

Dances with Despots:
exploring the current representation of monumental
statues and visitor engagement with these 'ghosts' of
past regimes within Eastern Europe
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*"Ghosts" inevitably emerge: odd fragments
of memory that wander homeless in the
wake of social and individual efforts to
render the past coherent.*

(Leshkovich, 2008, p. 5)

In this paper we examine how rhetorical symbols of past regimes, incarnated in the form of monumental statues, are re-presented after regime change. Taken as a paradigm case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for the wider processes of reconsidering meaning of past monuments, our research sites offer a "mature" case study which benefits from a long-term view on the ways in which monuments and statues of former political leaders are treated before, during and, particularly, after a significant sociopolitical shift. The main conundrum at the heart of this study is the juxtaposition of the solidity and apparent immutability of statues and their changing interpretations, as

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reflected in shifts in their treatment and in varying reception over time, and at different sites, by their local and international viewers. Consequently, our key aim is to work towards an understanding of the complex ways that nations, communities and localities deal with these once powerful and now symbolic tangible remnants of the recent past in order to shape and, indeed, consolidate the political present.

The research context - Williams (2007, p. 8) defines a monument as “a sculpture, structure or physical marker designed to memorialise”. He claims that “a memorial is seen to be, if not apolitical at least safe in the refuge of history”, as it capitalizes on respect our culture demands to be given to all dead. But disrespect can also appear as an early, engaged response to political change, a way of moving beyond the all-or-nothing decisions on how to treat markers of significant suffering, with the usual options being obliteration or sanctification (Williams, 2007, p. 185). The monumental statues forming the core of our study are not, generally, witnesses to atrocities or immediate markers of suffering. They are seen, however, as glorifying, directly or indirectly, an oppressive regime whose vanquishing forms the founding narrative of the current political system.

We identify four general strategies for dealing with such statues: destruction, delegitimization, decontextualization and depoliticization and these can be classified on a spectrum. The first strategy, destruction tends to happen at the point of political change, though the act of destruction lends itself to later commemoration. Under delegitimization they are mocked, decontextualization where they are moved to remote spaces drained of meaningful associations such as Grutas Park and depoliticization occurs where they can be viewed as art works of the previous regime rather than figureheads or as ideological statements. The last three strategies for dealing with disgraced

statues invite visitors to participate in creating or emphasizing the point of rupture at the end of the previous regime.

Focusing here on Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular on the outward-facing. Public sites of Memento Park in Hungary, Grūtas Park in Lithuania, and the grounds of the National History Museum in Tallinn, we analyse how the very solid figureheads, the ghosts of previous regimes, are reconfigured to become agents of peace and reconciliation or of revanchism and denigration, promoting emotional responses, harmony or tension. This study of statues as monuments to cultural change and changing cultures is topical and timely. Statues are often seen as both focus and pretext for discussion of key figures' role in history (Drayton, 2019). At present the statue parks under consideration here are both places of fragmented memory and forgetting. Folk memories blur timelines and can become both a threat to and evidence of acculturation as narratives change and shift over time. Managing these processes of change becomes part of the successive governments' necessary strategic agendas to maintain the political status quo (Ashworth and Graham, 1997; Hicks 2020).

Methods and fieldwork - Fieldwork material of our study consists of ethnographic observations and interviews with visitors and curatorial staff carried out in museums and memorial sites in Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and Poland between 2016 and 2019, as part of a project investigating relationships between visitors and recent history exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe. In this paper we draw on part of that fieldwork: the afterlife of statues representing the communist past. Our collected material consists of field notes, interviews, and discussion notes. We agree with Erll (2011, p. 110) that “memories are robustly plural” and yet plurality is problematic within dominant narratives in the

political present. Thus, our summary is an abstraction of the multiple and multifaceted ways in which, these experiences are often reflected on in the months and years after the visits, helping to fix or at least disseminate contemporary and shaped readings of the past.

Drawing on these ethnographic observations and interviews, we explore how visitors engage with these spaces and the statues themselves, and query the expected roles and ‘appropriate’ behaviour/emotional responses of tourist/visitors to such sites. Formal narratives and representations of the political past confined and contained as a heritage park are relatively straightforward. Meanwhile, the range of emotions felt by those for whom they formed part of the everyday lived experience and the subsequent generations for whom the park represents Bell’s (1997, p. 827) “unsettling ghosts of place” remains complex and unruly. We analyse visitors’ (including our own) experiences, and examine the impact of their relationship with the recent past. Are tourists also ‘ghost hunters’ or ‘bringer of ghosts’ to these sites?

Findings and conclusion - Armada (2010) argues that when one memory is prioritised, other memories are executed. However, our study suggests memory is complex and neither linear nor permanently erased or erasable just as the symbolic structures of memory – the monumental statuary can be erased yet remain in popular and public memory. We additionally conclude that being a tourist is a complex experience often requiring a respectful approach regardless of background or country of origin. However, our study shows that in some cases tourists are invited to mock, to actively perform ‘disrespect’ in ways which would be unthinkable for local people. We determine that international tourists may act as a proxy for local non-visitors, performing disobedience, helping to raise, and erase the ghosts, to render them harmless.

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