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Colourful Transformations of Soviet War Memorials in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

“I think they are stupid because it is a national monument. And national monuments are supposed to be green and not painted”, said a 10-year-old schoolboy, Adam Hájek, about the pink transformation of Tank No. 23, located in Kinsky Square in Prague, in 1991¹. His statement reveals the prevailing perception of monuments, which is not limited to children, but extends to a significant part of the society. Two days after the pink intervention, the soldiers of the Prague army corps repainted the tank its original green for the upcoming May Day celebrations. But what aesthetic attributes should monuments embody if they are not green or grey?

This conventionalised perception is further accentuated in the context of military memorials that are built to commemorate those who lost their lives and to remind us of the horrors of war. However, besides commemorating an important event or person, memorials have powerful communicative capacity. Street art and graffiti certainly disrupt the ordinary perceptions and uses of public space. This article asks: Why do instances of colour transformations and graffiti on memorials occur in the first place, and what do these alterations symbolise? What is the reason for changing the conventional colour typically associated with memorials in such a way? Furthermore, how does society interpret and comprehend these changes?

Graffiti is made mostly by anonymous authors who express their opinions on certain phenomena, events or current problems in society. The walls of buildings, streets and monuments serve as their “canvases”, through which the “message” spreads much faster than in gallery space, for example. Graffiti produces a very particular space for an eventual dialogue and discussion on a certain topic: it not only changes the visual appearance of monuments, but also their very function as commemoration objects. In parallel with their official purposes, a new use of these objects thus emerges in the form of street art, which someti-

mes parodies stereotypes that have been established over the years.

In dealing with graffiti, it is inevitable to discuss important aspects of its perception either as a form of artistic expression or, conversely, as an act of vandalism. Of course, the meaning of graffiti should not be over simplified, nor should it be presented exclusively as a protest against political culture (there is a lot of apolitical graffiti in the public space expressing the immediate feelings of the author, whether in the form of illegible abstract works or expressions of love). However, the message of graffiti is not the only thing that matters: considerable attention should be paid to the specific form and context in which graffiti appears.

When the object that becomes the “canvas” for the graffiti maker happens to be dedicated to the Soviet army, the general interest in the phenomenon naturally increases. Soviet war memorials are mainly associated with the political regime, and thus graffiti on these has become highly attractive to the media. One could even deduce that the more often graffiti on memorials appears in newspapers and other channels of public media, the more it is being used to spread a particular kind of message by activists.

The main aim of this article² is to examine the role of the war monument as an agent in the communication processes manifested through graffiti, and to elucidate its significance in the context of multiple historical periods of social upheaval and crisis. The text is divided into three parts, analysing the phenomenon of graffiti on Soviet war memorials during various historical epochs within the Czechoslovakian context. The first part of the text examines the existence of graffiti prior to 1989, during the period of the communist regime; the year 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops are of particular importance in this context. Secondly, my focus shifts to the period of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, examining the transformation of Czechoslovak public spaces during

the revolutionary upheavals and the impacts of the new political and societal changes on Soviet monuments in particular. The final section examines the phenomenon of very recent graffiti interventions on Soviet war memorials, which have increasingly become a flashpoint, particularly in times of crisis relevant to Russia's international policy and its resonance in the former Czechoslovakia. Finally I examine the differences after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, when the two countries – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic – began to adopt different approaches to cultural and historical heritage.



Fig. 1: Soviet war memorial Victory in Bratislava in August 1968. Reproduction: Nation's Memory Institute, Slovakia.

The Effects of the Prague Spring in 1968 on Soviet War Memorials

The phenomenon of graffiti and tagging was manifested in Eastern Europe during the communist regime, particularly during the tumultuous events of 1968,

which marked the invasion of Czechoslovak territory by Warsaw Pact troops. The authorities adopted a decidedly hostile attitude towards these kinds of expressions, categorising graffiti as vandalism imported from the West and perceived as a danger to the traditional doctrines of socialist ideology. This negative perception of graffiti continues to this day, despite evolving perspectives that increasingly recognise graffiti as a vehicle for free expression and the articulation of opposing voices in certain contexts.

Yet, in August 1968, the public space became the focus of social change and the growing resistance of the population to the presence of armed foreign troops in Czechoslovakia, which provoked a sense of shock, dissent and aggressive violation of the integrity of Czechoslovak society. The main meeting places for citizens to express their disapproval were squares and other public spaces, where statues, monuments and other reminders of historical events were usually placed. As a result, memorials became the perfect targets for expressions of disagreement and resistance.

Statues associated with the Soviet Union were often damaged, removed or, less dramatically, modified during August 1968. In the heart of Bratislava, near Hviezdoslav Square, stands the Victory Monument to Liberation by the Red Army (erected in 1946; sculptor Jozef Kostka). Depicting a woman, this statue, together with its massive pedestal, became an ideal platform for various slogans (fig. 1). In August 1968, two slogans in Russian appeared on it. On the front of the pedestal, in white, it said "Russians, go home!" (*русские идите домой*). Above the official text – "Bratislava is grateful to the Soviet Army Liberator" – was added in large letters "Father liberator" (*Отец освободитель*), and below it the inscription "Son occupier!" (*Сын захватчик*).

The same slogan also covered the main entrance at another monument in Bratislava, also dedicated to the Soviet army, located at the Slavín military cemetery, which I will discuss below. At the bottom right was written "1945 – liberator" (*освободитель*), while at the same level on the left appeared "1968 – occupier" (*захватчик*).

Statues of Lenin were another type of monument associated with the Soviet Union and the communist

regime. One of these (erected in 1966; authors Vladimír Relich and Jan Lauda) was located in the central square of Karlovy Vary, in front of the Hotel Central. Since August 1968 it displayed a protest banner with the inscription “Freedom – Dubček”³ (*Svoboda – Dubček*)⁴. Simultaneously, the pedestal of the statue was decorated with a black funeral ribbon. In contrast to many other monuments, this statue remained in its original location and was otherwise relatively undamaged during the protests⁵ (fig. 2). It was removed from the public space in 1990.



Fig. 2: Monument of Lenin in Karlovy Vary during the protest in 1968. Reproduction: Památky a příroda Karlovarska. Regionální internetová topografická encyklopedie Karlovarského kraje.

The Soviet soldier figure of Karlovy Vary’s Soviet War Memorial (completed in 1952; architect Alois Sopr), which stood near the Lenin statue, was seriously damaged in 1968. On the first day of the occupation, a crowd of about 400 young people vented their frustration on the statue of the Soviet soldier. Initially, the protesters covered the soldier’s head with a white

sheet, and then succeeded in toppling the entire statue. The soldier’s body dramatically fell in front of the pedestal into a flower arrangement next to it. The fallen statue of the soldier was left on the ground, surrounded by flowers and palm trees. Protesters placed banners in this area of the park with the words “go home” (*идите домой*), “1939” etc. Only the empty massive pedestal with the inscriptions “Freedom” and “Away with the liberators” (*Прыч с освободител*), wrapped in a Czechoslovak flag, remained there⁶. A replica of the destroyed soldier statue was returned to the pedestal in 1970 (fig. 3). At the end of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the statue was relocated to a cemetery.

The Collapse of the Communist Regime in 1989

The fall of socialist dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe resulted in the radical reshaping of public spaces, including the shrines of communist propaganda: monuments, statues and busts. In December 1989, a widespread removal campaign of symbols of the communist regime began. While Soviet war memorials were the subject of much debate as to whether they should be removed or kept in the public sphere, reaching a consensus on their future remained elusive. In general, Czechoslovakia did not deny the role of the Soviet army in the liberation of its territory. The only exceptions were the western regions of Czechoslovakia and the debate over the liberation of the capital, Prague⁷.

The numerous instances of graffiti that appeared on monuments during or just after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 reflected the atmosphere in society and the desire for change. The graffiti was in reference not so much to the historical events to which the monuments were dedicated, as to the condemnation of the period during which they were erected. Many inscriptions that then occurred openly compared two totalitarian – Nazi and communist – regimes. Often, there were also contradictory slogans next to each other: for example, “Death to fascism!” next to “Long live the leader!” Depictions of the symbols of Nazism in the form of swastikas set in five-pointed stars or such slogans as “Swastika = Five-pointed Star” in an equivalent position also became relatively frequent. The walls of some of these controversial objects were



Fig. 3: Soviet war memorial in Karlovy Vary. Photo: Vojtěch Terber (reproduction: Socharství.info. Informační portál věnovaný modernímu a současnému sochařství v České republice).

almost totally covered with messages and various drawings⁸.

Perhaps more so than in 1968, however, graffiti was then interpreted in multiple ways. For some Czechoslovak citizens, graffiti on monuments and statues served as a visual chronicle of the collective experience and ethos of a particular generation. For others, the choice of monuments as a canvas for graffiti was a consequence of their conspicuousness in public space⁹. The selection of these particular objects for graffiti was explained by the character of the monuments – as emblematic symbols of the past regime. Such messages and omnipresent graffiti, whether political, cultural or commercial, indirectly reduced the value of the objects of the former regime, and thereby the essence of these sacred places was gradually effectively de-sacralised.

Among the most famous street interventions in Czechoslovakia after 1989 was the repainting of Tank No. 23, which since 1945 had been on Kinsky Square in Prague. It was David Černý – today a famous artist, but at that time an art student – and the artistic group Neouchvátní who painted it pink on the night of 28 April 1991 (fig. 4). They were accused of vandalism and prosecuted for damaging a cultural monument. As one of the group members commented: “I have deep respect for the victims of Soviet soldiers, but I

believe that their memory should not be commemorated by a tank. A tank will always remain an instrument of war, even if it is placed on a pedestal”¹⁰.

A contingent of art theorists defended Černý’s action: “Painting a tank, used to kill people, pink, the colour whose emotional power and symbolic meaning must be understood as contradictory to the meaning of this terrible weapon, is the author’s expression of non-violence.”¹¹ Indeed pink can be seen as evocative of childhood and innocence, contrasted strongly with the military green of equipment used to kill. Curiously, the restoration of the original green colour two days later provoked even more debate about the meaning of the tank in public space. After the May celebrations, a group of Federal Assembly members decided to take advantage of their parliamentary immunity, and repainted the monument pink¹².

The tank was removed from Kinsky Square on 13 June 1991, a month before it was removed from the list of national cultural monuments. The tank entered the collection of the Military Technical Museum in Prague, where it was protected by legislation on museums and galleries. In 2000, the museum cleaned and repainted the tank its original green colour.

The scandal of the early 1990s surrounding the repainting and relocation of the tank was also affected by political events in the former Czechoslovakia: at



Fig. 4: Postcard with tank of Soviet army in Prague, painted pink by the artistic group Neouchvátní, April 1990. Publisher: FANT, Grafobal Skalica.

the time, the society condemned the sale of military equipment to Syria, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia back to Russia began. Memories of the 1968 occupation by Soviet troops resonated more strongly in the society than memories of the 1945 liberation.

Moreover, in 2001, Černý proposed returning the tank to its previous place in a different form. He suggested placing the tank in the ground so that only the backside of the tank would stick out. His project, *Genetically Bred Tank*, was initially approved by Prague 5th district city council. However, this decision was later reversed in the face of negative reactions from the Russian Embassy, as well as from Prime Minister Miloš Zeman, who issued a statement regarding Černý's proposed artistic installation, claiming:

"The intention, which in itself lacks any artistic value and will disrupt the space of Kinský Square in an incongruous way, cannot be evaluated as a political event, as it was in 1990, triggering a discussion about the wider context of May 1945 and August 1968 in Prague. This time, as a repetition, it becomes a joke that is not funny, and is just an arrogant, ill-considered expression of the mentality of the sprayer generation, which lacks any empathy for or [...] knowledge of the historical context and the specific victims of World War II."¹³



Fig. 5: *Genetically Bred Tank* by David Černý at Kinsky Square in Prague, August 2008. Photo: Matěj Batha (Wikimedia Commons).

Given the disapproving position of the municipal authorities, Černý, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops, installed a simulated buried tank at the Bohdaneč spa, near the Czech town of Pardubice, instead.

Seven years later, in 2008, on the 40th anniversary of the entrance of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovak territory, Černý decided to install his work without the council's approval in Kinsky Square (fig. 5). On his replica of the pink tank was added a white stripe, the symbol of the occupation troops in 1968. In 2008, however, the white stripe also represented a protest against Russia's aggression in the Russian-Georgian conflict¹⁴.

In 2011, on the 20th anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia, Prague organised a festival called Freedom Week. As part of the programme, the tank was repainted pink again, after an agreement between the museum and Černý. The tank was visible on the river Vltava for two weeks (fig. 6). Through this gesture, it acquired a new form of remembrance: it did not commemorate the liberation of 1945, nor the occupation of 1968. In the words of Alexander Vondra, then Minister of Defence, the pink tank symbolised the political transformation after 1989 instead:



Fig. 6: The Pink Tank by David Černý, floating on the Vltava River during Freedom Week in June 2011. Photo: ŠJů (Wikimedia Commons).

“Painting the tank was [...] a certain act of expressing freedom. Twenty years have passed since then and it is good to remember some things; there is a new generation. The tank remains pink and we still have freedom, so let’s cherish it.”¹⁵

Renewed Attention to Soviet Army Memorials since 2014

After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, tensions between Russia and Eastern Europe escalated significantly. Russia’s war on Ukraine caused anger, which resulted in the appearance of the Ukrainian flag on Soviet war memorials in many places across Europe as a gesture of protest, along with tags, inscriptions and other forms of transformation and graffiti. Russia consistently condemned these acts as “vandalism” and the “desecration” of monuments to fallen soldiers. From the point of view of protecting historical and artistic monuments, colourful graffiti can indeed seriously damage these works. But can graffiti serve

as a tool of protest and free expression? The following two examples from the Czech Republic are particularly revealing.

In May 2015, a giant heart in the colours of the Ukrainian national flag was placed on the Soviet war memorial in the Czech town of Brno (erected in 1955 on Moravian Square; authors Vincent Makovský, Bohuslav Fuchs and Antonín Kurial), a day before the official commemorations of the end of World War II. The blue and yellow heart was painted by an unknown person during the day. A professional company cleaned the paint off within a few hours¹⁶. After this incident, municipal police officers patrolled the area until the beginning of the commemoration ceremony.

A similar incident occurred again in December 2015, when a new inscription was added in the same place in Brno. A quote in the Cyrillic alphabet appeared in the comment bubble, insulting Russia’s President (fig. 7, 8). The vulgar phrase “Putin is a dickhead!”



Fig. 7: Soviet war memorial on Moravian Square, Brno, March 2012. Photo: Michal Klajban (Wikimedia Commons).

(*Путин хуйло!*) has become a popular Ukrainian way of describing him¹⁷. Some have not hesitated to include it among well-known historic patriotic slogans, such as “Yes We Can” and “Vive La Révolution”¹⁸.

The same heart in Ukrainian blue and yellow reappeared on the Brno monument in February 2022, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. This time, however, the city decided to keep the graffiti on the monument and not clean it off¹⁹.

Another colourful intervention resulting from Russia’s expansionist foreign policy occurred on the controversial monument dedicated to Marshal Ivan Konev on Interbrigade Square in Prague. The statue was erected by two sculptors, Zdeněk Krybus and Vratislav Růžička, in Prague’s 6th district during the “normalisation period” in 1980²⁰. Since 1989, the monument has represented the problematic heritage of the communist era. In 2007, the Czech authorities considered relocating it under the pretext of reconstruction work in the area. They also planned to reduce the height of the pedestal²¹. Nothing was done in the end, even though the monument was not classified as a war monument and had no national or international protection.

Nevertheless, the monument has often been vandalised. In 2014, pink paint was poured over the monument. In 2015, the sentence “Heil Putin?” was

painted on the pedestal²². The pedestal became the target of another attack in November 2017, when an unknown perpetrator spray-painted four dates on each of its four sides. In red paint were written the years 1956 (associated with Konev’s active participation in the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising), 1961 (signifying his role in Berlin during the construction of the Berlin Wall), 1968 (mentioned in connection with Konev’s reconnaissance activities before the invasion of Warsaw Pact military units), and 2017 (the year of the graffiti intervention itself)²³.



Fig. 8: Inscription “Putin khuiolo!” on the Soviet war memorial on Moravian Square, Brno, December 2015. Photo: Jana Soukupová (Mladá Fronta DNES).



Fig. 9: Statue of Marshal Konev in Prague, August 2019. Photo: Tomasz Peszynski (Český rozhlas).

About six months later, in spring 2018, during the celebrations to mark the end of World War II, two dates – 1956 and 1968 – were painted on the pedestal, along with “The one who never shot” (*Ten, který nikdy nevystřelil*). The statue of Konev was covered in pink by a group called the Czech Patriots, who claimed responsibility for the act. In their public statement, they condemned the misuse of the heroism of Soviet army soldiers by communist ideology, as well as the uncritical view of the figure of Marshal Konev²⁴.

The Konev monument is owned by the Prague 6th municipal district, which takes care of and finances its maintenance, and decides on its future. The 6th district discussed whether to remove the monument a few months after the start of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, in 2015. In November 2017, the Prague 6th district assembly approved the placement of a short biography of Konev on the statue’s pedestal instead, with the aim of providing additional historical context and fully illustrating his historical contribution to Prague. A bronze plaque containing Czech text along with two smaller inscriptions in English and Russian were installed on the monument’s pedestal in 2018, during the 50th anniversary of the Prague

Spring of 1968²⁵. This did not satisfy either the opponents or the supporters of the statue.

A year after the installation of these plaques, in August 2019, the monument was painted red and an inscription appeared on the lower pedestal: “No to the bloody marshal. We will not forget” (*Ne krvavému maršálovi. Nezapomeneme*; fig. 9). Unknown people also added “‘45 ‘56 ‘68 ‘61” in white paint above the text. In response to this act, the municipal council of district 6 requested that the Embassy of the Russian Federation relocate the statue to its gardens: “To prevent damage to the monument, we have already done a lot, and despite the plaques explaining what Konev ‘achieved’ in his life, the vox populi has spoken clearly. Dejvice does not want Konev”²⁶.

As the Prague municipality had already refused to clean the paint off the statue of Konev again, the whole incident with the Russian Embassy was further complicated by pro-Russian activists who were unwilling to accept the disrespect shown to the monument and the marshal. They took it upon themselves to clean the statue²⁷. In response to this, the municipality had an anti-graffiti coating applied to the monument and erected scaffolding around it with a banner

that read: “At this moment, this is the only effective way to protect the statue from further vandalism.”²⁸ The banner was repeatedly removed and reinstalled by supporters of the two opposing groups. In September 2019, the municipal council of Prague 6 decided to relocate the statue to a memory institution, the planned Museum of the 20th Century, to be established in Prague²⁹.

The city finally decided to remove the Konev statue entirely from its original location during the pandemic in 2020³⁰. Only an empty pedestal, covered with wooden boards to protect it from potential acts of vandalism, remained in place. But the war of messages between the two camps continued, this time on the pedestal. Despite the protective measures, such inscriptions as “Konev = liberator, Konev = murderer” and “Konev is a murderer and occupier” continued to appear³¹. On 9 May 2020, a toilet was installed where the statue of the marshal used to stand³². In November 2020, seven months after the removal of the statue, the pedestal was also dismantled by a decision of Prague district 6³³. In December 2022, a temporary statue of Vladimir Putin was erected on the site, with his right hand raised in a Nazi salute. This act was part of the “Gift for Putin” campaign aimed at collecting money to provide weapons to Ukraine³⁴ (fig. 10).

Soviet War Memorials after the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

After February 2022, the Ukrainian flag appeared on many monuments, buildings etc. around the world in solidarity with Ukraine and as a condemnation and expression of disapproval of Russia’s invasion of a sovereign state. The former Czechoslovak war memorials from the Soviet era were also often damaged or covered in paint, and the debate about the legitimacy of placing them in public spaces was reopened.

During the first week of the war, the Slavín War Memorial (designed by the architect Ján Svetlík and a team of artists) and the surrounding war cemetery (the complex was constructed in 1957–1960 on the site of a field cemetery, and inaugurated on the 15th anniversary of the city’s liberation) in the capital of Slovakia was painted in Ukrainian colours (fig. 11). This was the subject of much public debate, mainly because of Slavín’s reputation for pro-Russian activities. The mayor of Bratislava, Matúš Vallo, proposed that it would not help anyone to damage the monument with

paint: “We have many other ways to show support to each other, to Ukrainians and to the world, without dishonouring a place of remembrance and a national cultural monument. None of the dead at the Slavín are responsible for this war.”³⁵



Fig. 10: Campaign “Gift for Putin” to collect money for Ukraine, with a temporary statue on the empty pedestal of the former Marshal Konev monument in Prague, December 2022. Reproduction: Dárek pro Putina (Twitter).

The Russian embassy in Slovakia made accusations of desecration regarding the vandalism of the Slavín War Memorial and started a criminal investigation of the perpetrators³⁶. This is particularly ironic, given that a few days later, Russians destroyed the Holocaust memorial in Babyn Yar, Ukraine. According to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, anyone damaging a military monument – including outside of Russian territory – faces up to five years in prison and fines of up to five million roubles. The Slovak foreign ministry told Moscow to face the reality of huge public solidarity with Ukraine, attacked without reason by the Russian Federation³⁷. However, the blue and yellow graffiti did not remain on the Slavín War Memorial for long: the city decided to clean it off³⁸.



Fig. 11: Slavín Soviet war memorial in Bratislava, March 2022. Reproduction: Matúš Vallo má rád Bratislavu (Facebook).

Many other monuments to the Soviet army were draped in Ukrainian flags in the first weeks of the war, mostly as spontaneous reactions by citizens expressing their support for Ukraine. In some cases, however, the decision to wrap Soviet war monuments in Ukrainian flags was taken by city authorities at the request of their citizens. For example, the Monument to the Red Army, depicting a soldier (also known as the Victory Memorial, erected in 1952; authors Konrád Babraj and Jaromír Sirotek), on Marian Square in the Czech town of Znojmo was draped in Ukrainian colours on the very first day of Russian aggression in Ukraine, 24 February 2022³⁹. The town announced that the Ukrainian flag would remain on the statue throughout the period of military hostilities in Ukraine. There was also a protest by citizens near the monument, with signs saying “Occupiers, go home” – the same message that had appeared in Czechoslovakian cities in 1968 (fig. 12).

Another Czech town, Žďár nad Sázavou, had the Ukrainian flag attached to the pedestal of the Monument to the Victims of World War II (unveiled in 1955, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the liberation; author Konrád Babaj) by its own deputies. After the flag disappeared from the pedestal, the town leaders agreed to create a cape for the Soviet soldier

made from the Ukrainian flag (fig. 13). With the help of a professional climber and a technician, they managed to wrap the statue completely. According to the council members, Žďár nad Sázavou was showing its solidarity with Ukraine’s precarious situation and therefore this act was not an attack on Russia or its citizens: the monument was dedicated not only to Russians, but to soldiers of all nationalities who formed the Red Army. The many protests against the attack on Ukraine held in front of the monument subsequently intensified the debate about its possible removal from the urban public space⁴⁰.

In the Czech town of Přibyslav, a symbolic war erupted over the placement of the Ukrainian flag and its removal from the Soviet Army Monument (created in 1948 from an existing World War I monument, when a Red Army soldier’s statue was added by the artist Karel Samohrd). After several confrontations in which the Ukrainian flag appeared and then disappeared again, the town first decided to wrap the statue in foil. However, Přibyslav then took the somewhat radical decision to relocate the statue to a depository in early March 2022. According to Mayor Martin Kamarád, the most problematic element of the monument was the visual representation of a soldier holding a semi-automatic rifle and wearing a red star



Fig. 12: Statue of a Soviet soldier in Znojmo, February 2022. Photo: Dagmar Sedláčková (Znojemský Deník).



Fig. 13: Statue of a Soviet soldier in Žďár nad Sázavou, March 2022. Photo: Helena Zelená Křížová (Žďárské vrchy).

on his cap: “We do not think it would be right to welcome the (Ukrainian) refugees on their arrival in Přebyslav with a Soviet soldier holding a machine gun. We also want to calm the situation, as the site of the statue has been unusually crowded in recent days.”⁴¹ The city council stated that by removing the problematic part of the object, they wanted to protect not only the statue but also the people who were climbing on it⁴² (fig. 14).

The Přebyslav monument is listed as a cultural monument, which means that the Czech Monuments Board must approve any changes, while the Ministry of Defence is also responsible for dealing with monuments that represent war and military history. Despite this, a professional company removed the statue of the soldier, using heavy machinery, in March 2022. However, after the removal of the bronze soldier the lower part, made of sandstone, remained. In August 2022, graffiti in the colours of a Russian flag with the phrase “Death to Ukraine!” appeared there, next to

the official inscription “1914–1945”⁴³. The removal of the graffiti from the monument was carried out in accordance with a directive issued by the town council. Following this action, the municipality considered the possibility of relocating the entire monument to another site less frequented by the public, or alternatively to a local cemetery. In the summer of 2022, the town council launched a competitive process to seek proposals for the renovation of the square, with the aim of restoring its functionality as a civic space. It is worth noting that the document relating to this initiative makes no explicit reference to the monument in question⁴⁴.

In the Czech town of Litoměřice, the inscription “1945 liberator, 1968 occupier, 2022 killer of children” (1945 osvoboditel, 1968 okupant, 2022 vrah dětí) appeared in March 2022 on the pedestal of the monument Honour and Glory to the Soviet Army, depicting a Red Army soldier (dedicated in 1975 on the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia; author Otakar Petroš)⁴⁵. Seven months later, in October 2022, an unknown person painted the door of an automatic washing machine on the pedestal of the Soviet war memorial, in an apparent reference to the looting by Russian soldiers during the war in Ukraine (fig. 15). The initiators of this “modification” also added the colour red to symbolise a bleeding soldier⁴⁶. A few days later, someone repainted the pedestal in white and added an apology to the Ukrainians who had fought within the ranks of the Red Army. The city of Litoměřice removed the paint and placed an explanatory inscription to the monument:

“The statue from 1975 commemorates fallen soldiers from the Red Army during the liberation of Czechoslovakia in World War II. Many of these were, among other nations, Ukrainians. Therefore, this memorial commemorates the bravery and heroism of all nations that fought for our liberation in the ranks of the Red Army.”⁴⁷

In January 2023, another statement by the Litoměřice municipal authorities appeared above this official inscription: “This is currently being examined by a professional historical evaluation committee”⁴⁸. By declaring the beginning of research, the town thus



Fig. 14: Czech town Přebyslav expresses support for Ukraine, February 2022. Photo: Michael Omes (Přebyslav, oficiální web města).



Fig. 15: Statue of a Soviet soldier in Litoměřice, October 2022. Reproduction: Saint Javelin (Twitter).

signalled the intention to contextualise the statue within its historical framework. This should include the installation of either a new information plaque or something more elaborate to enhance the historical relevance of the statue. Considered a symbol of occupation and a vulgar celebration of the Soviet army, responsible for the occupation of several countries and the loss of innumerable human lives, a new civic initiative was formed at that time with the aim of removing the monument altogether⁴⁹. On the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, as well as the symbolic celebration of the victory that was commemorated during communism, this civic initiative organised a happening near the statue⁵⁰. The organisers of the demonstration launched a petition and collected signatures from citizens. Their main goal, as stated in the petition, was to “legally remove this symbol of occupation and normalisation, which is a disgrace (not only) to Litoměřice”⁵¹. However, the mayor was reluctant to support the removal of the monument, and it remains for now in its current location.

Conclusion

Graffiti on monuments merits our attention because it is a specific tool for expressing opinions and emotions. It has the ability to amaze, disturb and intrigue us. During political changes, international crises and social tensions, the visual appearance of monuments tends to undergo significant modifications. Graffiti interventions certainly disrupt their commemorative role. Alongside this official function, a new form of street art often emerges in such moments that parodies long-established stereotypes. The huge quantity of graffiti that appears on monuments during various crises primarily reflects the current mood in society and the desire for reaction and change.

Graffiti aims to express an opinion on controversial issues in contemporary society. For some people, graffiti is provocative art. These people are not usually satisfied with just one interpretation – i.e. the commemorative role – of Soviet army memorials. For others, the inscriptions and colourful transformations on the memorials show disrespect for those who gave their lives for the freedom of others. Soviet army memorials continue to be perceived as paying honour to the fallen, but they are also seen as symbols of Russian domination.

Soviet war memorials were not completely ignored after 1989. Since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into two separate states in 1993, memory politics in relation to cultural and historical heritage have developed slightly differently in the two states, and a comparison of the reactions of Czech and Slovak societies and political leaders to the graffiti on monuments clearly reveals these differences. While in Slovakia a certain conservatism and restraint can be observed among political leaders in their statements on controversial issues and in their reactions to various interventions on monuments, the Czech Republic has adopted a more radical position.

This became evident in 2014 and 2022, when the Soviet monuments returned to the centre of discussions with new vigour due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, making this contrast particularly visible. Whereas in Czechia, Soviet war memorials are viewed more from a contemporary political perspective, dominated by current geopolitical situations in the world and with regard to Russia, Slovak society is more vulnerable to Russian propaganda and hoaxes. From a historical point of view, the territory of Slovakia was liberated by the Red Army during World War II and shortly after, so the Slovak society has had fewer qualms about the monuments of the Soviet army in its public spaces: the traditional perception of the almost untouchable master narrative of World War II, enforced by the communist regime, has not really changed since 1989.

Endnotes

1. Quoted from the survey of the weekly magazine *Květy*, 30.5.1991.
2. This publication was created in the framework of the "Programme of Support for Promising Human Resources – Postdoctoral Fellows" at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences (project no. L300632201) and the grant "Political Socialization in the Territory of Slovakia during the Years 1848–1993" at the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (project no. APVV-20-0526, funded by the Agency for the Support of Research and Development).
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4. The meaning is ambiguous: it can refer to freedom, but also to Ludvík Svoboda, the president of Czechoslovakia during the revival process.
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 Fig. 2: Památky a příroda Karlovarska. Regionální internetová topografická encyklopedie Karlovarského kraje.
 Fig. 3: Socharstvi.info. Informační portál věnovaný modernímu a současnému sochařství v České republice.
 Fig. 4: FANT, Grafobal Skalica.
 Fig. 5: Matěj Bat'ha (Wikimedia Commons).
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 Fig. 8: Jana Soukupová (Mladá Fronta DNES).
 Fig. 9: Tomasz Peszynski (Český rozhlas).
 Fig. 10: Dárek pro Putina (Twitter).
 Fig. 11: Matúš Vallo má rád Bratislavu (Facebook).
 Fig. 12: Dagmar Sedláčková (Znojemský Deník).
 Fig. 13: Helena Zelená Křížová (Žďárské vrchy).
 Fig. 14: Michael Omes (Přibyslav – oficiální web města).
 Fig. 15: Saint Javelin (Twitter).

Abstract

Besides commemorating an important event or person, memorials have powerful communicative capacities. The difference between graffiti and memorials is obvious: graffiti is known for being provocative and not durable – it is ephemeral and emerges from the street, while monuments are erected "permanently", often by a political power. From the perspective of protecting historical and artistic monuments, colourful graffiti may significantly damage them. Nevertheless, graffiti is a tool of protest, free expression and communication. Since 1968 citizens have often vividly expressed their feelings through demonstrations and street interventions in the form of graffiti and painting monuments, especially those associated with the Soviet Union. The aim of this paper is to analyse the function of the Soviet war memorials in the territory of the former Czechoslovakia in terms of their roles as communicators, reflected in the form of graffiti during both domestic and international crises and conflicts in the past half century.

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Title

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