereby one element is seen through and transformed by another.”<sup>8</sup>*

Decolonisation, in turn – our overarching perspective, as elucidated by scholars such as Madina Tlostanova – presents a nuanced and multifaceted analytical framework for scholarly inquiry. She advocates for its adoption, guiding researchers in exploring power structures, identity formations and historical trajectories. This perspective offers profound insights into post-colonial experiences, particularly within the Central and Eastern European context. Beyond theoretical utility, decolonisation embodies a palpable societal imperative, reflecting communities’ collective aspirations within the region to reclaim agency, assert cultural identities and address persistent effects of historical colonisation. Its dynamic force shapes societal transformations in discourse and practice. Moreover, decolonisation emerges as a viable policy approach, influencing Central and Eastern European memory policies and heritage management. By re-assessing and reforming these policies, institutions contribute to dismantling prevailing narratives and fostering alternative representations of the past. Consequently, the multifaceted nature of decolonisation underscores its vital role in unravelling the intricate

historical, cultural and institutional dynamics within the general region<sup>9</sup>.

### What is Actually Russian? A Short History of Imperial Monuments in Białystok

Underlying the reactions to geopolitical developments related to Russian political activity is the question of what is understood as “Russian”, and to which objects this Russianness is attributed. The Central and Eastern European countries have a history of links and dependencies with Russia and its various forms of statehood, which further confuse the issue.

The city of Białystok, located in the east of Poland, boasts a unique sculpture depicting a dog, which can be used as an example how the country has dealt with its imperial Russian past. The canine’s muzzle exhibits a noticeable asymmetry, yet it appears remarkably cheerful. This sculpture symbolises Nikolai Kavelin (Mikołaj Kawelin, Николай Кавелин), a colonel in the tsarist army, who later became a local sports and social activist<sup>10</sup>. He also had an active and vibrant lifestyle, which became fertile ground for many stories on the local level. Kavelin had a rich career, and his complex biography cannot be oversimplified. This sculpture, located on the periphery of Branicki Palace’s splendid garden, certainly deviates from the traditional style of the tsarist era. However, it raises the question of what position architecture and other material heritage occupy in contemporary society.

The sculpture was crafted during the 1930s, before being lost during the war. A replica of it, created by Małgorzata Niedzielko, was installed on the outskirts of the palace park in 2006 (fig. 1). Curiously, this monument to a tsarist officer in the city’s public space does not seem to stir up any controversy. The only groups that raise objections in Białystok are in fact activists from the Russian Cultural and Educational Association, who advocate for a new interpretation of the sculpture. They believe that the title *Kavelin the Dog* is offensive to Russian national pride and therefore suggest changing the name to *Kavelin’s Dog*<sup>11</sup>. Apart from this dispute – which resonates primarily among the Russian minority and less so among the inhabitants of Białystok – neither this monument nor other forms of imperial Russian heritage in Białystok are contextualised, not least in relation to the war in Ukraine.



Fig. 1: Kavelin the Dog by Małgorzata Niedzielko, installed in 2006. Photo: Małgorzata Łukianow, 2022.

Analysing the life course of this monument, one can see that it contrasts with the changes in 1945, 1989 or 2021. During Małgorzata Łukianow’s fieldwork in Białystok, she queried people regarding the significance of the sculpture of Kavelin, and other relics from the Russian Empire period. This includes the memory of the Ritz Hotel (whose front wall featured the name РИЦ), built at the time, and the railway station (rebuilt in 2022 in the “tsarist” style)<sup>12</sup>. The responses to her interviews indicated that the heritage from the 19th century was not seen as representative of Russian heritage so much as being significant locally. According to the interviewed historians, tour guides and researchers, the cultural heritage remaining from the period of Russian rule in this part of



Fig. 2: The Monument to Heroes in the Poznań Citadel in 1945. Photo: collection of PTPN (cyryl.poznan.pl).

Poland cannot be classed as “Russian” due to the absence of nation-state characteristics in 19th-century empires. As a result, it does not evoke feelings of foreignness or rejection among local inhabitants. The question of whether an empire can in fact be a nation-state defies common understanding and vernacular memory<sup>13</sup>, but it is a question worth considering. It is thus surprising that being Russian is often associated with the Soviet legacy, given that the Soviet Union was a multiethnic and multinational empire.

Perhaps, however, a past so distant that it no longer aligns with the biographies of even the oldest inhabitants of Białystok may be explained by what has been called “banal forgetting”, i.e. not caused by active participation from memory actors or due to specific circumstances. This may be an unintended consequence of the dual heredity of memory: bottom-up processes occur when there is insufficient communication between event witnesses and later generations, while top-down or trivial forgetting occurs when cultural memory does not translate into individual images of the past<sup>14</sup>.

Conversely, this “banal forgetting” is not as banal as it seems. Present-day local communities do not generate patterns of memory management, and memory disappears, with its absence perceived as a natural state<sup>15</sup>. The question of whether the process of addressing the Russian Empire’s past is a memory lacking a curator – or an expert – remains open. When Białystok tour guides were asked whether they talked about the monuments and the situation of the city in general during the period of imperial Russia, they usually replied that they did not, and that in view of the splendour of the Branicki Palace, it was simply not interesting to tourists.

However, expert voices are not lacking on the other side of what might be considered the Russian legacy, which includes monuments honouring Soviets. Let us now look at a few of those in more detail.

### Monument to Heroes in Poznań

Situated in the heart of the city, the Monument to Heroes stands in a park and towers over a commemoration complex created on the site of the historic Soviet-German battle of Poznań (1945), which pushed

German troops out of western Poland and established Soviet authority and influence over this area (fig. 2). It is composed of an obelisk originally topped with a red star, a relief on the bottom and a plaque with a quote from Stalin, both in Russian and in Polish, thanking the soldiers and their commanders for their sacrifices in liberating Poznań. The relief depicts a battle scene in the Socialist Realist style, with a group of advancing soldiers, which makes it a part of a long classical tradition of triumphal war commemorations. As Joanna Figuła-Czech has written: “The message is clear: these are the victors – the strong, the great, the only ones who could defeat the ‘Germanic tormentor’. There is no trauma; there is a depiction of the reality of war in slightly theatrical gestures.”<sup>16</sup>

The semantic function of the obelisk, a form typical of totalitarian regimes, is no doubt triumphal. It serves to establish the power relations between the centre, represented by the monument, and viewers. The Monument to Heroes was supposed to become a “visual sign of memory” from the onset, a “sign of sincere Polish-Soviet friendship”, as expressed by Colonel Nikolai Woronow on the occasion of its dedication on 19 November 1945<sup>17</sup>. And in fact, it did become an ideological determinant of post-war Poznań: the main commemoration of World War II in this city, pushing aside other sites of memory and other narratives, such as that of the martyrdom of the Polish people<sup>18</sup>, or the role of the Polish army of pre-war lineage<sup>19</sup>.

The monument is in the midst of a cemetery of Soviet heroes killed in the battle of Poznań. This layer of memory directly builds on the previous one: the Citadel, as a layer of German dominance established there during the times of partitions, when these territories were incorporated in the German Empire, and earlier in Prussia (1772–1918). The Citadel was the main element of the 19th-century Prussian fortification system, and the slope that interests us here was the site of a Prussian cemetery. Perfectly demonstrating the ideological importance of this site in establishing power and the layered character of the complex, in 1945 the Soviets dug up the Prussian and German dead, moved the graves to other places in the town, and buried their own dead soldiers there<sup>20</sup>.

As one can imagine, many Poznań inhabitants after 1945 oriented themselves in relation to the new obelisk both ideologically and spatially: it was a popular meeting place for a Sunday walk in the park. It was where the main official war commemoration celebrations took place each year in May and September. At the same time, the site silenced other sites of memory, such as Fort VII of Poznań, a former Nazi concentration camp which was closed to the public after the war and turned into a place where the army was stationed<sup>21</sup>. In this way other narratives than the triumphal pro-Soviet one were downgraded if not erased from the urban space.

But the Monument to Heroes was also an object of disagreement, protest and violence. An unsuccessful attempt to destroy it took place as early as 1953, which was connected with hopes for change after Stalin’s death. A student of the University of Poznań placed a home-made bomb under the monument, but it did not detonate. After being discovered by militiamen, the perpetrator was sentenced to 12 years in prison and was deprived of his civil rights until 1962 for “counter-revolutionary struggle”. This shows how seriously the monument was treated by the authorities: the indictment stated that the student “gathered military and propaganda resources for this purpose, thus making preparations for a violent change in the political system of the Polish State”<sup>22</sup>.

The systemic change in 1989 was clearly reflected in the activities around the site. The star from the top disappeared one day in 1990. There was a lot of speculation about what happened to it, and it was eventually found in 2010, in a disused fire station warehouse near the city and moved to the Museum of Poznań History. The spontaneous removal of the red star – an iconoclastic act – paralleled the official actions of demolition that took place in the 1990s in many cities of the USSR’s satellite countries. As Christina Schwenkel has written, “it is also an act of reclaiming history and constituting a new regime of memory. Iconoclastic acts, in other words, are as much about the future as they are about the past”<sup>23</sup>.

In 1997, due to a conflict with the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Poznań, which had been going on since the removal of the star, the



Fig. 3: The graffiti that appeared right after 24 February 2022 on the Monument to the Heroes in Poznań Citadel. Photo: Anna Topolska, 29 April 2022.



Fig. 4: Interventions on the Monument to Heroes in the Poznań Citadel after February 2022. Photo: Lukasz Cynalewski (Agencja Wyborcza.pl).

monument was restored by adding a small bronze star low on the wall of the obelisk (fig. 3). On the part of the city authorities, this was rather a renovation of a historical monument than a political act: at most, an act of compromise to calm the existing conflict. Especially since the position of the “new” star was not very representative: it was located at a height of six meters from the base, not on top, and was made of bronze.

After that, the obelisk functioned rather as a tourist attraction, again a meeting place for Poznań inhabitants going for a walk in the park (its name no longer commemorating Polish-Soviet friendship), and as an orientation point. This changed in 2022: in the wave of recent protests and symbolic interventions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the site in Poznań has been reinterpreted in several waves, having become a topic of controversy on the international level.

Right after the invasion of 24 February 2022, someone splashed red paint on the obelisk at the level of the Soviet star, probably aimed at symbolising blood on Russian hands and the continuation of the infamous Soviet heritage (fig. 3). At the same time, an unknown person painted, on the side of the obelisk, gallows and the name Putin (fig. 4). This caused a reaction from the consul general of the Russian Federation in Poland, Iwan Kosonogow, who sent an official letter to the Mayor of Poznań, Jacek Jaśkowiak, demanding “immediate action to repair the damaged monument and prevent similar acts in the future”. Kosonogow stated that “the perpetrators of the barbaric act need to be found and punished”<sup>24</sup>. The case was handed over by the president to the Municipal Greenery Authority, which was to remove the inscriptions, but without making it a priority. The mayor in fact replied to the consul via a public press statement as follows:

*“Barbarism, cruel crimes and even genocide are being carried out in Ukraine by the Russian army on the orders of President Putin. The civilian population, including women and children, are being murdered. And this is what we must deal with first: saving the lives and health of people forced to flee their country from the cruel Russian invaders.”*<sup>25</sup>

The painted signs not only did not disappear from the monument, but a few days later more signs appeared. The whole pedestal of the monument and the barrier in front of it were wrapped in blue and yellow foil, symbolising the Ukrainian national flag. Moreover, four plaques, one on each side, were attached to the obelisk. They read: “Eternal honour and glory to the heroes” (*Wieczna cześć i chwała bohaterom*), “God, Honour, Fatherland” (*Bóg Honor Ojczyzna*), “Glory to



Fig. 5–8: Interventions on the Monument to Heroes in the Poznań Citadel after February 2022. Photos: Łukasz Cynalewski (Agencja Wyborcza.pl).

Ukraine, Glory to Poland, 24 February 2022” (*Chwała Ukrainie Chwała Polsce 24.02.2022 r.*), and “National hero General Leon Dębski, Katyń” (*Bohater narodowy general Leon Dębski Katyń*, fig. 5–8). Dębski was a Polish general and a hero of the Greater Poland Uprising of 1918, who during World War II took part in the defence of Lviv (1939), after which he was arrested by the Soviets, placed on the “Ukrainian Katyń List” and murdered by the NKVD<sup>26</sup>. Recalling his name in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Polish anti-Russian protests was testimony to how palimpsestic the site became, how many historical layers intertwined here, and how an immediate connection between Poznań and Ukraine was established, placing both on the same side. Sometime later, on the original plaque attached to the obelisk with the quote from Stalin, a smaller plaque was attached, saying “Fuck Russians” (*Jebać Roskich*)<sup>27</sup>.

The city finally found a firm which agreed to clean off the paint. However, quickly a new inscription appeared, as the anniversary of the end of World War II

approached on 9 May 2022. On the relief below the obelisk, somebody painted the letter “Z” in red, a symbol of the Russian invasion of Ukraine often placed on Russian tanks. Next to it a sign with a swastika appeared, comparing Putin’s Russia and its acts to Hitler’s Germany and Nazi crimes. Below, in Russian, was painted the date 9 May. As the obelisk was always the site of celebrations of Victory Day during the communist times, these inscriptions seemed to build on this tradition, criticising that historical period, but ironically also drawing on it to address the current situation<sup>28</sup>.

Nevertheless, the red paint splashed on the obelisk on the first day of the war was removed, as the city decreed. The foil and the plaques were also at some point removed as the contract with a cleaning firm called for. However, the inscription comparing the Russian invasion to Nazism and 9 May did not disappear and was still there at the time of submitting this article. The only thing that city authorities agreed to do was to cover it up.



Fig. 9: Intervention on the Monument to Heroes in the Poznań Citadel in September 2022. Photo: Anna Topolska, 9 October 2022.

Another element which is still visible there was added in September 2022, to commemorate the Soviet invasion of Poland: graffiti reading “17.09.1939 We remember, Memory” (fig. 9). In this way, another comparison was made between the Soviet invasion of Poland in World War II, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This new intervention perfectly summarises the aggressive function of the obelisk in the city that was once “liberated” by the Soviet army in 1945.

Besides these spontaneous actions around the monument, there were also official ones. As early as February 2022, the chairman of the Poznań City Council, Grzegorz Ganowicz, sent a letter to the Greater Poland voivode, stating clearly: “I think that the time has come to remove the five-pointed star symbolising the Red Army and the Soviet Union from the obelisk that dominates the cemetery complex at the Poznań Citadel.”<sup>29</sup>

This proposal was supported by the mayor of Poznań. However, it turned out to be impossible to officially remove the bronze star as, according to

international agreements, the Russian embassy would have to officially allow this: the agreement of 22 February 1994 includes cooperation in the field of preserving graves and memorial sites for victims of wars and repressions, including monuments. The Polish Ministry of Culture and the National Institute of Cultural Heritage gave its answer, explaining that, in this case,

*“the prohibition of promoting communism or another totalitarian system in the names of organisational units, auxiliary units of communes, buildings, public utility facilities and equipment, and through monuments does not apply to monuments located in cemeteries or other resting places.”<sup>30</sup>*

Hence, nothing could be done officially. But in September 2022, apart from the above-mentioned new inscriptions, somebody painted the star yellow (fig. 9), which ironically made it a literal astrological star symbol, deprived of its political associations.

The efficacy of the described interventions resides primarily in the mnemonic process, characterised by interaction among diverse strata. Significance emerges through the layering of these strata, each corresponding to specific temporal junctures. Elements are perceived within the context of earlier constituents and interventions. The Soviet memorial in Poznań thus assumed a contemporary anti-war significance through surrounding activities, but, at the same time, such transformations hinge upon the overarching historical dimension. Therefore, these interventions possess a palimpsestic nature, and it is precisely this characteristic that imbues them with potency. From the Soviet alteration of the Prussian cemetery, resulting in the establishment of a memorial and a separate burial ground, to the appropriation of territory symbolising authority, to the subsequent vandalism of the Soviet memorial in response to the Ukrainian conflict, the site in Poznań evolved into a significant memory palimpsest with inherent agency.

### **Monument to the Liberation of the Land of Warmia and Masuria, Olsztyn**

A different situation occurred in the city of Olsztyn in north-east Poland. The debate, which included both





Fig. 10: Monument to the Liberation of the Land of Warmia and Masuria (formerly known as the Monument of Gratitude to the Red Army) in Olsztyn, colloquially known as “the gallows”. Photo: I. Serdell (Wikimedia Commons), 2007.

local and national media, was prompted by the decision of the Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Piotr Gliński, on 23 January 2023 to exclude the Monument of the Liberation of the Land of Warmia and Masuria from the list of registered monuments<sup>31</sup>. Erected in 1954, it was designed by Xavery Dunkowski (fig. 10). It commemorates the entry of the Soviet army into Olsztyn. The monument is carved with typical scenes from battles during World War II, including a tank and a silhouette of a soldier, as well as other scenes reflecting Socialist Realism: farm and industrial labour, plus the sickle and hammer: the emblem of the USSR. According to Polish legislation, there are a few valid reasons for deleting a monument from the register. In the case of physical removal, there are mainly two reasons: when the monument has been damaged to an extent that it has lost its historical, artistic or scientific significance, or when new research fails to support its original significance<sup>32</sup>.

In his statement, Gliński explained that monuments in public areas aimed to protect the shared memory of important events or figures from a spe-

cific community’s standpoint: the problem lay in the fact that monuments dedicated to the Red Army were designed to promote a communist perspective on history<sup>33</sup>. When evaluating the monument, he opined that its aesthetics were influenced “by the style of Socialist Realism”, which made its interpretation clear: it was automatically linked to the communist system via its aesthetics and not its message. Thus, the decision to remove the monument was justified due to the historical and propaganda context of its unveiling. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage instructed the Warmia and Masuria voivodeship to promptly implement the decision. In consequence, in late January 2023, the voivode issued a decision instructing the commune to remove the memorial of gratitude to the Red Army from the city centre. Gliński referred to the law forbidding the propagation of communism and other totalitarian regimes, and said: “the existence of this type of object in public space violates the constitutional principles of independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Poland”<sup>34</sup>. The execution of this decision is still pending, but the statement itself says:

*“The issue of removing the monument commemorating the soldiers of the Red Army is an important matter of state for Poland, especially in the international context of Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Leaving the monument in a representative place in a Polish city makes it essentially a symbol of the rule and domination of the USSR over Poland, and at the same time legitimises Russian military conquests.”<sup>35</sup>*

This directness and immediacy of action provoked a reaction from Robert Traba, a history professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and the chairman of the Polish-German Textbook Commission and of the Olsztyn Borussia Cultural Community: “This is not just a local issue [...]. We are fighting against the dictate of politics over history”<sup>36</sup>. Traba posted a video on YouTube entitled *For Freedom of Historical Debate*, in which he says: “I would not like our history to be cleansed to [the point of only including] symbols that correspond to the current government”<sup>37</sup>. He made a proposal to transform the meaning of the monument instead, in the direction of “agonistic memory”, which is intended to move away from the division between “us” (victims, good) and “them” (enemies, bad)<sup>38</sup>. He envisioned the memorial area as a museum commemorating war crimes in general, as a sort of an agora for debate: “Almost 80 years after the war, we should be able to be ‘not an authoritarian but a true democracy’, to tell the story associated with this monument.”<sup>39</sup> His proposal was rejected, however, and was additionally heavily criticised by the government-friendly media<sup>40</sup>.

But where is the “local” in that discussion? This question is important because citizenship in the community should be a way to resist top-down historical politics. And this resistance, or rather agency in the case of Olsztyn, was not visible. Even a brief analysis of this discourse shows that the debate took place primarily at the academic, expert and political levels. Thus, the idea of turning the monument into an agora for discussion was turned down.

### Other Actions in Poland

The contestation of Soviet heritage in the cultural landscapes of Polish territories has been, of course,

broader, and has taken place in all of the regions, in big cities, small towns and villages where Soviets had once marked their presence. As mentioned, the Institute of National Remembrance, whose director in March 2022 issued a statement encouraging local authorities to remove Soviet monuments in their municipalities<sup>41</sup>, anticipated around 60 monuments being officially removed in the near future.

35 of these have already been taken down under the institute’s auspices, which in some cases was preceded by grass-roots actions. In March 2022, the monument to the Victorious Red Army (erected in 1954) was destroyed by individuals in the Koszalin cemetery<sup>42</sup>, where a truck was used to knock down the statue. In the same month, a similar action took place with a monument in Toruń: the Tribute to Red Army Heroes (erected in 1959, created by Witold Marciniak)<sup>43</sup>; the Institute of National Remembrance offered its support. Monuments were also taken down in the cemeteries of Radom<sup>44</sup>, Krosno<sup>45</sup> (both May 2022) and Kartuzy<sup>46</sup> (January 2023). In some cases, only certain elements were removed, e.g. in Elbląg the sickle and hammer from the Monument of Gratitude to the Red Army (Agrykola street, erected in 1945) as early as on 25 February 2022<sup>47</sup>.

In Malbork, somebody sprayed vulgar slogans on the Monument to the Red Army (Sikorskiego street, erected in 1945) on 6 March 2022<sup>48</sup>. The debate in this town became heated, and the authorities were challenged. In consequence, they consulted the Institute of National Remembrance and steps were taken to remove the site from the list of the historical monuments of the voivodeship that prevented any legal action. The institute supervised the removal in August 2022. The Vice-Minister of State Assets, Karol Rabenda, said at the event: “This is a historical moment, a conclusion of the process of decommunisation in Malbork [...]. There should not be a place in the Polish public space for symbols of Russian or Soviet imperialism.”<sup>49</sup>

A similar action was carried out at the same time in Szczecin Dąbie, where an official event for demolishing their monument was organised<sup>50</sup>. Support for local governments or individual initiatives by the Institute of National Remembrance was provided, among other places, in Brzeg (for a monument removal in

August 2022)<sup>51</sup>, Chorzowice (in March 2023), Głubczyce<sup>52</sup> and Jodłowno<sup>53</sup> (both in May 2023) as a response to a petition submitted by the local community. In addition, on 20 April 2022 Soviet monuments were demolished in the villages of Garncarsko (in Lower Silesia), Międzybłocie and Siedlec (in the Wielkopolskie voivodeship)<sup>54</sup>. In October 2022 the same happened in the village of Mokre (in the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship)<sup>55</sup>.

The institute also voiced support for the mayor of Rzeszów, where a problem with a Soviet Monument of Gratitude to the Red Army (erected in 1951)<sup>56</sup> occurred after February 2022. In April 2022, in response to social pressure, the mayor decided that the monument would be moved from the city centre to a cemetery<sup>57</sup>, obtaining the voivode's approval and financial support. However, so far the monument has not been removed from its site, and in August 2023 a banner was placed there, reading "stop the glorification of barbarians".

## Conclusions

The recent extensive Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited discussions on the significance of Soviet heritage across the post-Soviet region, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. This discourse, along with the actions taken against monuments, can be viewed as an ongoing effort to explore, layer and reveal meanings linked to the communist past of these countries. Employing the interpretive lenses of palimpsests and postcolonial theory, we observe that both concepts involve a sequential process of revealing and reinstating.

The challenges to Soviet heritage within the cultural landscapes of Polish territories have been extensive, occurring across various regions, encompassing both major urban centres and smaller towns and villages where Soviet influence previously existed. The activity of the Institute of National Remembrance and the notion of "local" engagement within this discourse is noteworthy: community activism is envisioned as a means to counteract top-down historical policies, yet this resistance, or rather the agency – as demonstrated in the case of Olsztyn in particular – remains inconsequential. A brief examination of this discourse reveals that the debate predominantly occurs not in

the society at large, but is limited to the academic, expert and political levels. Consequently, the proposal to transform the monument into an agora for discussion was rejected. But it was not the case everywhere.

The effectiveness of the interventions discussed primarily resides in the mnemonic process, characterised by interactions among diverse strata. Significance materialises through the layering of these strata, each corresponding to specific temporal junctures, as well as through a superimposition of one inscription over another being in constant interplay and thus constituting a palimpsest, as the close analysis of the Monument to Heroes in Poznań and the particular bottom-up activity present there showed. The recent wave of reinterpretation of Soviet heritage in Poland has become a visible layer in its palimpsestic cultural landscape, bringing back previous discussions, but also starting new ones.

## Endnotes

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6. E.g. Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen, “Multimodal Palimpsests: Ideology, (Non-)memory, Affect and the Senses in Cultural Landscapes Construction in Eastern and Central Europe”, in: *European Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2022, pp. 447–453. See also the rest of this issue.
7. Lieven Ameel, Jens Martin Gurr and Barbara Buchenau, “Palimpsest”, in: *Narrative in Urban Planning: A Practical Field Guide*, eds. Lieven Ameel, Jens Martin Gurr and Barbara Buchenau, Bielefeld 2023, p. 69.
8. Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, New York / Oxford 2013, p. 4.
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16. Joanna Figuła-Czech, “Pomnik Bohaterów” [The Monument to Heroes], in: *Kronika Miasta Poznania*, no. 4 (special issue: Cytadela), 2011, p. 246.
17. Głos Wielkopolski quoted from Piotr Bojarski, “Na tropie gwiazdy czerwonej” [Searching for the red star], in: *Kronika Miasta Poznania*, no. 4, 2011, p. 251.
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21. For a more thorough account, see Anna Topolska, “Visualizing the Memory of World War II: Photographs from Fort VII in Poznań, Poland”, in: *The Polish Review*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2017, pp. 55–72.
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23. Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*, Bloomington 2009, p. 111.
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28. See *ibid.*, <https://poznan.naszemiasto.pl/litera-z-i-swastyka-pomnik-bohaterow-na-cytadeli-w-poznaniu/ga/c1-8810433/zd/71278077> (last accessed 17.12.2023).
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## Abstract

This article aims to show the diverse avenues of the debates over Russian and Soviet heritage in Poland. While the Soviet monuments have been broadly contested – either as bottom-up or top-down initiatives – tsarist Russian heritage has been less visible in the discussions. In 2022 the country became a memory battlefield, adding layers to already palimpsestic memory sites. We provide both an overview of this process and a close reading of selected sites, concentrating primarily on the Monument to Heroes in Poznań and the Monument to the Liberation of the Land of Warmia and Masuria in Olsztyn. Moreover, this article looks at the role the Institute of National Remembrance has played since March 2022 in urging local authorities to dismantle Soviet monuments within their municipalities. The official removal of approximately 60 monuments across Poland is anticipated in the near future. 35 have already been dismantled by late 2023, sometimes following grass-roots initiatives. Our article examines this interpretive framework through the lenses of palimpsests and postcolonial theory. Characterised by the sequential actions of divulging and reinstating, palimpsests tangibly disclose latent historical imprints, while decolonisation endeavours to expose and revive suppressed narratives and meanings.

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## Title

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