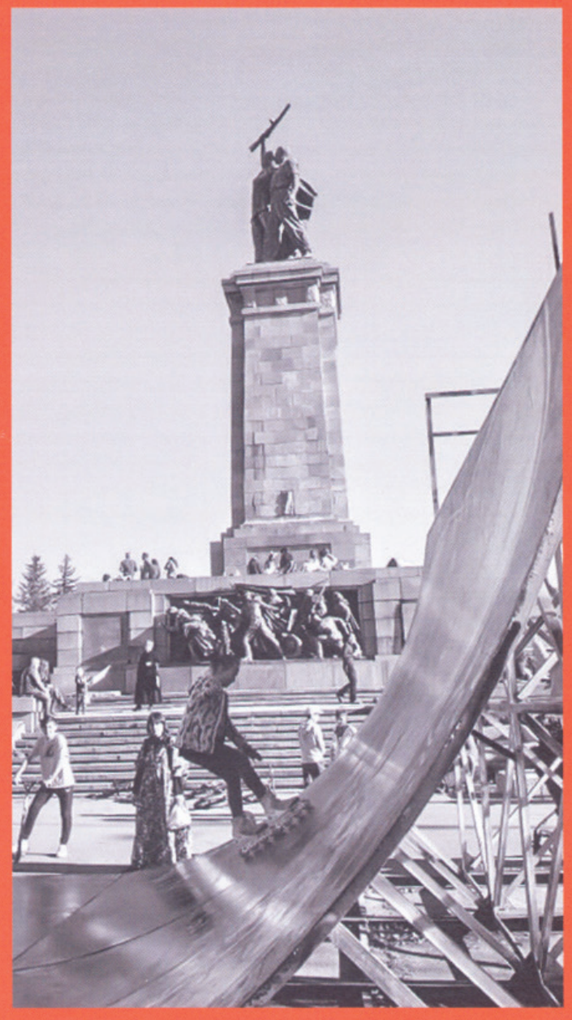

The Afterlife of Socialist Monuments in Bulgaria:
A Story of Power, Neglect & Assimilation

by Petar Kirilov

Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Buzludja, 2009–2012 (top)
Photograph by Nikola Mihov
Younger generations and urban subcultures assimilating the space around the Monument of the Soviet Army (left)

Memory

The aleatory nature of human memory has been studied extensively in the twentieth century, and scholars have concluded that it can often be ambiguous and even malleable. This is further acknowledged by our tendency to build physical objects that are supposed to perpetuate memories through time. Assigned the duty to carry on the memory of significant historical events, personas or political ideologies, monuments are instrumental for generating common historical understanding. A monument's narrative is influenced by political ideologies, national beliefs and local myths. Built by those who have the power to alter public aesthetics and command public consent, they serve to convey political messages. As James E. Young states, 'memory is never shaped in a vacuum and the motives of memory are never pure'. Nevertheless, it is important to note that architectural systems, and therefore monumental representation, are dependent on the ideology that promoted them and are doomed to die along with it.

Such was the case with many of the remnants of the socialist regime in Bulgaria. As the main physical carriers of the memory of the regime, monuments are part of an ongoing public debate concerning the assimilation and reinterpretation of the troubled recent past. The rapid Europeanisation following the fall of the socialist regime in 1989 demanded the removal of the physical carriers of the memories from the 'shameful' past.

Socialist Icons

Two of the most prominent examples of socialist architecture are the Memorial-House Buzludzha and the monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia. As a part of the monumental propaganda instituted by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), they served as a way to affirm its ruling power. Dominating the surroundings, their sheer grandeur established them as narrators of unquestionable truth. To reformulate history and differentiate from past ideologies, the Party created

landscape icons to serve as anchors of collective memory and promoted the narration of a history of uprisings, revolutions, martyrdom and triumph.

Conceived as the pinnacle of socialist architecture, the Memorial-House Buzludzha has a sixty meter, free spanning roof, seventy meter high pylon, and only three main anchorage points, establishing it as a world-class engineering achievement. In the words of its architect, Georgi Stoilov: 'The goal here is to immortalise an ideology aiming to transform society, that is to say erect a symbol of an eternal idea, which has a great past, huge present and even greater future'.8 The building was part of the cultural initiative '1300 years Bulgaria' celebrating the thirteenth century since the birth of the nation, further intertwining it in national mythology.

Built in 1954, the monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia is a perfect example of the revolutionary typology of Socialist Realism. Projecting thirty seven meters in the sky, it dominates the surroundings with its stunning visual impact. Following the canon of socailst realism, it depicts a soviet soldier victoriously holding his gun in the air, surrounded by the other key representatives of society—a mother with a baby and a man. Unambiguous and blunt, the monument commemorates the dead soldiers and valorises their sacrifice. However, it was not its visual impact that embedded these monuments in their sites, but the commemorative practices that took place around them. They stimulated public engagement and evoked personal attachment to the messages conveyed. The monuments' capability to construct collective memory has been recognised and abused by many. To quote J. Young, 'It was usually the shakiest of regimes that installed the least moveable monuments, a compensation for having accomplished nothing worthier by which to be remembered.'

Post-Socialist Reality

The fall of the socialist regime in 1989 triggered a series of social and political changes that reflected on the urban landscape. There was a common desire to physically break with the past by de-sacralizing the monuments, whether it was removing, relocating, or simply leaving them to decay. The socialist policy to construct its own history was followed by post-socialist iconoclasm. It was perceived as cleansing the urban landscape and providing space for new life and new icons.

After thirty years of institutionalised neglect, the Memorial-House Buzludzha has become an empty shell, a mummification of the forgotten socialist ideals. Purposefully let to rot, the building has been ravaged and all the decorative elements have been stolen. What remains is a naked structure. Decontextualized from the urban realm and away from people's eyes, it has been easily neglected. The symbolism of the monumental ghost from the past, dominating the natural landscape, has become even stronger - a reminder that even the largest, most dense, immovable objects are ineffective against shifts in political environments. Lately it has been rediscovered by the younger generations. Experiencing it without ideological prejudice, they recognise its architectural and artistic qualities. Intriguing for its futuristic appearance, it has gained international popularity. Although this attention has been used to spark a renovation process, it poses the threat of over-aestheticization. For most of the articles use it as a 'concrete clickbait', it is essential for the local population to recognise its cultural and historic significance.

Assimilation

The fate of the Monument of the Soviet Army is quite different. As a part of the earlier stage of monumental art of the regime, it had a purely utilitarian function and limited artistic and cultural value.13 Despite its controversial historicity, it managed to preserve its spot in the landscapes even after in 1993 a decision was made to remove it. In the past decade, it has been an object of several artistic interventions. The lower part of the monument, depicting soldiers going into battle, has been painted over numerous times and has been used as a way to make a public statement. In 2012, overnight, the soldiers were painted as characters from western pop culture including Superman, The Joker, and Captain America.

Underneath was a slogan saying: 'Up to date'. Some viewed this as a harmless artistic provocation, others labeled it as vandalism. However, the meaning was clear: these are heroes of the past and we do not recognise them as ours. In 2013, the same part of the monument was painted pink, in relation with the anniversary of Prague Spring of 1968, in which Bulgaria took part in repressing the riots. The text underneath read: 'Bulgaria apologises'. The monument became a canvas for the younger generations who managed, through artistic interventions, to discharge it politically and use it in a unique manner.

Even if monuments do not represent current ideologies or social notions, that does not mean that they have become marginal to society. On the contrary, they can be reinvented. Unlike their physical appearance, their symbolic and cultural value can be altered, most often during times of social change. Newer generations look at these monuments in a different context and can imbue them with new meanings. It is now up to them and their power to redefine these monuments and give them a new life.

In 2012, overnight, the soldiers were painted as characters from western pop culture including Superman, The Joker, Captain America and more. Underneath was a slogan saying: "In step with time"

The arms of the soldiers painted in red, resembling blood

2014, Painted in the colores of the Ukrainian flag to demonstrate support during the invasion of Crimea

2013, Monument was painted pink in relation with the anniversary of Prague Spring of 1968, in which Bulgaria took part in repressing the riots. The text underneath reads: "Bulgaria apologises".

What's next ... ?