

Gabowitsch, Mischa

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Mischa Gabowitsch (mischa.gabowitsch@univie.ac.at)
Research Center for the History of Transformations, University of Vienna

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Mischa Gabowitsch

Keeping track of Soviet war memorials

Monuments commemorating the Red Army's participation in WWII are almost certainly the most widespread type of war memorial on our planet. Built in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials, they were designed and erected by actors ranging from central leadership figures from Moscow to individual Soviet prisoners of war and foreign sculptors or local administrations. Such memorials are found from Manchuria to Norway and California to Israel, though most were built in or near the European theatres of war where Soviet soldiers fought and died: in the Western parts of the Soviet Union and in Central Europe. These monuments were built at different times, from the first wartime burial spot indicators to post-Soviet cenotaphs. They were erected in a range of different locations, from remote forests to military and civilian cemeteries to central urban squares. They have served a wide variety of different purposes, from grave markers to propaganda vehicles, with one and the same monument often being used in multiple and intertwined ways.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, given the totalitarian ambitions of its political system, and unlike several West European countries, the Soviet Union never had a single institution responsible for their design, construction and upkeep. Thus, no official central register of such monuments existed either within the Soviet Union or for any of its satellite states. Starting in the late Socialist period, agencies in a number of countries attempted to compile such registers for specific (usually preservationist, but sometimes patriotic) purposes. Since the collapse of the Soviet system, compiling catalogues and databases has been among the main genres of commemorative activity and scholarly engagement with Soviet war memorials, along with case studies of individual monuments, typically devoted to especially large and prominent specimens.²

1) This is an adapted version of the internal review that I wrote at the publisher's request. Although the book's title page mentions me as 'reviewer of the English-language edition', I was provided only with an already typeset version of the English edition, and no revisions could be made in response to my review. Czarnecka's statement, on p. 26, that my review, among other contributions, 'gave this book its final shape' is thus incorrect and was removed from part of the print run at my request. Work on this version of the article was made possible by Austrian Science Fund (FWF) grant no. M 3377-G for the project 'Soviet war memorials and global networks'.

2) For greater detail see Mischa Gabowitsch, 'What has happened to Soviet war memorials since 1989/91? An overview,' *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 2, 2021, 185-222, specifically the section 'Legal context, institutions, inventories' (p. 189-197).

Monuments large and small

Among the attempts to survey the entire landscape of (certain types of) Soviet war memorials, Dominika Czarnecka's voluminous book about monuments in gratitude to the Red Army in Poland stands out both in its scope and in the level of historical detail she lays out. Other compendia tend to proceed phenomenologically, starting from extant monuments in their present-day shape. Czarnecka relies on a plethora of Polish archival sources, in addition to published materials, to present a meticulous account of the construction and subsequent uses of the most prominent type of Red Army monument found in Poland—monuments erected in public locations, often in city squares, i.e. all those outside cemeteries. This wealth of material should suffice to earn her book a prominent place on the shelf of any serious student of Soviet war monuments anywhere, and publication of the English version will facilitate its dissemination well beyond readers of the Polish version, published in 2015 and soon out of print.³

In an almost 200-page appendix to her book, Czarnecka provides an expanded and updated version of a catalogue initially compiled by the Polish Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites in 1988, with details about 476 gratitude monuments. This should make her book the first-stop reference for anyone interested in (the now largely removed) Soviet war monuments in Poland, complementing a 2003 Russian-language catalogue that focuses on cemeteries.⁴ But it is the middle part of her work (chapter 2 to 4) that is a true treasure trove for anyone interested in the biographies of monuments and especially those looking for material for a transnational history of Soviet war memorials. In these three empirically dense chapters, Czarnecka surveys the construction and uses of the gratitude monuments, discusses attacks on those monuments, and chronicles eight selected commemorative sites from construction to removal.

Each of these chapters offers much interesting detail. Chapter two covers monument construction and its financing as well as the use of monuments for commemorative and political ceremonies. One of the most interesting aspects here concerns the relationship between the monuments' interconnected roles as burial site markers and sacralised symbolic spots. We know from case studies of Soviet war memorials in other countries (from the GDR via Hungary to the USSR itself) that the geography of burial and reburial often had a strategic aspect in staking the Red Army's, and more largely the Soviet Union's, symbolic claim to a central location. The Polish case is particularly instructive in that the many instances of removal and relocation in the post-socialist period were often accompanied by exhumations, which, as Czarnecka details, repeatedly revealed discrepancies between the claimed and verifiable number, identity, and even presence of bodies buried beneath the monuments. The sub-chapter about financing monument construction features interesting evidence of how supposedly grassroots fundraising was actually orchestrated from above, and money was siphoned off from more pressing reconstruction tasks. It does not, however, discuss how the

3) Dominika Czarnecka, *Pomniki wdzięczności Armii Czerwonej w Polsce Ludowej i w III Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2015.

4) Makarov et al. *Katalog zakhoroneniy sovetskikh voinov, voennoplennykh i grazhdanskikh lits, pogibshikh v gody II mirovoy voyny i pogrebennykh na territorii Respubliki Pol'sha*. Warsaw / Moscow: Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii; Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii; Sovet okhrany pamyati bor'by i muchenichestva Respubliki Pol'sha, 2003.

money was spent: the actual production process, including the role of foundries, quarries, engineers, architects, juries and construction workers remains a black box. While a number of sculptors are listed, the precise conditions under which they worked and their motivations and relationships with their patrons are not discussed in detail.

Chapter three provides numerous examples of attacks on Soviet war monuments—from organised efforts to blow them up or, in one case, pull them down them using a tram, to lone individuals smearing them with paint or covering them with slogans. It also discusses how such attacks were linked to larger waves of social and political unrest, especially in 1956 and 1981, and shows both the types of punishments that were usually meted out before and after 1956 and the ways in which such incidents were covered up or condemned in the official press. This chapter is highly detailed in its descriptions of individual cases (often gleaned from official investigation records), making it a useful basis for comparison with similar attacks in e.g. East Germany, the Baltics, or Ukraine, which appear to have been less frequent and are at any rate less systematically documented in the literature.

Chapter four presents a more detailed history of eight selected gratitude monuments in places ranging from mid-sized towns such as Stargard Szczeciński and the former ‘Little Moscow’ of Legnica to Cracow and Warsaw. These more in-depth case studies occasionally go further than the overview in chapter two in mentioning the actors and mechanics of monument construction: in the case of Legnica, for example, a technical foundry and local residents commandeered to take part in building what was to become one of the most emblematic ‘brotherhood’ monuments; in the case of Koszalin, details about the various construction materials used. However, Czarnecka’s main focus is on decision-making and on questions such as the symbolic significance of the urban spaces in which the monuments were erected. Each of the sub-chapters also includes a highly detailed account of post-socialist discussions about the monument’s removal, relocation or modification. This primarily takes the form of lengthy quotes from the relevant debates in the press and especially in the city councils and lists of associations taking positions for or against removal. While that makes these sub-chapters somewhat difficult to read as a coherent narrative, it turns them into a useful reference for those interested in the detail of the debates in each of the cities examined, and a great collection of material for students of preservationist vs iconoclastic arguments in post-socialist contexts.

The fifth and final chapter of the book attempts to summarise what happened to gratitude monuments in post-socialist Poland. It charts efforts to destroy, remove or relocate Soviet war monuments after 1989 through numerous individual examples and statistical tables. It also traces the arguments of proponents and also opponents of removal. In this chapter even more than in the case studies, Czarnecka does try to represent both sides’ perspectives but hardly attempts to hide her sympathy for those who advocated removal. She concludes with a brief discussion of some of the new monuments that have replaced the removed structures. This chapter reads very differently now from when the Polish version was originally published, given the PiS government’s subsequent centralised (and, in international comparison, unprecedented) campaign to remove virtually all Soviet war monuments. Analytically it offers less purchase on the complexity of the topic than recent work by, for example, Ewa Ochman or Nancy Waldmann, and most notably fails to offer a discussion of the multi-faceted ways

in which contemporary Polish artists have engaged with surviving Soviet war monuments.⁵ Nevertheless, like the other substantive chapters in the book, it offers a wealth of interesting source materials, such as numerous quotations from participants in debates on removal, including various Polish associations and official Russian representatives.

Communists vs the people?

All the rich empirical detail that Czarnecka presents in the main part of her book, however, is embedded in an analytical framework that is problematic in several respects.

The author often refers indiscriminately to ‘the Soviet authorities’ and ‘the Communists’, failing to distinguish in substantive and meaningful ways between such different actors as Polish Communist Party officials or state administrators, representatives of the Soviet party, and Soviet military leaders. At times her story reads like a battle between the oppressive forces of evil in the guise of Communism and their downtrodden yet often resistant victims—‘the’ or ‘most’ Poles. The problem with this approach is that it makes it difficult to distinguish between different types of actors and to identify the logic according to which each behaved, beyond the general desire to establish Russian / Communist dominance over Poland. While geopolitical and ideological motifs undoubtedly formed the overall framework for monument construction, its actual dynamic cannot be understood without reference to other aspects. Czarnecka could have looked at patronage networks linking sculptors and architects with party and military leaders. She could have tried to understand how exactly the army’s (and individual units’ or commanders’) desire for self-glorification interacted with the agendas of propaganda and ideology departments. She could also have analysed local Communists’ own agency, a topic that has increasingly been at the forefront of interest among historians of post-war central Europe even for the period before Stalin’s death.⁶ However, she doesn’t do any of this. Like many historians of Soviet statuary before her, she succumbs to the temptation of using the passive voice throughout her narrative (monuments ‘were erected’), thus neglecting to probe questions of agency and even possible conflict between different parts of the Communist ‘regime’. Instead, she sometimes goes so far as to suggest that ‘some actions of the Communist authorities seem irrational’ (168), without even considering that the internal military rationality of self-commemoration might at times simply have been at odds with the broader Communist rationality of seeking local legitimacy.

This problem is exacerbated in the first chapter of the book, which takes up almost 80 pages yet hardly touches on monuments at all, instead offering a survey of the Soviet and Russian military presence in Poland in 1944–1993 (and reaching back to the Polish-Soviet war of 1920) that is supposed to make readers understand why ‘most Poles’ wanted Soviet

5) Ewa Ochman, ‘Spaces of Nationhood and Contested Soviet War Monuments in Poland: The Warsaw Monument to the Brotherhood in Arms’, in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 477–93; Nancy Waldmann, ‘Koniec przeobrażeń? Dekomunizacja przestrzeni publicznej w Polsce na Ziemiach Zachodnich i Północnych w latach 2016–2017 – wybrane przykłady’, *Rocznik Ziemi Zachodnich* 2, 2018, 714–766.

6) For a good example, see Kateřina Čapková, Chad Bryant and Diana V. Dumitru, ‘Undone from within: the downfall of Rudolf Slánský and Czechoslovak-Soviet dynamics under Stalinism,’ forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern History*.

war memorials removed from public space in the post-socialist period. This chapter is written in the traditions of Polish national-conservative historiography and is reminiscent of the tone of historical writing in the 1990s. Poland's society appears here as socially and ethnically monolithic: social divisions or class conflicts are not mentioned at all, nor is the massive presence of Ukrainians, Belarusians or Jews in interwar Poland. Indeed, the word 'Jew' appears in the book only in a reference to Jewish women being raped by Soviet soldiers in 1920 and in cases of stones from Jewish cemeteries being used by 'Communists' when building their monuments. In a 700-plus page book related to war memory in Poland, the epicentre of the extermination of Europe's Jews, Czarnecka manages to dispense with even mentioning the words 'Holocaust,' 'Shoah,' or 'Auschwitz,' except for a comment about Russians killing four prisoners who had escaped from a death march, and occasional references to an unspecified 'Oświęcim State Museum.' She also fails to note the fact that it was the Red Army that liberated the worst extermination camp in human history. All of this is indicative of the ethno-national, 'good Poles vs evil Communists' approach in which the author embeds her priceless empirical material. The few passages that might add nuance to the image of the Red Army as no more than a barbaric occupying force are almost immediately taken back ('Red Army soldiers did put an end to the German terror, but committed crimes of their own,' p. 99). No mention is made of population groups in Poland, other than 'the Communists,' who might have had cause to welcome any aspect of the Soviet / Red Army presence in 1945 or, later, from indigenous or foreign concentration camp survivors to those who benefitted from the Communist land reforms, from early post-war intellectuals seduced by Communist ideals to the late Socialist descendants of settlers from Soviet-annexed Eastern Poland in the new western and northern territories. Instead, Czarnecka's narrative often mixes description, normative assessments and speculation, often substituting post-1989 evaluations for perspectives contemporary to the monuments' construction and using sweeping phrases such as 'in the eyes of the Polish people' or 'from the people's perspective' to make what may very well have been the majority attitude appear as the sole authentic and relevant point of view. When they suddenly crop up in some of the lengthy quotes from post-1989 opponents of monument removal, arguments that qualify the view of the Red Army as a force of evil are presented as if coming out of nowhere or from the deluded imaginations of Poles not firm enough in their historical knowledge.

Methods and sources

It would have been possible to offer a more nuanced and complex account without relativising Soviet crimes in Poland, and without distracting from the very real reasons why most Poles *did* see Red Army monuments as symbols of occupation. No serious historian can doubt the reality of Nazi-Soviet cooperation in dismembering and subjugating Poland in 1939, the murderous nature of Soviet rule in wartime and post-war Poland, or the fact that Poles in the regions incorporated into the Soviet Union were singled out for particularly harsh repressions. Nor can it be controversial to state that the Red Army was guilty of sexualised violence in its march through Poland or that, along with the NKVD, it became part of the repressive apparatus of Communist control as Poland's borders were redrawn and the country was set on

a path of integration into the Soviet bloc. Yet simply restating such facts is not tantamount to explaining the logics of action that led to them and that also resulted in the creation of war memorials. Polish and foreign historians alike have already produced much more complex analyses of Polish society.⁷ Historians working in former Soviet republics have similarly shown how the reasons why different actors participated in Socialist monument construction could vary, well beyond ideology and coercion.⁸ Conversely, motivations for resisting or attacking Soviet war monuments were no less variable, both in the satellite states and within the Soviet Union itself. Alcohol was often an important factor, and so was the use of Nazi symbols, often employed by young people in particular to shock society and the authorities. Yet Czarnecka goes to great lengths to stress that ‘the consumption of alcohol before the deed was, at least in some cases, only a means of gathering the necessary courage and overcoming mental barriers’ (p. 203). In the case of swastikas painted on monuments, she speculates that they may have been references to Soviet-Nazi cooperation in 1939–41 instead of simply acknowledging the provocative potential inherent in appropriating the symbols most actively vilified in socialist-era Polish (and Soviet) popular culture. A more complex analysis going beyond black-and-white narratives of oppression and resistance could have added much-needed nuance to Czarnecka’s account of the gratitude monuments, and indeed reinforced our understanding of ideological and symbolic colonisation rather than justifying it.

In terms of source materials, the book’s most glaring shortcoming is that—with the exception of two documents published in a Polish edition of NKVD reports to Stalin—it does not use any Russian sources about war monument construction in Poland, or about Socialist-era commemorative policies in general, be it archival documents, press reports or memoirs. This is surely one of the reasons why Czarnecka fails to distinguish clearly between the different kinds of Soviet actors involved in monument construction in Poland—regular soldiers, liberated prisoners of war, army engineers, commanders of Red Army units, military governors, propaganda officers and professional sculptors and architects. She does mention some of these different categories of actors in passing but does not attempt to discern the different logics behind their involvement—something that might have helped her account for the differences in shapes, symbolism and inscriptions between individual monuments, which she mentions but leaves largely unexplained.

For much the same reason, Czarnecka’s representation of domestic Soviet commemoration is typically caricatural or simply false: thus she strangely claims that, inside the USSR, ‘in 1948 any public mentions of war were prohibited’ (p. 124).⁹ This misrepresents the chronology and topography of monument construction within the Soviet Union, and generally disregards the numerous case studies of (and published archival sources on) Soviet war monuments in countries other than Poland that exist in Belarusian, Bulgarian, Czech, English, Estonian,

7) See, for example, Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944–1947: ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak; Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2012; Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*, Warsaw : Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014.

8) See, for example, Sergei Kruk, ‘Profit rather than Politics: the Production of Lenin Monuments in Soviet Latvia,’ *Social Semiotics* 20: 3, 2010, 247–76.

9) For a detailed discussion of this period see Mischa Gabowitsch, ‘Victory Day before the cult: war commemoration in the USSR, 1945–1965’ in David L. Hoffmann, ed., *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2021, 64–85.

German, Hungarian, Latvian, Ukrainian and, needless to say, Russian.¹⁰ Of course her focus is on Poland, and it would be unfair to expect in-depth knowledge of monument construction and use in other countries, but even some superficial familiarity with that literature could have led her to nuance her assumptions about the similarities in how such monuments were constructed in different places. Thus, to mention a few examples, in Czechoslovakia and specifically the Czech lands, grassroots monuments expressing genuine gratitude to the Red Army for liberation from German occupation were indeed widespread in 1945–47 and not just a figment of Soviet propaganda.¹¹ In Bulgaria, the ubiquitous gratitude monuments for Russia's intervention against the Ottoman Empire in 1878 provided a very different kind of context for the erection of new memorials in and after 1945.¹² And in East Germany, the local Socialist Unity Party soon developed a particular zeal in commissioning Red Army memorials even after the Soviet administration had lost interest in supervising their construction.¹³

Having said that, there are, of course, also highly interesting parallels to be drawn in terms of monument construction between Poland and the other countries that had a Soviet military presence and, just as importantly, there were transnational connections that remain to be explored: like Helga Köpstein before her, Czarnecka mentions in passing the involvement of the Noack foundry from West Berlin in casting monuments to Red Army soldiers in Poland (p. 249); some of the sculptors she lists were also active in other socialist countries. Czarnecka's book offers plenty of material for such comparison and will therefore remain an important reference not only for the Polish case, but for the study of Soviet-style military commemoration in a broader international context.

Conclusion

The original version of Czarnecka's book was published by the state-affiliated Institute of National Remembrance not long before the onset of the 2017 wave of top-down monument removal in Poland. Thus, regardless of its scholarly merits, it can be read as an academic justification for that wave of government-ordered iconoclasm. Readers of the English translation will hopefully be more interested in the book's contribution to the research literature. Any serious study of Soviet war monuments needs to take into account the whole range of roles

10) To name just a few examples: János Pótó, *Az emlékeztetés helyei. Emlékművek és politika*, Budapest: Osiris, 2003, 126–139; Helga Köpstein, *Die sowjetischen Ehrenmale in Berlin*, Berlin: Rossi, 2006; V.I. Adamushko, *Uvekovechenie pamyati zashchitnikov Otechestva i zhertv voin v Belarusi, 1941–2008 gg.: dokumenty i materialy*, Minsk: Natsyianal'ny arkhiv Rëspubliki Belarus', 2008; Scott W. Palmer, 'How Memory was Made: the Construction of the Memorial to the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad,' *The Russian Review*, 68:3, 2009, 373–407; Jan Galandauer, Ivan Malý and Oldřich Kortus, *Národní pam'tník na Vítkově*, Prague: National Museum, 2012, 82–93; Birgit Viotti, *Nõukogude perioodil Teise maailmasõja mälestuseks rajatud memoriaalid ning nende roll Eesti kultuurimaastikul*, MA Thesis, Estonian University of Life Sciences, 2011; Nils Muižnieks and Vita Zelče, *Karojošā piemiņa: 16. marts un 9. Maijs*, Rīga: Zinātne, 2011, 197–237.

11) Martina Winkler, *Panzer in Prag: der fotografische Blick auf die Invasion von 1968*, Düsseldorf: C.W. Leske, 2018; Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019.

12) Nikolai Vukov, *Monuments Between Life and Death: Memory and Representation in Monuments of the Socialist Past in Bulgaria*, Ph.D Dissertation, Central European University Budapest, 2005.

13) For examples and discussion of how this affected their post-socialist fortunes, see Leonie Beiersdorf, *Die doppelte Krise. Ostdeutsche Erinnerungszeichen nach 1989*, Berlin / Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2015.

that they play at different times and for different people, beyond their function as markers of geopolitical dominance. Czarnecka barely addresses this complexity, but the vast amount of material she compiled can help ask more complex questions about art, agency and local dynamics. Her spadework is already beginning to inform sophisticated studies of Soviet war memorials in Poland that place them in larger historical context and pay attention to the different actors involved in their construction, use, modification and removal.¹⁴

14) E.g. Szymon Piotr Kubiak, 'Gratitude. The Red Army Memorial in Szczecin: A Geographical, Topographical, and Biographical Perspective,' *Ikonotheka* 30, 2020, 89–112.



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