

MONUMENTS AS REMINDERS AND TRIGGERS

A CONTEMPORARY COMPARISON BETWEEN MEMORY WORK IN UKRAINE AND THE US

by Yuliya Yurchuk

On August 12, 2017, the US was shocked by the tragedy that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the mayhem of white-nationalist groups' protests, a 32-year old woman, Heather Heyer, was killed. The groups of racists had gathered that day to impede the removal of a statue to the General of the Confederacy Robert Lee (1807–1870). White racists waved Confederate flags, and some of them used Nazi symbols. Among the extremists were representatives of different radical right-wing groups, including the alternative right and the Ku-Klux-Klan. In the middle of the protests, one of the extremists drove his car into the crowd. More than nineteen people were injured, and one – Heather Heyer – was killed.¹ The young man who drove into the crowd is a supporter of Nazi ideology. It is worth mentioning that he was inspired with Nazi ideology by history lessons at school.²

A lot of Americans were also shocked by the response from the president, Donald Trump. He refused to make any clear accusations and talked instead about the

responsibility of “many sides.” This was interpreted by journalists in many media as equating perpetrators and victims.³ The day after the President's speech, the White House issued an “explanation” of what Trump really meant. This clarification claimed that Trump considers any violence unacceptable. The clarification came out too late, however. Moreover, the explanation did not come directly from the President, but from his administration. The President's reaction left many questions

about what the current President of the USA considers acceptable and unacceptable: The same president who, just a couple of weeks before the tragedy in Charlottesville, called on the world to unite in the fight against “Muslim terrorism” after the terror attack in Manchester.⁴ But when a race crime happened on home ground, Trump could not say anything concrete. Trump's speech, however, was positively interpreted by neo-Nazi groups who understood the President's words as approval for their actions.⁵ Even during the protests, the racists were shouting: “Heil Trump!”⁶

abstract

There are parallels in discussions about monuments in Ukraine and the USA. The reminder of the Soviet past (or in the American context, of the Confederacy) is an abject that is difficult to assimilate. On the one hand, the abject is our unwillingness to see the past and accept it; on the other hand, for those who associate themselves with this past, this is the threat of castration because through the negation of a given past a certain group is cast out from the space of representation. That is why it is questionable whether a monument can be inclusive at all. Which memory does the monument recall? Which past is castrated when a new monument is built? Which groups are fighting for recognition and representation? Which groups lose this right? These questions confront researchers and memory workers and are discussed in this essay.

KEY WORDS: memory studies, monuments.



Monument to Bandera in the Western Ukrainian town of Ivanovo-Frankivsk.

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Why monuments to Confederate heroes?

In the Southern states of the USA there are many monuments to the Confederacy. The most popular hero among them is General Robert Lee. He was originally from Virginia and was known to be a talented military leader. Lincoln offered Lee the command of his army, but Lee refused because he could not go to war against his native state. Instead he became a general in the army of the Southern states. As we know, the South was defeated. Immediately after the war, the main approach to dealing with the past in the USA was reconciliation: there were attempts to avoid speaking about the differences between the states, instead promoting the main discourse “*e pluribus unum*.” In a way, the reconciliation between the South and the North happened thanks to “forgetting” about the slave-trade and the common responsibility of all the states (not only the South) for this.

Later, towards the beginning of the 20th century, the situation changed. The Southern states accepted a revisionist narrative of the war: the narrative of the “Lost Cause.” This narrative stressed the courageous fight of the South; even when everyone understood that the war was lost, the Southerners wanted to fight to the end. It was a question of pride and honor. This narrative also emphasized that the Civil War was not really about slavery: It was rather about constitutional ideals.⁷ In the 1920s many monuments to the Confederacy were built. At that time, Ku-Klux-Klan activities were revived and the enforcement of the

Jim Crow segregation laws was strengthened. In a way, the revival of the memory of the Confederacy ran parallel to the revival of right-wing nationalism in the USA. General Lee was commemorated on an anniversary coin, five postage stamps, and a range of monuments. In the USA, only Lincoln is commemorated in a similar way.⁸ It is worth noting that General Lee was against any monuments to Civil War heroes because he thought that monuments would hinder reconciliation and would lead to conflicts in society.⁹ What is happening now (the calls to stop commemorating Confederacy heroes) reflects shifts in attitudes about race and reconciliation in society.

THE MOVEMENT AGAINST monuments to the Confederacy started long before the conflict in Charlottesville. In the spring of 2017, four monuments to the Confederacy were dismantled in New Orleans, the last of which was also a monument to General Lee. The events in New Orleans were mentioned in many media because of the speech by the mayor Mitch Landrieu.¹⁰ At that time some commentators criticized the supposedly excessive safety measures in New Orleans.¹¹ The monument in Charlottesville was also discussed in the spring. In April a ban was issued on dismantling this monument. It was stated that six more months were needed before making the final decision.

The characteristic feature of the discussions against the Confederate monuments, including the monument to Lee, is that both the Confederacy and Lee were transformed into racist



The United Daughters of the Confederacy at the Confederate Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, U.S., on June 5, 1922.



Hundreds of marchers rally at the Robert E. Lee statue on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, on September 16, 2017.

icons. Present day racists and neo-Nazis appropriated the memory of the Confederacy and associate themselves with the cause. They announce that the Confederacy embodied “golden times”, which chimes well with Trump’s discourse “to make America great again.” In this way the “lost greatness” is associated with revisionists’ narrative of the “Lost Cause.” Trump’s speech after the Charlottesville tragedy only strengthened the anger and fear of many Americans who see that the USA is moving further and further to the right when the government openly approves white racists.

The Mayor of New Orleans has spoken on similar topics. He said that in a changed society, Americans cannot commemorate the heroes who they commemorated in the past because many people of New Orleans today see the past as a humiliation. When they pass by the monument, they see every day the reminder that people who adhered to a racist ideology and who approved slavery are still respected¹² (e.g. General Lee is known to have been cruel to slaves and he was explicitly racist when he spoke about Afro-Americans not being human). The Mayor’s speech is also interesting from the point of view of memory researchers. Mitch Landrieu proposed exchanging the monuments to the Confederacy for more inclusive monuments that would address the victims of slavery, lynching, and inequality.¹³ In the Mayor’s view, this could lead to better understanding and reconciliation in the community.

Memory, reconciliation, and the struggle for recognition

Discussions and tensions about the legacy of the Confederacy demonstrated once again how the past can be a powerful political resource and how views of the past depend on the ever-changing conditions of the present. Sometimes the heroes of past centuries cannot remain the heroes of the present because society has changed. There are powerful interest groups inspired by human rights rhetoric who struggle for recognition of the suffering of those groups in the past. In this way, the past becomes a decisive tool in the politics of recognition, where memory is pre-

sented as “the right to remember.” As a result, memory politics includes on the one hand the potential for liberation and representation of suppressed and silenced experiences; on the other hand, memory can also be manipulative because it is related to the groups who have more power.

Memory can also become one of the main resources for reconciliation. Researchers of memory say that it is not possible to speak about reconciliation as long as the wounds of the past are not healed.¹⁴ For this reason, recognition is the first step towards reconciliation between different groups. But reconciliation and recognition are difficult to reach because there must be a clear evaluation of the crimes and acceptance of guilt by the perpetrators. The perpetrators of the past are often no longer alive, nor are the victims. Instead there are the subsequent generations who are often not related either to victims or perpetrators. Often the next generations are united because of the common ideology or their common beliefs in some ideals of justice (that is why much is said about historical justice, whereas retribution bears rather a symbolic meaning).

Something similar happened in Ukraine during the process of decommunization. This process started not in 2015 when the “Laws on Decommunization” were adopted, but much earlier in the 1990s when Ukraine started to distance itself from its Soviet past. A more appropriate term would be de-Sovietization, as Tetiana Zhurzhenko notes.¹⁵ The process of de-Sovietization is marked by society’s interest in topics that were taboo in the USSR. It should however be stressed that the similarity in tendencies of memory politics does not mean that the Confederacy and the Soviet past are somehow comparable. They are not. The similarity only concerns the memory work. The main imperative in both cases is that memory is promoted as the main instrument in reconciliation. When the Director of the Institute of National Remembrance spoke about the Decommunization Laws in Ukraine, he also spoke about reconciliation (of those who adhere to Soviet memories and those who support the new ways of remembering promoted in post-Soviet Ukraine).¹⁶ Interestingly, in both cases politicians and memory entrepreneurs refer to monu-



Statue-monument “Mother Motherland” in Kyiv.



Monument to Poles killed by the UPA in 1943–1945, Przemyśl, Poland.



The Holocaust memorial monument at Babi Yar in Kyiv, where Nazi troops murdered more than 33,000 Jews in September 1941.

ments. It seems that those who support the dismantling of the monuments think that getting rid of the monuments squeezes out the past represented by these monuments from the space of one’s identification.

IN SUCH A GESTURE of memory work (and the work of those who shape memory politics) the monument, like the past that it represents, becomes what Julia Kristeva calls an abject.¹⁷ The abject is understood as something that evokes horror because it can threaten the existence of the whole system of meanings and knowledge about ourselves. It is the reminder about our own past that we want to forget. A vivid example of an abject is the dead body that horrifies us because it reminds us of our own death.¹⁸ The abject “lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.”¹⁹

In this sense the reminder of the Soviet past (or in the American context, of the Confederacy) is an abject that is difficult to assimilate. It reminds us about something we want to forget. The abject is related to our strong wish to repress, to cast out the past from the space of identification. In such a gesture we say “it is not us,” we turn our backs on it and try to forget it.²⁰ On the one hand, the abject is our unwillingness to see the past and accept it; on the other hand, for those who associate themselves with this past, this is the threat of castration because through the negation of a given past a certain group (who associate themselves with this past) is cast out from the space of representation. That is why it is questionable whether a monument can be inclusive at all. Which memory does the monument recall? Which past is castrated when a new monument is built? Which groups are fighting for recognition and representation? Which groups lose this right? These are the questions that confront researchers and memory workers.

“THE DEFENDERS OF CONFEDERACY MONUMENTS (OR IN THE CASE OF UKRAINE, COMMUNIST MONUMENTS) SPEAK ABOUT THEIR CULTURAL VALUE.”

Here we see again the parallels in discussions about monuments in Ukraine and the USA. The defenders of Confederate monuments (or in the case of Ukraine, communist monuments) speak about their cultural value. In this way, culture becomes the main argument when all other arguments are exhausted. When one is in a situation where political meanings are outdated, when part of society is no longer proud of the past because this past is associated by them with everything negative, then culture comes to the rescue. The monuments are defended as the “national” heritage, which one has no right to ruin because the heritage is a value per se. Nevertheless, heritage is not a neutral term. Political interests often stand behind the arguments of the defenders of monuments in the same way as they do in the case of those opposing the monuments.

The process of heritage formation is complex. In an open democratic society, this process has to take place via open public discussion where the question of memory is discussed publicly. But such an ideal situation is hard to achieve. In most cases monuments are built on the initiative of a certain group, who start speaking in the name of the whole nation. In the end, the heritage becomes the “national” heritage. Here we see again an interesting parallel between Ukraine

and the USA: the monuments to the Confederacy were propagated by a limited number of interested persons (mostly from the association United Daughters of the Confederacy),²¹ but now the supporters of these monuments speak about the “national” heritage. In a similar way, the monuments to Soviet heroes were built by specific people at specific times. It is hard to speak about these monuments as the part of a national heritage because their construction was not discussed in open debates.

A similar situation is seen in the building of post-Soviet monuments dedicated to war-time Ukrainian nationalists, particularly

the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Stepan Bandera. These monuments are initiated by specific groups and often financed by private initiatives, but they are presented in the public space as the wish of the whole nation. Of course, the monuments are not the results of national referenda; they are not the wish of the whole nation or even of the majority. Such referenda are not in fact needed. But what is needed is a common understanding that each monument and each renaming of the street or town is the victory of some group that got the upper hand over their opponents at a specific point in time. As a researcher who has spent a long time studying Confederate monuments said, "Private initiatives have colonized public space"; what is now considered as national is a result of lobbying by a very limited number of people.²² This is the same conclusion to which I came when I studied the monuments to OUN and UPA in Ukraine.²³

The situation when the monuments rapidly succeed one another also presents a risk of a particular nature. When the public sees that the "parade of heroes" changes with such a rapidity, they may fear that the new heroes won't last long. In my conversation with one of the professors of the military university in Kyiv, he said that some of his students, who come from the war currently going on in the East of Ukraine, are afraid to take the official status of veteran because they are afraid that with a change of power, their own status could radically change as well. Of course, it is too early to jump to any conclusions based on one conversation, but it does show the peculiarity that the rapid changes of the monuments can inflict.²⁴

IN WESTERN EUROPE (with some exceptions, of course) the politics of regret became one of the central approaches in memory politics.²⁵ In the politics of regret, the focus is shifted from hero-

ism to mourning the victims and taking responsibility for the suffering inflicted. In Ukraine a similar practice is established in the commemoration of Holodomor, for instance, when the victims take the central position in the memory culture. However, in Ukraine the focus is not only on the victims but also on demands that guilt be recognized. That is why active emphasis is placed on the perpetrator's identity, presented as a general image of everything Soviet. In this process there is a concrete differentiation into "us" and "them." The fact that there were perpetrators among "us" is mostly kept quiet. In this way, the memory becomes an object about which it is difficult to speak. Similarly, the memory of Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists is presented as exclusively positive and heroic while the crimes inflicted by nationalists are not mentioned, although a lot of historical studies in Ukraine and abroad show that Ukrainian nationalists collaborated in the Holocaust. However, this historical knowledge is squeezed out of the public memory (e.g. in urban spaces). Russian propaganda that names everything directed to sustaining Ukrainian sovereignty as "fas-

cist" only fuels these tendencies to repress this knowledge, since any critical remarks about some members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in Ukrainian public space is sometimes seen as "anti-Ukrainian" and the critics are labeled traitors.

The past is worth speaking about not only when it is glorious, but also when it is difficult because it can warn against repeating the tragedies. The main European slogan in the memory of the Second World War – "Never again" – serves as such a warning. In Ukraine, the Institute of National Remembrance has also taken steps towards the Europeanization of memory since 2014. Directly after the end of the Euromaidan protests, the Institute proposed the wording "Never again" as an official slogan in celebration of the Day of the Victory over Nazism. When the war in the East of the country started, though, the slogan became outdated as the very thing that was never to be repeated – the war – is actually being repeated in the country.

REFLECTING ON THE situation in Ukraine when many monuments were dismantled in the havoc of decommunization, and bearing in mind how people in a quite different context lost their lives in clashes about a monument, it is difficult to avoid reflecting on the meaning of monuments and the position of historians in debates on the past. Perhaps, in approaching a difficult memory, it is worth taking clear positions and not being afraid to oppose some disputable commemoration because we may risk being treated as traitors, separatists, etc. In applauding Ukrainian heroes who adhered to ideologies that were far from democratic, we create conditions where it is easier to step back from democratic values and ideals. In either being afraid of the past and fleeing from it or over-idealizing it, we create a fetish that has a strong potential to influence our present and our future. When the past is not discussed openly and under safe conditions, then

the grounds for clashes grow and tragedies such as that in Charlottesville happen. With respect to the Ukrainian situation, Viacheslav Likhachov, a researcher of the rightist movement, noted, "neo-Nazi symbols ... are becoming common in society – they are associated with "heroic defenders" and not with the hooligans who attack the people on the streets. The rightist conservative protective discourse is natural in such conflicts, and it creates a basis for spreading the ultranationalist ideology."²⁶ This shift in the perception

of radical ideologies presents important questions to both politicians and researchers. In this regard, the discourse about the responsibility of "many sides" cannot be accepted when we talk about hate crimes. A clear differentiation of victims and perpetrators is needed. But the problems begin when this differentiation is purely along the lines of nationality or race. The truth is that these groups can be divided according to only one principle: those who suffered from hateful ideology and those who preached those ideologies and committed the crimes.

Finally, is it necessary to reevaluate the monuments? Prob-

ably, yes, because the times are changing as are the ideals. The idols of the past that symbolized heroism and patriotism can become the symbols of racism, hatred, and violence. That is why it is necessary to reevaluate and revise them. But this revision has to be open to the public, and the leaders of the country cannot speak about the responsibility of "many sides" as that places victims and perpetrators on the same level. It is necessary to direct attention and efforts to stop hateful ideologies spreading if we want to live in a democratic society where the rights of individuals are respected. When people are killed because of monuments, we have to understand that monuments are not simply "stones in space." Perhaps in place of the monument to General Robert E. Lee it would be more appropriate to construct a monument to the victims of the clashes in Charlottesville, with a clear message that society condemns such crimes and will do everything possible to prevent them. The fact that a white American woman became the victim of white racists shows that the borderlines are not found in "race" or any other social construct but in hateful ideologies of whichever political color. ■

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