Mischa Gabowitsch

Mimetic De-commemoration

The Fate of Soviet War Memorials in Eastern Europe in 2022–2023

Monuments to soldiers who fought in the ranks of the Red Army in World War II are the most ubiquitous type of war memorial on the planet. The Soviet Union never had a single agency in charge of building, maintaining and cataloguing war memorials. Thus they were built by many different actors, such as military engineers, surviving family members, or Soviet and foreign sculptors and architects, and exist in a large variety of shapes and sizes, from small grave markers to huge memorial complexes. Since the beginning, the memorials have served multiple functions, from marking burial sites to geopolitics and propaganda. Their geography is just as vast: in addition to Eastern and Central Europe, the Red Army or individual Soviet soldiers were memorialised from France to North Korea in the post-war period. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many new memorials to Red Army soldiers have been built in the former Soviet Union, most notably in Russia and Belarus, but also in Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and several Central Asian states. Emigration from the former Soviet Union has even led to the creation of new Red Army memorials in such countries as the United States and Israel. The post-socialist period has also seen many new cataloguing efforts by both amateurs and professionals: the absence of a centralised Soviet war monuments commission meant that no unified register existed at the end of the Soviet era.

Soviet war memorials in a range of countries have been protected by international law, bilateral agreements and inclusion in national heritage lists. Still, a number of memorials were removed from public space between 1990 and 2022, especially in Central Europe, as several articles in this issue describe, as well as in such countries as Georgia and Uzbekistan. However, this was done much less systematically than for other types of socialist-era monuments, such as Lenin statues. Crucially, in most cases the decisions were taken locally and on a case-by-case basis. The main exception to this rule is Poland, whose then conservative government adopted a top-down policy of systematically removing monuments of gratitude to Red Army soldiers starting in 2017. However, across the former Soviet sphere of influence there were cases of vandalism, such as paint attacks, as well as artistic performances that strove to place the memorials in new contexts and re-examine such themes as militarism, nostalgia and propaganda. Finally, many war memorials across post-Soviet space in particular have been modified and appropriated both by local residents and by political activists or regimes. They have added emblems of the new post-Soviet nations, religious symbols or mementos of specific family members, resulting in individualisation, nationalisation or religious reinterpretations of Soviet war memorials[1].

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a new wave of attacks on monuments dating from the Soviet era. The scale of these attacks has been unprecedented in some places but much more modest in others. Press reports tend to distort the picture by suggesting that Soviet monuments are coming down "across Europe". This makes it important to introduce some distinctions before putting some of the observations made by the contributors to this issue in conversation with each other.

Mapping Iconoclasm

Between February 2022 and the end of 2023, multiple Soviet war memorials were removed in five countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. Whereas in Poland and the Baltic states the vast majority of such memorials have now been removed from public view or destroyed altogether, in Ukraine iconoclasm was more circumscribed, occurring most systematically in the Lviv region and more haphazardly across other areas of unoccupied Ukraine.

Two other countries saw the (partial or complete) dismantling of one such memorial each. In Bulgaria, the Russian aggression tipped the scales of a long-running debate in favour of a decision to move the 1954 Monument to the Soviet Army from central Sofia to an open-air Museum of Socialist Art: the initial plan was approved in March 2023, and the statue was relocated in December 2023[2]. In Czechia, a bronze statue of a Soviet soldier was removed from a war memorial in Přibyslav in March 2022, with the mayor claiming that this decision was temporary and served at least in part to protect the statue[3].

In many other countries, there were paint attacks, graffiti or other symbolic protests affecting Soviet war memorials, none of which amounted to destruction. Significantly, no (new) acts of removal of memorials to Red Army soldiers were reported from Moldova, the Caucasus or Central Asia. None were reported from the NATO member states Norway, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Italy, France or the United States, even though individual politicians in some of those countries publicly advocated removing some monuments or parts thereof[4]. Those who called for removal were often the same who had done so in the past. While their appeals now typically attracted more media attention, they were ultimately not heeded. In Hungary, Russian officials even unveiled several renovated or rebuilt monuments to Red Army soldiers after February 2022. A few days after one of them was dedicated in the village of Csák-berény, anti-war activists wrapped the memorial in black foil and attached the flags of Hungary, Ukraine (with the Hungarian-designed coat of arms of Carpathian Ukraine) and the EU to it in an act of protest[5].

As was the case before, the fate of war memorials needs to be distinguished from that of other types of Soviet-era statuary. In Finland, municipal authorities removed the World Peace Statue in Helsinki, donated by the city of Moscow in 1989, and Lenin statues in Turku and Kotka[6]. In Lithuania (and to a lesser extent in Latvia), monuments to members of the local Soviet-era intelligentsia generated the most controversy[7]. In Ukraine, a large-scale wave of monument removal swept away statues associated with Russian imperial control over the country, those celebrating "friendship and unity" between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, those honouring individuals associated with Russian dominance (such as General Aleksandr Suvorov and Empress Catherine the Great), and Russian cultural figures (such as the poet Aleksandr Pushkin). Wherever new decommunisation legislation was adopted, this typically included general provisions against publicly displayed Soviet symbols, such as five-pointed stars.

This kind of iconoclasm sometimes had sweeping effects, but it was not unprecedented: essentially it continued and widened the campaigns of statue removal and de-Sovietisation of public space that had already taken place in these and other countries before 2022, such as the wave of decommunisation in Ukraine after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.

Arguably the most significant change in 2022/2023 concerned attitudes towards Soviet war memorials. One way to describe this change is that war memorials, which had in practice constituted a category of their own due to their complex historical baggage and their frequent status as grave markers, increasingly became assimilated to other types of Soviet monuments for purposes of iconoclasm. Their status as grave-sites no longer played an important role, as reburial became routine.

As mentioned above, previous decisions to remove Soviet war memorials had usually been local and taken on a case-by-case basis. Poland, starting in October 2017, was the major exception to this rule, since the conservative Polish government gave the Institute of National Remembrance and regional governors broad authority to enforce the removal of Soviet war memorials even against the wishes of local authorities. What has happened since February 2022 in the Baltic countries and the Lviv region in Western Ukraine can be described as a Polonisation of de-commemoration. The earlier Polish model of top-down statue removal has been adapted to new places, leading to the emergence of bureaucracies of iconoclasm, and types of conflicts similar to those previously seen in Poland.

Bureaucracies of Iconoclasm

Scholars of memorials, such as James E. Young, have stressed that controversial debate about what kind of monument is appropriate to commemorate a given

event at a given site is in fact the most important part of the memorialisation process[8]. The discussion *is* the memorial. The same can be said for de-commemoration: it is through discussion and by weighing the merits of different proposals that a community can decide which forms and objects of memorialisation it wishes to repudiate, and for what reasons. For this to be a meaningful and democratic process, the voices of all those with a connection to the memorial need to be heard. This process works best when it is local and accountable: when decisions can be made by a representative body that draws its legitimacy from different local constituents, and when this body is answerable to a variety of actors, interests and types of expertise, and documents all stages of the decision-making process.

Post-2022 iconoclasm has often involved suspending such local processes. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, final authority over monument removal has been granted to unelected bodies. Those "administrators of monument dismantling" (as Linda Kaljundi and Riin Alatalu call them in their contribution to this issue) claimed "that there was nothing to discuss and public debates should be avoided in times of war". These include the Estonian War Museum (acting on behalf of Estonia's Ministry of Defence) and a secret government committee of experts in Estonia; the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia and the Latvian State Inspection for Heritage Protection; and the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania[9].

In Ukraine, the situation is more complex. The Institute of National Remembrance and the Ministry of Culture, with its decolonisation commission, have not acted very transparently, but their actively iconoclastic role has not extended to war memorials to the same extent as in the Baltic countries. At the regional level, however, the Lviv oblast administration has pressed ahead with demolishing most Soviet-era war memorials even against local resistance[10].

This is in fact another striking echo in the newly iconoclastic countries of what has happened in Poland since 2017. In all three Baltic states and in Ukraine's Lviv region, the hand of local municipalities has been forced by the adoption of nationwide laws. In Latvia, a national law from June 2022 prohibited the display of a wide range of monuments or memorial signs even in the "indoor premises of 'a public person'"[11]. In Narva, Estonia, the national government ordered the local tank monument removed after the municipal government failed to reach a decision. A draft Estonian law from November 2022 would have required municipalities and even private owners to remove a broad variety of monuments from public view; even though it ended up not being ratified by the president, many of its provisions were implemented[12]. A national law was passed in Lithuania in December 2022[13]. The new Ukrainian law from April 2023 "On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and on the Decolonisation of Toponymy" places the responsibility to remove certain categories of monuments on local authorities, but gives civil and military administrations the right to do so if the municipal governments do not comply within a year[14].

Even when local agencies are not directly forced to remove a monument, lower-level actors such as municipalities or local museums are called upon to make decisions for which they lack the resources. Museums in particular suddenly find themselves in charge of many monuments that become part of their collections for political rather than conservational reasons, and which most of them are hardly equipped to display and contextualise properly.

The new de-commemoration policies have also had some unintended effects. One of these concerned cataloguing. In such places as Estonia, no central register of Soviet war memorials existed before a commission was set up to select monuments for removal or destruction. Whereas in Russia and Ukraine there are websites that use crowdsourcing methods to document monuments in order to better preserve them, in Estonia the conservative daily newspaper *Postimees* and then the government organised crowdsourcing campaigns to identify "Red monuments" in order to initiate their removal or destruction[15].

Focusing on the Western world, the architectural historian Lucia Allais has observed that in the 20th century monuments were defined by their ability to withstand destruction[16]. In this case, the relationship was reversed, as monuments' lists serve the purpose of destruction rather than preservation: monuments

have been taken out of oblivion and given greater prominence by the very fact of being slated to disappear[17]. In a very small number of cases destruction has gone hand in hand with detailed documentation, e.g. in Latvia a 3D scan of the gigantic Victory monument in Riga was made before its demolition[18].

Actors and Logics of Monument Destruction and Protection

Iconoclasm – or resistance to iconoclasm – is rarely a mass movement. De-commemoration is typically a minority concern, even more so than commemoration. Whether or not iconoclasts have popular support is often difficult to gauge, since much depends on how the question is asked. Surveys in Ukraine certainly show that monument removal is not a popular priority. Many of those surveyed would prefer to leave the question open until after the end of the war, and even those abstractly in favour of removing certain generic types of monuments are much less enthusiastic when asked about specific monuments: removing monuments to Soviet cultural figures is considered OK in the abstract, but "our" Yury Gagarin statue should be left untouched[19]. Few other routes for mass involvement in de-commemoration exist outside of forms of public deliberation, such as hearings, though it should be mentioned that a public fundraising campaign in Latvia managed to raise 200,000 euros for the removal of the Victory Monument in Riga[20].

With this in mind, who were the actors of monument destruction and protection following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and what were the logics behind their actions? Several authors in this issue rightly point out that it does not do full justice to the 2022–2023 debates around Soviet monuments to present them exclusively as conflicts between politicians, on the one hand, and art historians and preservationists, on the other. Nevertheless, some common patterns can be discerned.

The removal campaigns in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and on a regional level in Ukraine's Lviv region were all initiated by conservative or centre-right governments, with some key agencies, such as the Estonian Ministry of Justice and the Latvian Ministry of Culture, led by especially right-wing politicians with iconoclastic agendas. State agencies have often acted in concert with non-state activists of de-commemoration. In Poland, attacks on memorials by local activists often preceded actions by the state against those same memorials[21]. In Ukraine, the initiatives of such activists as Anton Petrivskyi in Lviv and Kostiantyn Nemichev in Kharkiv were explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by regional administrations and enjoyed some popular legitimacy due to the fact that both had become active soldiers[22].

Arguments for removal most often refer to the monuments' association with Soviet dominance in general and Soviet military conquest and control in particular, linking them to Soviet crimes, such as mass terror, deportations and artificial famine. This often implies externalising the Soviet system and associating it exclusively with Russia. Locals who fought as part of the Red Army are then cast as traitors or collaborators, or as hapless victims of a foreign system. Alternatively, their wartime biographies are still perceived as heroic, but the symbols under which they fought are repudiated.

While such arguments have long been put forward by the political right in many countries, developments in recent years have gradually increased their popular appeal. The most important of these is Russia's increasing claim, in the Putin era, to patronage over Soviet war memorials abroad. This claim is based on their official line that Russia is the sole guardian of the true legacy of Soviet war memory. That legacy in and of itself is considered problematic by many outside (as well as inside) Russia. In practice, however, memorials outside Russia's territory have been increasingly integrated into a Russian commemorative culture that has in fact departed significantly from the Soviet precedent, hybridising it with elements of Russian nationalism, imperialism and statist Orthodoxy. As a result of Russian memorial policies, Soviet war memorials have become associated with present-day Russian geopolitics, and thus the very actions that claim to protect these memorials have jeopardised them by dragging them into new political battles. In February 2022, this came to a head when Russia justified its assault on Ukraine through parallels to World War II and named the protection of Soviet war memorials in Ukraine as one of the reasons for its attack. When the Russian forces started demolishing

or modifying Ukrainian memorials in the newly occupied territories, that was further grist for the mills of those who would get rid of Soviet war memorials by virtue of their association with present-day Russia, especially within Ukraine.

While such arguments referring to the historical and geopolitical dimension of war memorials tend to be primary, they are sometimes bolstered by references to the monuments' low artistic value or threatening appearance, especially where tank monuments are concerned.

Monuments Worthy of Protection?

Conversely, those wishing to preserve Soviet war memorials include a number of people attached to the political symbols on display in the memorials and the grand Soviet and Russian narratives about the Great Patriotic War that have become associated with them. This attitude is sometimes criticised even by those with a deeper attachment to commemorating Red Army soldiers: as the local volunteer searcher Daniil Galitski has pointed out, few if any of those protesting the removal of the Narva tank monument have paid any attention to the many small soldiers' memorials scattered through the forests in the surrounding countryside and often in need of repair or maintenance[23].

Most of those objecting to monument removal, however, have done so either out of historical or artistic considerations, or out of a sense of attachment that has nothing to do with either Soviet historical narratives or present-day Russian propaganda. In Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, opposition to iconoclasm has been led by historians, art historians, heritage experts and occasionally artists.

Art and heritage specialists have generally been slow to take a systematic interest in Soviet-era monuments or in developing public appreciation for them, often dismissing them as serial and ideological forms of art and thus doing nothing to combat what Kaljundi and Alatalu call "visual illiteracy" in their regard. In recent years, interest has grown in Soviet-era public structures, ranging from architecture to mosaics to monuments. Yet, arguments referencing artistic value do not play out in the same way in every country. In Croatia, as Dragan Damjanović and Zvonko Maković write, the fact that all Red Army memorials were made by local artists has significantly contributed to their preservation. In Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, art historians and preservationists have likewise been at pains to point out that many monuments, as well as buildings slated for modification due to the presence of decorative symbols from Soviet times, are among the most prominent examples of local artistic production in the post-war years and moreover sometimes include hidden messages at odds with official Soviet ideology. However, arguments of this kind have largely fallen on deaf ears, even though they may have contributed to preserving a few especially remarkable monuments, such as the modernist memorials in Tehumardi and Maarjamäe in Estonia[24], the monument to the Liberators of Tukums in Latvia[25] and Ivan Kavaleridze's cubo-futurist statue of the Bolshevik leader Artyom in Ukraine.

Historical arguments have likewise influenced the debate to different degrees in different places. In several countries, it has been pointed out that the Red Army included millions of Ukrainians and many other non-Russians, and that Ukrainians have used Soviet war memorials in numerous countries to mourn their dead both unofficially and in official ceremonies. In such places as Germany or Austria, this argument was used against iconoclasm and informed anti-war protests that saw Ukrainian colours being added to Soviet memorials, and yet the same considerations did little to halt de-commemoration elsewhere. On a more general note, such historians as Valdemaras Klumbys in Lithuania, Robert Traba in Poland and Henrik Meinander in Finland[26] have emphasised that ridding public space of all potentially offensive images mimics an authoritarian logic. Instead, they have proposed agonistic or pedagogical approaches that place monuments in their historical context, leaving them in place as venues for open debate and helping sharpen critical thinking about history. Once again, these proposals have been essentially shouted down where governments have been bent on crude forms of decommunisation.

The same goes for other types of arguments. In Croatia, exoticising the Socialist Realist style of Red Army monuments has helped reframe them as magnets for domestic tourism[27]. Few successful cases of this kind of rebranding can be found in other coun-

tries, perhaps because for those in charge Soviet war memorials are not yet so alien as to be non-threatening. The city of Lviv in Ukraine, which attracts a lot of foreign tourism, has attempted to integrate some Soviet-era heritage into its tourism policy, despite resistance from the regional government[28]. In other cases, however, where Soviet-era war memorials do play an important touristic role, they tend to have been nationalised rather than estranged. In Ukraine this has happened most prominently with the gigantic Motherland statue in Kyiv: in 2015, the name of the museum inside its base was changed from the National Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 to the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, and in August 2023, amid resistance against the Russian onslaught, the Soviet coat of arms on the figure's shield was replaced with a Ukrainian trident.

Artists also intervened in the 2022–2023 debates, though not in great numbers, as many of them focused their energies on responding directly to Russia's attack on Ukraine and its repercussions. In Germany, where Soviet memorials were not threatened with removal, the artist Svea Duwe sought to encourage debate about the different meanings of the main Soviet war memorial by surrounding it with the inscription "This structure is fragile"[29]. In Latvia, going beyond the debate about war memorials, the artist Ivars Drulle proposed sawing the statue of socialist-era writer Andrejs Upīts in half, "symbolically separating the good from the bad", a proposal that was not accepted[30].

Other artistic interventions, by contrast, have questioned people's excessive attachment to Soviet war memorials at a time of war. Thus in Narva, Estonia, in April 2023 the local artist Vovan Kashtan sprayed a bloodthirsty quote from a Russian pro-war blogger onto a wall at the site of the already removed tank monument as a statement against Russian military aggression[31].

Yet perhaps the most serious challenges to the removal of Soviet war memorials have stemmed from their appropriation by local residents, who have invested these memorials with multiple attachments that go well beyond their ideological messages.

Numerous local practices of appropriation can be found across the former socialist world. In Croatia, as Damjanović and Maković write in this issue, the local population "feel a connection with these memorials, which have become connected with their identity", not least because Red Army memorials in that country also commemorate Yugoslav fighters and civilian victims. Stephanie Herold describes campaigns of rust removal and cleaning of a tank monument in the Saxon town of Beilrode in the eastern part of Germany that attracted the participation of local residents and companies; even the city's homepage declared the monument "part of the community landscape, a piece of local history". In Kienitz, in the neighbouring state of Brandenburg, a resident interviewed for an artistic project about the status of their local tank memorial evoked the monument's role in everyday life by saying: "We children played on it. It was the centre of the village."

Ukraine is full of cases where Soviet war memorials are domesticated by being treated as family graves, or appropriated for a nationalised or Christianised form of war commemoration and adapted to mourn the victims of the ongoing war[32]. As Iryna Sklokina writes in this issue, these forms of appropriation have drawn particular ire from iconoclastic activists. The Belarusian case shows that the appropriation of war memorials can transcend local contexts: during the large-scale nationwide protests of 2020, demonstrators reframed the 1954 obelisk on Victory Square in the capital and the Minsk Hero City memorial as venues for protest against a regime that tries to draw much of its legitimacy from a claim to the legacy of Soviet victory in World War II[33].

Conclusion

Sociology teaches us that any object can be experienced through different modes of valuation. In the case of monuments, it is useful to distinguish between *symbolic*, *artistic*, *historical*, *material* and *habitual* modes. In theory, every one of these modes allows for both negative and positive valuation. We can value a monument because we identify with what it stands for, because we appreciate its form, because we value it as a historical document, because we think it plays an important role as a material part of the fabric of urban or rural space, or because we have invested it with meanings pertaining to our everyday lives.

Conversely, we can object to a monument because we repudiate its symbols, because we consider it artistically worthless, historically uninteresting, spatially incongruous, or because in our everyday existence we experience it as threatening.

In practice, in the debates of 2022–2023, arguments referencing artistic, historical, material and habitual experience were largely restricted to those objecting to the disappearance of Soviet war memorials from public space. In contrast, those advocating for or accomplishing their removal referred almost exclusively to the symbolic level, treating other aspects merely as an afterthought.

This has meant that instead of a complex debate, war memorial removal largely became a technocratic process, one that saw a set of top-down policies first developed in Poland copied in new contexts. In other words, the process of de-commemoration has been mimetic rather than democratic. As many critics of monument removal have pointed out, the way it has proceeded bears similarities to Soviet policies of destroying monuments whose subject matter is deemed unacceptable and replacing them with new ones. Indeed it is not that different from what the Russian invaders have done to memorials in the occupied parts of Ukraine[34].

According to this position, the polity is contaminated by the very presence of certain symbols in public space. They must be stricken from the historical record as if they had never existed, with no public debate or complex democratic deliberation. This logic is somewhat fetishistic and implicitly attributes near-magical qualities to the offending symbols. In the words of the conservative Estonian minister Lea Danilson-Järg: "If the worshippers of the Soviet symbols had been condemned in time, there might not be a war in Europe today."[35] This suggests that the very presence of certain symbols has the power to poison people's minds and make them commit nefarious acts, that continuing to display these symbols is tantamount to "worship", and that no amount of pedagogical or artistic framing can make people develop a critical attitude towards them. This argument is different from noting that Soviet war memorials have been used by Russia as a pretext for invasion in the Ukrainian case, which would involve acknowledging that it is precisely their destruction, rather than their mere presence, which Russia has used to justify its aggression.

Nevertheless, the events of 2022–2023 have led to an increased public interest in different ways of handling difficult heritage, such as Soviet war memorials. The complex considerations advanced by historians and heritage experts may have done little to prevent technocratic removal and destruction in those countries where iconoclasm has become the order of the day. Yet it is important to note that they represent a minority of the countries where such memorials can be found. Thus there is still room for more thorough democratic deliberation and original solutions as more countries tackle the question of what to do with memorials of past wars during new wars.

Endnotes

1. The two preceding paragraphs summarise my article: Mischa Gabowitsch, "What has Happened to Soviet War Memorials since 1980/91? An Overview", in: Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, vol. 7, no. 2, 2021, pp. 185–222. Work on the current article was made possible by FWF (Austrian Science Fund) grant no. M 3377.
2. "Sofia's City Council Approves Plan to Move Contentious Soviet Red Army Monument", in: RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 9.3.2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-sofia-red-army-mnument-moved/32310767.html (last accessed 30.12.2023). On past conflicts around the monument, see Daniela Koleva, "Pamiatnik sovetskoi armii v Sofii: pervichnoe i povtornoe ispol'zovanie" [The Soviet army monument in Sofia: Primary and secondary uses], in: Pamiatnik i prazdnik: etnografiia Dnia Pobedy, ed. Mikhail Gabovich [Mischa Gabowitsch], trans. Aleksandr Beliaev, Sankt-Peterburg 2020, pp. 294–309. See also Claudia-Florentina Dobre's contribution to this issue.
3. See Petra Hudek's contribution to this issue; Tereza Pešoutová, "Pískovcový rudoarmějec z náměstí v Přibyslavi musí pryč. Chtějí ho ochránit před možným poškozením" [The sandstone Red Army soldier from the square in Přibyslav has to go: They want to protect it from possible harm], in: Český rozhlas: Vysočina, 9.3.2022, https://vysocina.rozhlas.cz/piskovcovy-rudoarmejec-z-namesti-v-pribyslavi-musi-pryc-chteji-ho-ochranit-pred-8698272 (last accessed 30.12.2023).
4. In addition to the examples cited throughout this issue, see e.g. Stephanie Höppner, "Sowjetische Denkmäler: Kann das weg?", in: Deutsche Welle, 17.8.2022, https://www.dw.com/de/sowjetische-denkm%C3%A4ler-kann-das-weg/a-62837005; "Hungarian Jobbik Party Calls for Dismantling of Soviet Monument in Budapest", in: TPV World, 17.10.2022, https://tvpworld.com/63993035/hungarian-jobbik-party-calls-for-dismantling-of-soviet-monument-in-budapest (both last accessed 30.12.2023).
5. "V Vengrii otkryli vosstanovlennyi pamiatnik sovetskim voinam" [A restored monument to Soviet warriors has been unveiled in Hungary], in: RIA Novosti, 19.6.2023, https://ria.ru/20230619/pamyatnik-1879254286.html; László Szily, "'Úgy érezzük, hogy mára Oroszország saját felségterületének tekinti Magyarországot, ezért reagáltunk mi'" ["We feel that Russia now regards Hungary as its own territory, which is why we reacted"], in: 444, 26.6.2023, https://444.hu/2023/06/26/ugy-erezzuk-hogy-mara-oroszorszag-sajat-felsegteruletenek-tekinti-magyarorszagot-ezert-reagaltunk-mi (last accessed 30.12.2023). The two preceding paragraphs include a few sentences from the forthcoming book: Mischa Gabowitsch and Mykola Homanyuk, Monuments and Territory: War Memorials and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (scheduled to be published by Central European University Press in 2024).
6. See Olga Juutistenaho's contribution to this issue.
7. See Maija Rudovska's and Violeta Davoliūtė's contributions.
8. James E. Young, The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between, Amherst 2016.
9. See the contributions to this issue by Linda Kaljundi and Riin Alatalu; Davoliūtė; Rudovska.
10. See Iryna Sklokina's contribution.
11. See Rudovska's contribution.
12. See Kaljundi's and Alatalu's contribution.
13. See Davoliūtė's contribution.
14. See Sklokina's contribution.
15. See Kaljundi's and Alatalu's contribution.
16. Lucia Allais, Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century, Chicago 2018.
17. This echoes an observation by the Estonian architectural historian Mart Kalm, cited in Kaljundi's and Alatalu's contribution.
18. See Rudovska's contribution.
19. See e.g. data from a survey in Kharkiv: Mykola Homaniuk and Ihor Danylenko, "Symvolichnyi prostir mista: viziia kharkivian" [Symbolic urban space: The perspective of Kharkiv residents], in: Kharkivska sotsiolohichna merezha, December, 2022, http://soc.kh.ua/doslidzhennya/strong-symvolichnyj-prostir-mista-viziya-harkiv-yan-strong (last accessed 30.12.2023); Oleksiy Gnatiuk and Mykola Homanyuk, "From Geopolitical Fault-Line to Frontline City: Changing Attitudes to Memory Politics in Kharkiv under the Russo-Ukrainian War," in: The Hungarian Geographical Bulletin, no. 72, 2023, pp. 239–256.
20. See Rudovska's contribution.
21. See the contribution to this issue by Małgorzata Łukianow and Anna Topolska.
22. See Sklokina's contribution.
23. Oral communication from Daniil Galitski, Narva, 18.9.2023.
24. See Kaljundi's and Alatalu's contribution.
25. See Rudovska's contribution.
26. See the contributions by Davoliūtė; Łukianow and Topolska; Juutistenaho.
27. See Dragan Damjanović's and Zvonko Maković's contribution.
28. See Sklokina's contribution.
29. See Stephanie Herold's contribution.
30. See Rudovska's contribution.
31. Andrei Titov, "Vovan Kashtan kak glavnyi simvol narvskogo aktsionizma" [Vovan Kashtan as the main symbol of Narva performance art], in: ERR. Raadio 4, 27.6.2023, https://r4.err.ee/1609019009/vovan-kashtan-kak-glavnyj-simvol-narvskogo-akcionizma (last accessed 30.12.2023).
32. See Mykola Homanyuk's and Mischa Gabowitsch's contribution to this issue.
33. See Oxana Gourinovitch's contribution to this issue.
34. See Gabowitsch, Homanyuk [forthcoming], Monuments and Territory.
35. See Kaljundi's and Alatalu's contribution.

Abstract

Some observers have claimed that Soviet monuments, and in particular war memorials, are coming down "across Europe" in response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Soviet war memorials have indeed been removed in large numbers in 2022–2023, even though previous waves of decommunisation had often spared them. However, the geography of this new strong iconoclasm is limited to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and some regions of Ukraine, in addition to one case in Czechia and one in Bulgaria. This article analyses the new bureaucracies of iconoclasm, noting that they first emerged in Poland and then spread to new countries in a mimetic process. The article then reviews the actors and logics of monument destruction and protection. Whereas (mostly right-wing) governments and activists have spearheaded the removal of war memorials, the case to recontextualise monuments instead of removing them was primarily made by historians, art historians and heritage experts. The article dwells in particular on the ways in which Soviet World War II memorials have been appropriated and domesticated by local residents, gaining new meanings that go beyond their original ideological messages. It argues that de-commemoration, like commemoration, should be a complex process involving all those with a connection to the monument and what it memorialises, and that the top-down removal campaigns of 2022–2023 have largely eschewed democratic deliberation.

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Title