

The Afterlife of Socialist Monuments in Bulgaria and Their Role in Formation of Post-Socialist National Identity

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Abstract

In this essay I will be looking into the current state of the monuments erected during the socialist regime in Bulgaria (1944 - 1989), and in particular the 'Memorial - House Buzludzha' and the Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia. The preservation, desecration, abandonment, or replacement of these monuments is subject of a prolonged and ongoing social debate. I will be examining the relationship between the transformation and assimilation of socialist heritage and post-socialist identity and how each of the afore mentioned monuments had a role in the mediation of the political changes in the country.

The generation born and raised after 1989 (the fall of the socialist regime) has been alleviated from the burdens of living in that period, therefore its view is informed by a different socio-political climate, unburdened by the traumatic memories of the totalitarian regime. In their view these monuments are not reminiscent of an oppressive past, however they have significant artistic value and the potential to act as mediators for a new post-socialist identity that accepts its past, allowing it to finally move forward.

Keywords: post-socialist; identity; monuments; memory

Introduction

More than thirty years after the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989, the struggle of the countries from the former Eastern Block to establish a post-socialist identity is yet to conclude. For Bulgaria, this period was of political uncertainty or, as it is commonly referred to, ‘the Transition’. The drastic socio-political changes in the end of the twentieth century were greeted by an initial wave of optimism and desire for change. However, after three decades of transitioning, the anticipated social reforms are still not achieved and a lethargic atmosphere is prevailing. The nation was fixated on distancing itself from its socialist past and this resulted in a self-induced memory and identity crisis that has been detrimental to the development of the country.

As the main physical carriers of the memory of the regime, monuments are an integral part of an ongoing public debate concerning the assimilation and reinterpretation of the recent past.¹ The remnants of socialist architecture and monumental art serve as constant reminders of the past which people wanted to escape from. During the period of transition some of them were destroyed, some underwent various transformations and relocations.² The public mostly denies the significance of these monuments as a valuable part of Bulgarian history because they are reminiscent of a traumatic period. Consequently, none of the monuments or buildings from the socialist era are listed and protected as heritage.

The fact that these monuments are not considered to be of cultural and historic importance is indicative that Bulgaria still has not been able to come to terms with its past. In fact, quite the opposite, it has become a country so fixated on repressing its past that it has forgotten how to live in the present and has created a deteriorating environment for its future generations. One way to reconcile with the past is to reconsider our relationship with cultural heritage. Monuments can be used to construct collective memory, which is vital for the forging of a national identity, therefore acting as mediators of change.

Memory and National Identity

The aleatory nature of human memory has been studied extensively in the twentieth century. Against forgetfulness and repression, our capability to remember seems flawed and fragile. This is further acknowledged by the tendency to build physical objects that are supposed to perpetuate memories through time.³ Assigned the duty to carry on the memory of significant historical events, the legacy of important personas or political ideologies, they are instrumental for generating common historical understanding. In that sense, public memory can be manipulated by those who build them.⁴ As the reputable historian James E. Young states, ‘memory is never shaped in a vacuum and the motives of memory are never pure’.⁵

¹ Lora Doncheva and Anka Ignatova, *About Memorials of the Socialist Monumental Art in Bulgaria - History and Contemporary Issues*, p. 1.

² Nikolai Voukov, *Death and the Desecrated: Monuments of the Socialist Past In Post-1989 Bulgaria* (Budapest, Central European University, 2003), p.4.

³ Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaction Books, Limited, 2012), p.198.

⁴ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p.15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

The cultural landscape is a record of past and present ideologies. It marks the significant events in a nation's history and serves as a physical timeline of objects, each representing its own era. It leaves a permanent mark on the urban tissue and is often a subject of transformation by various factors that impact the urban tissue, like economy, culture and society.⁶ The way monuments represent past events is largely dependent on the geographical region they were built in, the time period and the people who built them. Their narrative is influenced by political ideologies, national agenda, local beliefs and myths.⁷ Built by those who have the power to alter public aesthetics and have power over public consent, they serve to convey political messages. Monuments can spread desired political views by giving them material form and repress the opposing ones by excluding them from the landscape.⁸ 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.¹⁰

The dependency of a monument's significance on political ideologies makes it very rigid and unable to adapt. Usually, once there is a shift in the socio-political environment, the monuments installed by the former rulers lose their validity. Their innate stiffness prevents them to adapt to the changing environment, turning them into emptied shells of forgotten ideals.¹¹ It is a common misconception that stone or concrete can perpetuate memory in time, as if their seeming indestructibility and longevity can ensure that the memory will not be forgotten as long as its physical carrier is still intact.¹² In fact, it is not the physical decay that is the reason for their inability to perpetuate memory. There are many examples of buildings and monuments that have survived the test of time, yet the idea behind them has been obliterated.¹³

Monuments, Collective Memory and National Identity

On their own, monuments have no significant value, however, intertwined with national mythology and struggles, they gain significance and become an anchoring point for the masses.¹⁴ Such heritage can guide and impact the way information regarding culture is assimilated by social groups and provide them with a common understanding of their experiences, which in turn creates a common identity.¹⁵ In the words of Emile Durkheim, 'society is known to exist through its empirically verifiable institutions - religion, government, culture etc. - but that what binds it together is the collective consciousness that its members share being part of that society'.¹⁶ Therefore, an interconnected system

⁶ Mariusz Czepczynski, 'Interpreting Post-Socialist Icons: From Pride and Hate Towards Disappearance and/or Assimilation', *Journal of Studies and Research in Human Geography*, 4.1 (2010), p.67-78

⁷ Young, p.1-2

⁸ Aaron K. Putt, 'Abstract Forms/Explicit Intent: Modernist Monuments of Socialist Yugoslavia in Service of the State' (Thesis, Georgia State University, 2019) p.38

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.38-39

¹⁰ Emilia Kaleva, Социалистическите паметници и обществените градски пространства в постсоциалистическия български град [Socialist Monuments and Public Urban Spaces In The Post-Socialist Bulgarian City] *One Architecture Week, 2016* <<https://onearchitectureweek.com/социалистическите-паметници/>> [accessed 27 November 2020]

¹¹ Young, p.4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.13.

¹³ Forty, p.221.

¹⁴ Young, p.2.

¹⁵ Scott L. Moeschberger, *Symbols That Bind, Symbols That Divide* (New York: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2014), p.5.

¹⁶ Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2000), p.217.

of monuments that are representative of the nation's origin and its past, is necessary to construct a group identity.¹⁷

Bulgarian Communist Party and Socialist Monumental Art

After the ascendance of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1944, sudden changes were imposed on the urban fabric. In 1948, at the 5th congress of the Party, it was decided that art and architecture should follow the guidelines of Socialist Realism which was established and canonised in the USSR.¹⁸ Superimposed on what preceded them, new buildings and monuments, that reflected the socialist ideology, were erected.

Making of New History and Forgetting the Past

“He who controls the past commands the future; he who commands the future controls the past.” - George Orwell¹⁹

In order to redefine what a society is, you need to alter the way past is constructed. Through the mass production of monuments, memorials and later on memorial parks, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) constructed a new national narrative - one that established hegemony over every political and social aspect. The establishment of a new social order that followed the socialist doctrine required an abrupt differentiation from past ideologies.²⁰ To reformulate history, the Party created landscape icons that served as anchors of collective memory and promoted the narration of a history of uprisings, revolutions, martyrdom and triumph. The illusion of a shared past was central to moulding the desired national identity.²¹

Socialist architecture and monumental art are notorious for their grandeur. These dominating symbols of power relied on already existing folklore and entwined the socialist dogma into them, reinterpreting their national significance in order to describe the regime as the only possible, natural progression. For example, to seek self-legitimisation, many of the monuments compared past national struggles to the partisan movements, elevating the two to the same significance.²² According to Lenin's implementation of the Monumental Propaganda, monuments had to have revolutionary typology, demonstrate the strength of the people, both physical and spiritual, build up morale, and promote the idea of a utopian future.^{23²⁴} War memorials, on the other hand, had the obligation to commemorate the numerous martyrs that gave their life for the cause, justifying and even absolving the suffering and monstrosities of war.²⁵ The monuments from the era rarely ever represented the present, rather they focus on the past and the future, because the present was undeniably grim and did not represent the promise of utopia.

¹⁷ Nedyalka Vasileva, *On The Instability Of Monuments: Monuments In Bulgaria Form The Period Of The Communist Regime 1944-1989*, (thesis, Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2013), p.4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.44.

²⁰ Nikola Naumov and Adi Weidenfeld, ‘From Socialist Icons To Post-Socialist Attractions: Iconicity of Socialist Heritage In Central and Eastern Europe’, *Geographia Polonica*, 94.4 (2019), p.145.

²¹ Vasileva, p.7.

²² *Ibid.*, p.8.

²³ Putt, p.9.

²⁴ Miroslava Petrova, ‘Crisis of the Memory - Two Monuments From the Socialist Era Today’, (Monterey: Universidad de Monterey, Mexico, 2017), p.12.

²⁵ Putt, p.23.

However, the main function of the monuments was to affirm the power of the ruling party. Dominating the surroundings, their sheer monumentality and grandeur established them as narrators of unquestionable truth.²⁶ They also signified a clear hierarchy of power, so that it is crystal clear who rules the state. Often located in central places in the city, or ones of high cultural significance, the monuments became an inseparable part of their sites, creating a powerful visual and cultural bond with their surroundings.²⁷

Memorial-House Buzludzha²⁸

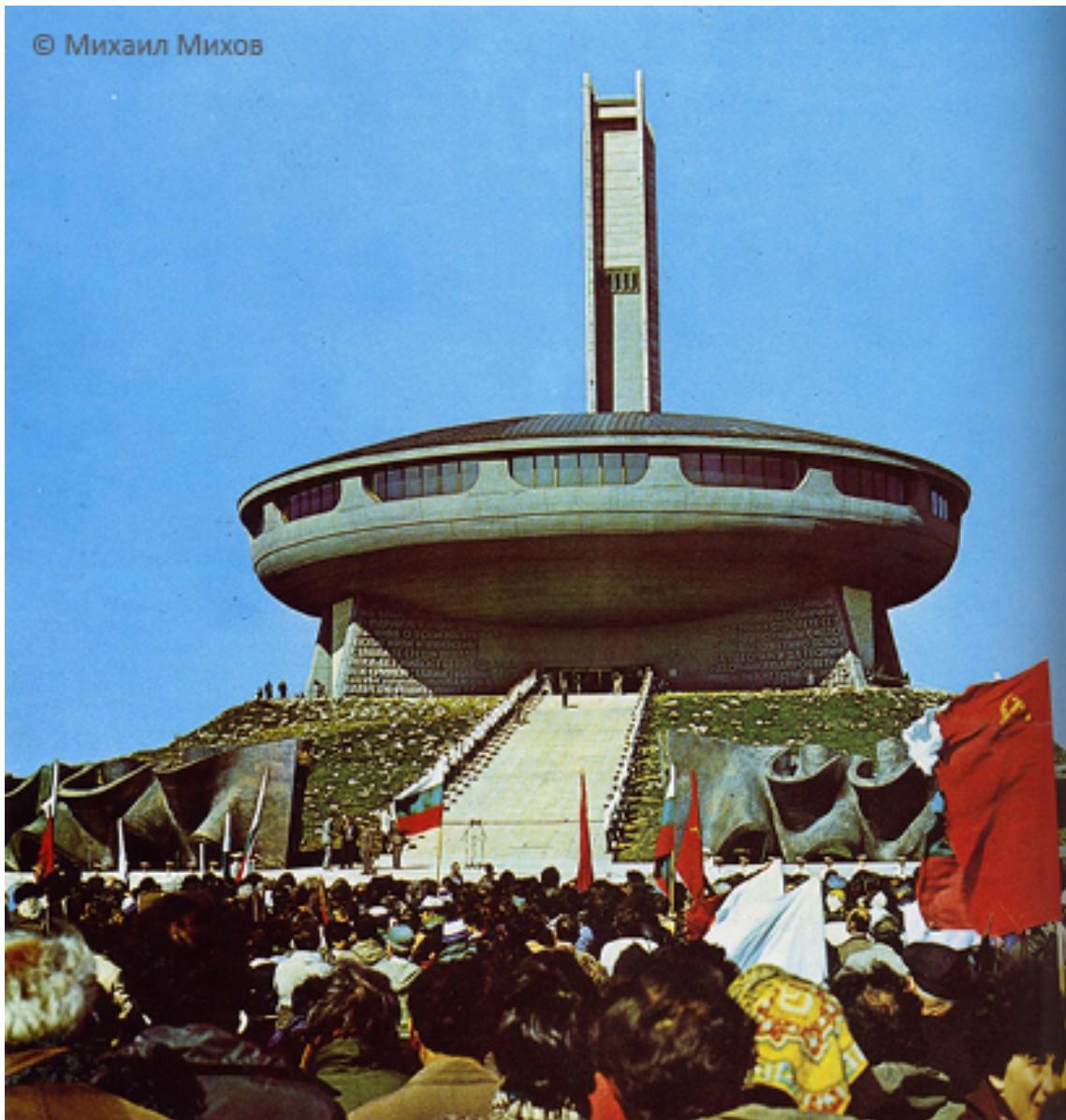


Fig. 1 Opening ceremony of Memorial-House Buzludzha, 1981

²⁶ Vasileva, p.8.

²⁷ Kaleva, <<https://onearchitectureweek.com/социалистическите-паметници/>> [accessed 27 November 2020]

²⁸ Mihail Mihov, *Opening Ceremony of Memorial-House Buzludzha*, digital photograph, Vesti, 1981 <<https://www.vesti.bg/galerii/foto/pametnikyt-na-naroda-na-buzludzha-predi-i-sega-8419>> [accessed 5 December 2020]

One of the most prominent examples of socialist architecture is the Memorial-House Buzludzha. In the words of its architect, Georgi Stoilov: 'The goal here is to immortalise an ideology, that aims 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'.²⁹ The building was part of the cultural initiative '1300 years Bulgaria' celebrating the thirteenth century since the birth of the nation. With its sixty meter, free spanning roof, seventy meter high pylon, and only three main anchorage points, the building was a world-class engineering achievement.³⁰ The modernistic approach to materials and design demonstrated the progress of the state, distancing it from the prejudice that the Eastern Block was tracking behind the other European countries.



Fig 2. A collage of authentic mosaics from the interior of the Memorial-House Buzludzha

²⁹ Vasileva, p.21.

³⁰ Ivanova, p.33.

To continue its policy to entwine the socialist ideals with past national struggles and achieve an illusion of continuity, the Party chose a site that is of historical significance. The location had acquired a sacred status due to its significance in the fights for freedom in the Russian -Turkish War, which further enhanced the symbolism of the monument.³¹ Although, it is evident from the governmental decrees that the project was subsidised by the BCP, it was promoted as an initiative entirely funded by public donations.³² The goal was to fabricate a cause that would unite the people and showcase the strength of the socialist nation.

Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia³³



Fig.3 Inaugural practices taking place in front of the Monument of the Soviet Army

³¹ Emilia Kaleva, *The Best Examples of the Architectural Heritage of Socialism in Bulgaria*, (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 2013), p.4.

³² Vasileva, p.15.

³³ Anton Todorov, *Inaugural practices*, digital photograph, Bgspomen, n.d., <https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-lfr0mETMHxg/WRKZHby7QTI/AAAAAAAQZE/p7ZAGwBI380UfF182TWb_s3erMf65zACLcB/s320/542109_423886394342526_207325565_n.jpg> [accessed 6 December 2020]

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, true to the socialist ambition, it dominates the surroundings with its stunning visual impact. Following the canons of monumental propaganda, 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. It was also aimed to pledge allegiance to the USSR and solidify the brotherhood with the soviet nation.³⁴

Like a pillar in a dessert, the monument became emblematic for the landscape. However, it was not its visual impact that embedded it in its site, but the commemorative and inaugural practices that took place around it. The incorporating events served as a tool for production of collective memory and in fact were more important than the monument itself, because they actively engaged the public, stimulating a personal attachment to the messages conveyed.

Fall of Socialist Regime

The fall of the socialist regime in 1989 triggered a series of social and political changes that reflected on the urban landscape. The nature of this transformation of public space was different from the ones in other countries from the Soviet block. There was no mass destruction of the icons of the past, however the public negation towards them lead to their relocation, removal or simply abandonment and decay.³⁵ This was a way for society to physically represent the break with the past, to desacralise the monuments and strip them form their sacredness. It was perceived as a process of cleansing the urban space and providing space for new life and new icons.

In order to be accepted as part of the common European history, the post-socialist countries, as well as Bulgaria, had to distance themselves form their past and conform to the Western European narrative and identity. This rapid Europeanisation demanded the destruction of the physical carriers of the memories from the 'shameful' past.³⁶ Bulgaria's new obsession to repress the past and delete this part of its history in pursuit of Western ideals resulted in an identity crisis. The socialist policy to construct its own history was followed by post-socialist iconoclasm. The repetitive denial of the past lead to a lack of anchoring points for the nation and therefore lack of collective memory. Apart from the hatred towards communism, the society had no other means of unification. There was no existing foundation on which the new identity of post-socialist Bulgaria could be built on.

Victor Turner's theory on liminal societies perfectly describes the processes that took place since 1989. It is devised in three phases: first is 'separation', followed by 'transition', and ending with 'reincorporation'. Bulgaria still has not reached the last phase. Turner explains that individuals in a liminal society are 'betwixt and between'. They have distanced themselves from the society of the past, however, they are unable to reincorporate themselves in current society. Naturally, liminal societies produce liminal landscapes that differ form the past ones, yet they did not live up to the expectations for the future.³⁷ Perhaps, the uncertainty on how to deal with such 'contested heritage' and the lack of state sanctioned discourse is due to the mistakes that were made in the

³⁴ Czepczynski, p.4.

³⁵ Ina Belcheva, 'Contemporary Art and Socialist Heritage Debate in Post-Socialist Bulgaria', *Three Decades of Post-Socialist Transition*, 2019, p.25.

³⁶ Kaleva, <<https://onearchitectureweek.com/социалистическите-паметници/>> [accessed 27 November 2020].

³⁷ Czepczynski, p.3.

past.³⁸ The most prominent example is the destruction of the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, who was the first leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party. After ten years of polemics on its future, it was removed in 1999. Thirty years later its spot remains vacant, reminiscent of what was once there. Adrian Forty argues that iconoclasm actually prolongs memory rather than obliterating it.³⁹ Such is the case of the Mausoleum, whose site has assimilated its potency and carries the memory of the monument, emphasising on the inability of the nation to reconcile with its past.

Current State of Buzludzha⁴⁰

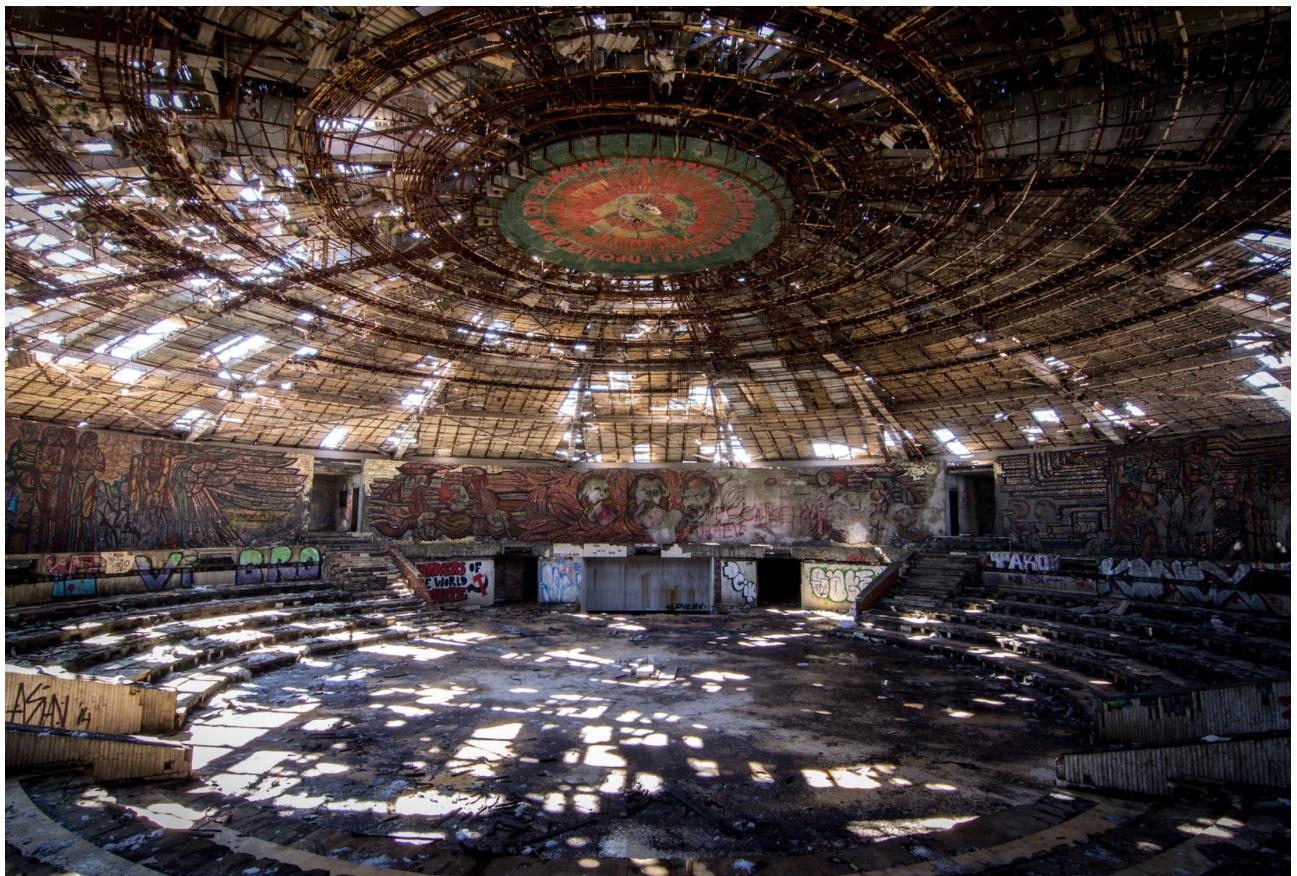


Fig.4 Current state of the main hall of the Memorial-House Buzludzha

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. Decontextualised from the urban realm and away from people's eyes, it has been easily neglected. A monumental ghost form the past, dominating the natural landscape, its symbolism has become even stronger. It has become a reminder that even the largest, most dense, immovable objects are ineffective against shifts in political environments.⁴¹

³⁸ Naumov and Weidenfeld, p.8.

³⁹ Vasileva, p.12.

⁴⁰ Darmon Richter, *The Ceremonial Hall inside the Buzludzha monument*, digital photograph, The Buzludzha Monument, 2016, <https://cdn.shortpixel.ai/client/to_webp,q_glossy,ret_img/https://buzludzha-monument.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/history-banner-2-12-1.png> [accessed 17 December 2020]

⁴¹ Vasileva, p.34.

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 and mystical appearance, it has gained international popularity. Although the attention that has been brought to it, has been used to spark a renovation process, it poses the threat of over-aesthetisation. 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.⁴²



Fig.5 Error: No Past Found

Current State of Monument of the Soviet Army

The fate of the Monument of the Soviet Army is quite different. Located in the centre of the Bulgarian capital, its verticality provokes. It is also a part of the earlier stage of monumental art during the regime. It had a purely utilitarian function and like many of the representatives of socialist realism, it has a limited artistic and cultural value.⁴³ The monument became a symbol of oppression and a reminder of traumatic events, yet it managed to preserve its spot in the landscapes even after in 1993 a decision was taken 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 way to make a public statement. In 2012,

⁴² Raino Isto, ‘I Will Speak In Their Own Language: Yugoslav Socialist Monuments and Science Fiction’, *Extrapolation*, 60.3 (2019), p.303.

⁴³ Doncheva and Ignatova, p.3.



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 colours 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 ... ?



Fig.6 Monument of the Soviet Army as a canvas

overnight, the soldiers were painted as characters from western pop culture including Superman, The Joker, Captain America and more. 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. Another intervention was done in 2013, when the same part of the monument was painted pink. It was 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.⁴⁴

Monuments as Mediators of Change

As the physical carriers of memory, monuments have the capacity to act as mediators in times of political change. Used as an outlet for the public’s frustration with past and current events, they bore the anger of the nation and had a therapeutic role in the period of ‘transition’. The remaining socialist icons can be a priceless tool for coming to terms with the past. Informal urban subcultures have found a way to desacralise these spaces, accepting them as theirs by claiming the space around them and investing them with new meanings. Places like the Monument of the Soviet Army have already been assimilated by the younger generations, which comes to prove that Buzludzha also has the potential to act as generator for the processes of reconciliation with the past, which would set the foundations for a post-socialist identity.

Bulgarians still have not recognised that socialist architecture and monumental art had left a huge mark on the urban environment. In his book *Word and Buildings*, Adrian Forty claims that ‘the very existence of a city’s complexity lay in the persistence through time of certain indelible features’.⁴⁵ Removing the reminders of that era would mean that the urban fabric will be empty and the city would loose its emblematic features that make it unique. These monuments act as guardians of collective memory, but can also generate new ones. If they are lost, the connection with the past will also be lost, which would result in a national identity emanated from obscurity and repression of the past.⁴⁶

Bulgaria is yet to form its post-socialist national identity and the first step is to stop the erasure of the past. It is important to preserve the monuments from the socialist era because they can be assimilated and reclaimed by the future generations. As seen with the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, the destruction of a monument does not mean that the memory of the past will go with it. 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. Such transformations occur mostly during times of social change.⁴⁷ Newer generations look at these monuments in a different context and can imbue them with new meanings, giving them new life. They shall be used as a stepping stone in the formation of a unique and reflective national identity.

⁴⁴ Ina Belcheva, ‘Sculptural Graveyards: Park-Museums of Socialist Monuments As a Research For Consensus, *Discussing Heritage and Museums: Crossing Paths of France and Serbia*, (2017), p.106.

⁴⁵ Forty, p.217.

⁴⁶ Petrova, p.19.

⁴⁷ Moeschberger, p.14.

Conclusion

Since Antiquity people have been attempting to perpetuate memory through time by the instalment of various physical objects that aim to protect it. Their capability to construct collective memory has been recognised and abused by many and 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.”⁴⁸

Such was the case with Bulgaria during the forty year period of socialist rule. The remnants of this troublesome period have long been neglected by the society in a frail attempt to forget its past. As a result, the former symbols of socialist glory are lingering on the edge of oblivion. For them to keep existing it is essential for Bulgarians to rethink their relationship with these monuments. The assimilation of problematic heritage is an effective way to measure the progress of the society and it is an important step in creating a national identity. It is the responsibility of the younger generations to actively participate in the reinterpretation of these former icons, assign them with new meanings and give them a new life. The monuments from the socialist era have the transformative potential to change from oppressive symbols to mediators of change, which is already evident in the case of the Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia.

⁴⁸ Young, p.5.

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List of Figures:

Fig.1 Mihov, Mihail, *Opening Ceremony of Memorial-House Buzludzha*, digital photograph, Vesti, 1981 <<https://www.vesti.bg/galerii/foto/pametnikyt-na-naroda-na-buzludzha-predi-i-sega-8419>> [accessed 5 December 2020]

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Fig.3 Todorov, Anton, *Inaugural practices*, digital photograph, Bgspomen, n.d., <https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Ifr0mETMHxg/WRKZHby7QT/AAAAAAAQZQ/p7ZAGwBi380UF182TWb_s3erMf65zACLcB/s320/542109_423886394342526_207325565_n.jpg> [accessed 6 December 2020]

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Fig.5 Produced by author, based on the photographs of Mihov, Nikola, *Forget Your Past*, 2009-2012, <<https://www.nikolamihov.com/forget-your-past>> [accessed 27 November 2020]

Fig.6 Collage produce by author, based on photographs of Neon, Stoyan, *Soviet Army Monument painted in red*, digital photographs, Reuters, 2013 <<https://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/18lqzhjyqzu2v.jpg.jpg>> [accessed 5 November 2020] and Lazarova, Julia, *Bulgarian street artists turn Soviet war memorial into Superman, Wolverine, and other superheroes* digital photograph, Sofia Echo, 2012 <<https://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/18lqzhzsogut.jpg.jpg>> [accessed 5 November 2020]

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