

# Reflections on post-Soviet Memory

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"Cities as mirrors of civilisation are products of many centuries of stratification, which result from a commixture of culture, ideas and values," said Jacek Purchla the director of the International Culture Centre in Kraków during the opening of the 3rd Heritage Forum of Central Europe.

Recalling the words of the Italian writer, Italo Calvino, Purchla added that "the city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the grating of the windows, the

banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags..." This memory of the city and the ideas that it carries are not always the memory that you want to remember. An attempt to forget and to deconstruct the memory of the city or its elements can be particularly strong in post-Soviet countries where, as Purchla emphasised, Sovietisation collided with tradition. Logic, symbolism and memory of those cities were disrupted by a new trend in art, new memory, simultaneously entering into a dialogue with the existing one.

## Restructuring identity

The city as a place bearing the marks of history seems to be an important element in creating identity and collective memory. It is filled with sites, monuments, streets and neighbourhoods, but also abound with non-places of memory – places that a city wants to forget and thus deconstruct in order to restructure its identity.

This was the background for my conversation with Żanna Komar, an art historian and historian of architecture. In recent remarks, Komar addressed the issue of changes in the city through the presentation of trauma and by illustrating the various forms of commemorating two world wars. She also discussed how differently the events of the Second World War are remembered in Western Europe versus Eastern Europe. In the West, the focus was placed more on the trauma of death and on the Holocaust, where Eastern Europe focused more on affirming the victory.

According to Komar, Poland is kind of on the border between the western and eastern halves of memory. Differences in the forms of remembering depend on the cultural, political and social situation, but also on the public psyche. In the East, the victims of the war were treated not as subjects of an event, but more as a means to an end. A Second

World War monument therefore served as atonement on the one hand, and created a social fiction on the other. It was a means of dealing with the war while at the same time becoming a way to build the identity of another empire.

A similar function of accountability and creation was served with the demolition of statues of Lenin after the fall of communism throughout the region. In this case, however, it was not about remembering but more about forgetting and denial. In Kraków the monument to Lenin fell 25 years ago, on December 10th 1989 following protests organised by the Federation of Fighting Youth. Removing the communist statues of Lenin in Ukraine continues until today. In 2014 over 400 monuments were demolished. The Ukrainian experience of socialism was much longer than in Poland, says Komar, thus the society needs more time to oppose it and recover from it. The idea of historical awareness spread slowly and in 2014 it reached its peak. The gesture of deconstructing the monument became a step into the future and proof that the nation desires change.

“The Lenin statute became an obstacle in building a new identity,” Komar says during our conversation. “It obscured a different past, a pre-socialist past which could not otherwise be recovered other than through the destruction of the monument.” She quotes the philosopher Boris Groys who once said that the “old archives do not allow the creation of a new history.”

The “artistic project of destruction”, as Komar calls it, became an organised artistic event possessing its own drama, limited in time and created a logical narrative or a set of symbols: images, gestures, passwords and objects in space. Its task is to activate participants and allow for an expression of unfettered creativity. The event introduces amateur elements and can be seen as an open formula masterpiece. The act is often documented. And this documentation – photos, videos – along with the remains of the monument itself, become a component in the memory of subsequent generations. The pedestal of the statue becomes an artefact.

## **Memory is political**

Museums and memory studies have found a way to commemorate such an act. An excellent example was the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the various ways its existence and destruction is remembered. There is a Berlin Wall Museum at Checkpoint Charlie which presents a permanent exhibition on the history of the Berlin Wall and many related topics from security services of the GDR (Stasi), the opposition movement and the events following the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

This shows a unique approach to commemoration. It is not so much about a place of a once-existing wall or statute of Lenin, but rather this commemoration follows the liberating act of destroying the monuments. The remaining fragments become documents themselves. As noted by Komar, “they speak and move modern audiences much more than fiction.” Within a generation, this form of commemoration allows for a distance and illustrates that memory is political. Its form and content depend on the socio-political movements. Komar predicts that the process of historical awareness and the spreading of anti-socialist ideas in Ukraine will continue to move further and further to the East.

A similar relic of the post-Soviet socialist realism are urban districts which also recently generated interest, primarily as tourist attractions. This reflects some new trends in culture that made its way to Central and Eastern Europe from the West, namely a fascination with vast apartment complexes such as Nowa Huta in Kraków, or the Sykhiivskyi District in Lviv. Like with the statues of Lenin, this trend is also delayed in Ukraine. In her article titled "Soviet Modernism from the Western Perspective", Komar even writes about "a unique architectonic phenomenon with specific qualities, both in terms of aesthetics and meaning". She characterised it as a style that has become recognised in the 21st century and relates to the industrial construction from Stalin's death through "Khrushchev's thaw[ing] until the beginning of perestroika". Districts are on the one hand completely rejected and negated, and on the other hand, arouse admiration and evoke nostalgia.

An example of such a recognised district is the "Old" Nowa Huta in Kraków, which is a representative form of urban architecture. It embodies all the construction principles of socialist realism. An ongoing reactivation of the Nowa Huta district aims to restore the character of the Central Square and the vast space around the Avenue of Roses. A similar action, according to Komar, may not take place in Ukraine. It is true that socialist modernism is slowly being rediscovered in countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Khreshchatyk – the main avenue of Kyiv rebuilt after the war in the 1950s in the style of socialist realism. But Ukraine's poor infrastructure, financial crisis and a general lack of maintenance makes a reactivation of such districts very challenging. Komar additionally notes that "in contrast to the well-constructed housing estates in Nowa Huta and its urban design, the apartment complexes in the East are made of flimsy materials and have not been reconstructed since they were built. They would probably not survive the test of time."

## **Record of history and emotions**

In the post-Soviet world the 1990s, labelled as Likhije 90-e (the wild 1990s), represent the time right after the breakup of the Soviet Union when it seemed that everything was possible. It was believed that in the place of the Soviet space, a new garden city will be created. Although it is accurate to point out that this period was not accompanied by any cultural, artistic or architectural trends, it was a time of powerful emotions to which some people may still nostalgically return.

In this context the city is treated as a memorial museum whose exhibits are the streets and neighbourhoods. It is a record of history and the emotions of people. It contains many stories and ideologies. Also, as the city is constantly changing and it becomes an arena of different memories. Just like shadows, various forms of nostalgia roam the city. There are those that construct our identity and those that stand in the way. In the post-Soviet states this memory is now being constructed differently. In different ways these countries had to recover from Sovietisation and begin to build or reconstruct its history anew. As in the case of Ukraine, memory is created on the basis of an act of deconstruction which later becomes constructive. Elsewhere, as in Poland, districts of the Soviet modernism are reactivated to mark a new trend in urbanism and nostalgia to glance at them from a distance. In Ukraine, the time for such nostalgic memory has not yet come.

What unites Ukraine and Poland is a universal need for commemoration. Still, in these countries there is an ongoing battle for the right of remembrance and how it should be commemorated. And just as different as these cultures are, and how different their history and the political situation are, so is their memory, which includes the method of remembrance and commemoration.

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