

Private Circulation

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THE REVENGE OF TASTE



4. Under construction. Note the construction worker on the scaffolding at the centre of the image for a sense of the gigantic scale of the Monument.

Thus Godolphin received a nose bridge of ivory, a cheekbone of silver and a paraffin and celluloid chin ... The reconstruction had been perfect ... He talked like a man under death sentence. “Perhaps I can pawn my cheekbone. It’s worth a fortune. Before they melted it down it was one of a set of pastoral figurines, eighteenth century—nymphs, shepherdesses—looted from a château the Hun was using for a CP; Lord knows where they’re originally from—”

—Thomas Pynchon, *V.*

I.

The Victory Arch (aka the Hands of Victory, the Crossed Swords, or the Swords of Qadisiyya), a giant monument in Baghdad consisting of two pairs of hands crossing swords, was commissioned in 1985 to commemorate Iraq’s pre-emptive victory of the Iraq–Iran War, which ended in 1988.

Each steel sword was made from the weapons of fallen Iraqi soldiers, and weighs about 24 tons—they are meant to represent the swords of Sa’ad ibn-abi Waqas, the commander of the Arab-Muslim army that defeated the Persians in the battle of Qadisiyya in AD 637. The hands were modeled after plaster casts of Saddam Hussein’s own hands. (While the swords were cast in Iraq, the bronze hands were cast in Britain by the Morris Singer Foundry.) Spilling out from the bottom of the monument are the helmets of Iranian soldiers, many of which are







dented or have holes in them, presumably from bullets and shrapnel. On 8 August 1989, when the monument was opened to the public, Hussein rode under the swords on a white stallion.

Since at least 1991 the United States has set its sights on destroying the Victory Arch. In the lead-up to Operation Desert Storm General “Stormin’ Norman” Schwarzkopf told General Colin Powell that he’d like to “blow up the giant Saddam statue and the Victory Arch in downtown Baghdad.” Powell was “all for it,” but the plan fell through when Pentagon lawyers shot down the idea. Then, in 2007, as part of a program to remove Ba’athist monuments, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered the sculpture’s destruction. One day later, after at

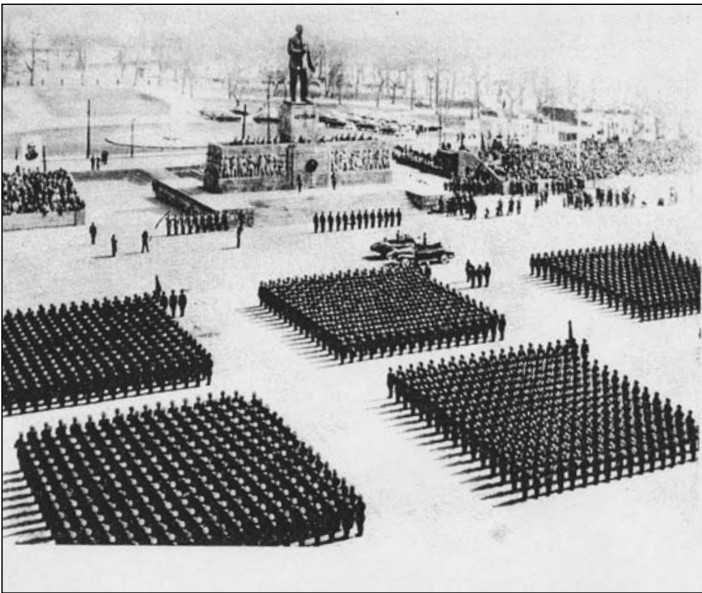
least one of the four bronze hands had been dismantled, the order was blocked by U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, and demolition halted. Today, the swords still cross, but there is something Darth Vader-like¹ about the stripped hand.

Like many invading armies of the past, the U.S. has recast statues of the old order into its own image. [Khalid Alussy](#), a young sculptor who helped produce Ba’athist monuments, was hired to create a work for the 4th Infantry Division, after they blew up two equestrian statues of Hussein in Tikrit. The newly commissioned work, which was cast with bronze recycled from the equestrian statues, features a U.S. soldier kneeling before a pair of boots, a rifle, and a helmet, while a young girl reaches for his shoulder.

The finished sculpture was shipped to Fort Hood, Texas.²

Photographs of soldiers desecrating the remaining vestiges of Hussein’s Iraq—driving over with tanks, pissing on, toppling, relocating, thrashing, clowning in front of—are widespread on the Internet. At the Victory Arch, the missing bronze has not stopped soldiers from photographing themselves posing as if they were holding the swords of Qadisiyya. Another popular photo-op is the throne at Al-Faw palace. Built in commemoration of the Iraq–Iran War, the palace now serves as Camp Victory. With thousands of soldiers hamming it up for photographs, the throne is starting to look soiled.





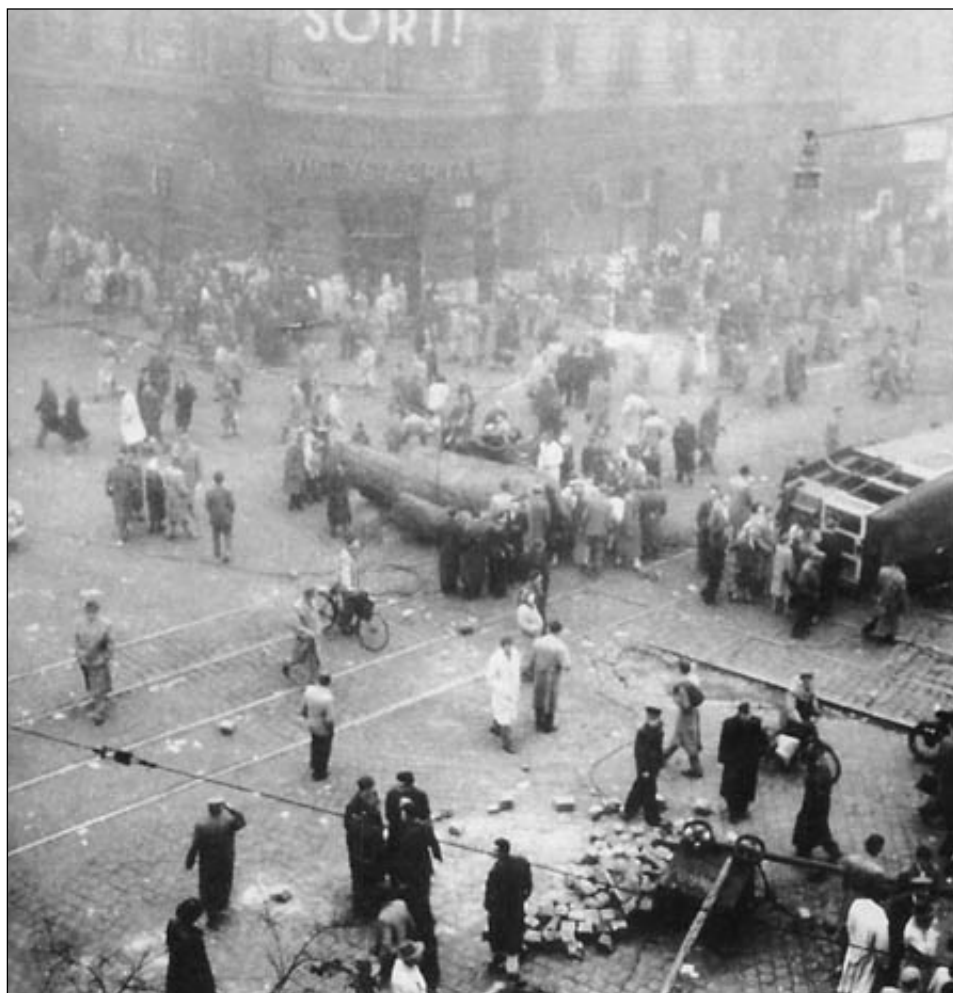
II.

On the first day of the Hungarian Revolution, 23 October 1956, citizens of Budapest toppled this statue of Stalin. The bronze figure stood 8 meters tall atop a base 26 meters long and 9 meters high. Several statues built before 1945 and considered “bourgeois” were melted down to contribute to the roughly 46,000 pounds of bronze

that constituted the statue. Sculpted by Sándor Mikus, it was completed in December 1951, two years before Stalin’s death.

On the afternoon of the revolution, protesters, with the help of a Politburo member, brought tractors from a nearby factory and got to work rigging the statue with steel cables. In order to upend Stalin,

he had to be cut with torches just above the boots. From there the toppled statue was hauled to the National Theater and abused. Today, in commemoration of the revolution—which lasted until 10 November, when it was brutally suppressed—an artist’s rendition of the original jackboots stand on a pedestal, taking Stalin’s place.







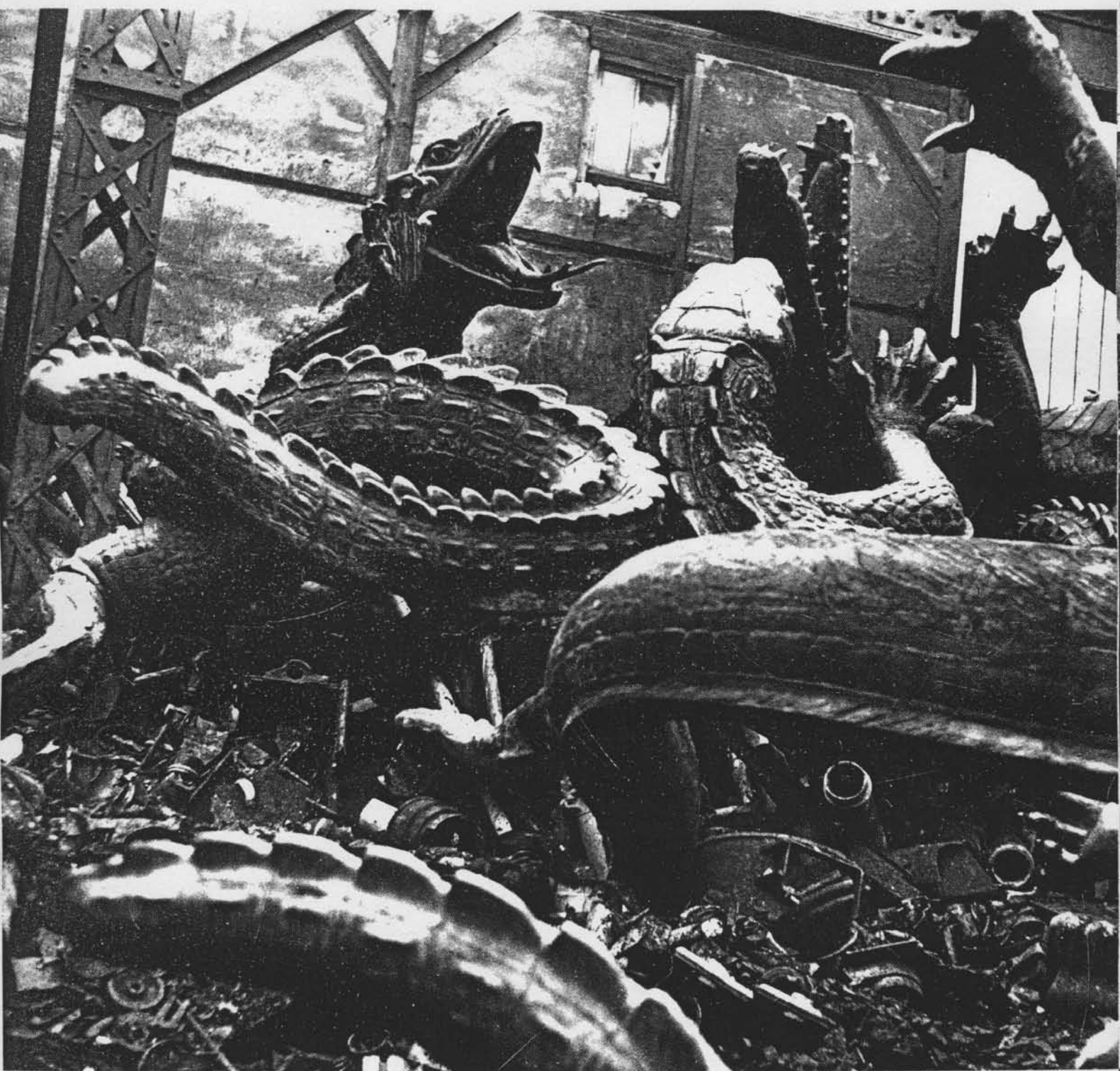
III.

Under the leadership of Philippe Pétain, Vichy authorities issued a decree that outlined the need to “reintegrate the constitutive metals of public statues into the circuit of industrial and agricultural production” in France. Three years later, in 1944, more than 80 Third-Republic monuments had been dismantled, brought to a scrap yard in the XII arrondissement of Paris, and

melted down. Though the Vichy authorities cited social and economic reasons for the appropriations, it was widely understood that the metals were contributing to the German military. A couple of months after the decree, Pierre Jahan covertly visited the scrap yard to photograph the tangled and battered sculptures. One year after the end of WWII Jahan published his photographs in *La mort*

et les statues, a book made in collaboration with Jean Cocteau, who wrote the captions and an introduction. Several of the images show alligators from Jules Dalou’s *Triumph of the Republic*. Due to public outcry, the statue, which stands today at the Place de la Nation, was not completely scrapped. But the alligators, which symbolized the enemies of the republic, were never replaced.











NOTES

1. According to globalsecurity.org, on the eve of Operation Desert Storm, Hussein marched his troops under the Victory Arch for Iraqi television to the theme of the movie *Star Wars*. This tidbit of information is repeated on many websites and even serves as the basis for an artwork, but remains (at this time) unverified. Global Security also wrote that the monument was made by the German firm H+H Metalfarm. However, Kanan Makiya's book *The Monument*, a thorough study of the Victory Arch, attributes the work to Morris Singer Foundry. See also <http://www.msaf.co.uk/ms1988-1990.htm>
2. See <http://1-22infantry.org/current/4idmonument.htm>

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