

DEATH AND THE DESECRATED: MONUMENTS OF THE SOCIALIST PAST IN POST-1989 BULGARIA

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The end of socialism as state ideology touched deeply ingrained mechanisms of social expression and representation and, together with the changed attitude to the legacy of the socialist past, led to deep transformations in the notions of sacred places, ritual sites, death and the sacred. Monuments of the socialist epoch were among those sites of public memory, which bore most directly these shifts in representation, and their fate as destroyed, desecrated, neglected or fallen into oblivion presents an important episode in the history of the post-1989 period. The proper treatment and interpretation of the socialist monuments was a key public issue in all the countries of the Eastern Europe after 1989 and, with varying intensity, has remained important in the following years.

Among the primary problems postsocialist societies faced were how to reintegrate those former emblems of power into the new social and political context and how to acquire distance from the past without losing the memory of it. The ways socialist monuments were treated varied--they were destroyed and dismantled, reshaped and expelled from the central places they occupied, sent to museums and storehouses, secretly stolen at night, sold as metal scraps or remolded into other forms and symbolic representations. Parallel to these efforts ran attempts to reinstall them and to reconstitute their former symbolic potential. Contracts for preserving cultural legacy, declarations in support of particular monuments, attempts to organize rituals and ceremonies in the way they were performed before 1989 and campaigns for cleaning monuments on memorial days and anniversaries were the usual counteractive measures taken in monuments' support. In their turn, these acts were responded to with declarations condemning "re-communization processes" and with strikes and protests against the reinstalation and renovation of monuments.

In most of these monumental dramas there is a thick network of political implications and motives related to dealing with monuments during this period. The relation of monuments as specific representations of death to politics is twofold--monuments depend on politics to reinterpret them and reinscribe them with new meanings and monuments help to understand and shape politics in a particular way. However, although being very closely intertwined with problems related to politics, the manner in which monuments are treated has yet another aspect, to which I would like to pay closer attention in the current text. This aspect concerns the perception and interpretation of death and the sacred, and the reconfiguration of the special meanings that death gained during socialism. It is a problem of reshaping the memory of those whose figures stood behind the representative bodies of monuments, as well as of how societies construct the sacred and how they manage to deal with sites and images, which they previously considered as possessing sacred dimensions. This aspect has been pointed out by Verdery, but it remains largely dependent on the political interpretation of the sacred, which she had chosen as a focus. Although insisting on the sacred component of every authority, she sees the sacralization of socialist regimes as determined mainly by their position of power and on their role as "guardians of secular values, especially the scientific laws of historical progress." In my view, the sacred component in the socialist power of representation is determined largely by the specific utilizations of death and on the role of death in the constitution of the sacred.

This perspective helps us better understand desecration as dependent not wholly on the form and the extent of changing monuments' original standing, but on the very attempt of treating a monument as excluded from the realm of sacredness. By "desecration" in the current text, I mean the undoing of the symbolic

network, which has attributed a halo of sacredness to sites used for signifying and representing death. In spite of the specific overtones, which the term "desecration" has acquired in the public debates after 1989, and despite its frequent use as a label of condemnation against iconoclasts, I have used it in an attempt to address its core meaning of standing outside and against the forms, which the sacred has taken in a given community. Desecration is to be understood as an act of dissociating a particular object or locus from the powerful resource provided by the realm of the sacred; a subversive act of annihilating the halo of protection around it, and of expelling it into the sphere of the profane.

In order to be able to see this specific transformation we need to take a step backwards--taking the construction of sacredness in the socialist system of representation as a launching point for the events and processes that took place after 1989. The socialist notion of sacred bodies and immortal heroism had several important aspects. First of all, it was an all-encompassing discourse of special dead bodies, which formed a pantheon of heroes and martyrs to the communist idea. The elements of this heroic cult included the notion of death by exploitation in an unfair battle; the special condition of heroic bodies in battle who overcome great odds; and the notion of sacrifice as the ultimate and worthiest goal to be pursued in hero's life. All these elements found overt expression in the inscriptions and verses on monuments and heroic plaques to the communist sacred dead, in the sculptural representations of heroes, and in the inclusions of monuments in socialist rituals, art, and propaganda materials. Monuments appeared as certain pedestals to immortality, which represented, in a sacralized form, personal fates and collective experience in an unbreakable continuity between death and life. The infusing of these representations with sacredness was especially emphasized in the sober ceremonies that took place around monuments -- with their special occasions and symbolic locations, with the blurring of mourning and celebratory overtones in them, with the pilgrimages and sacred routes, which they initiated and established. Every aspect of World War II partisan and communist underground activity or any sober event related to communist experience was commemorated and considered sacred. The extreme division of space into the smallest details to reference the narrative of heroic death

paralleled with an ultimate intention to confirm and to exhibit death by creating and referring to heroes' remains, death places and memorial inscriptions. Almost by necessity, exhibition places surrounded memorial complexes and alleys of immortals regularly formed the path to memorials and monumental ensembles. They served to provoke gratitude and respect to the gift of dead heroes, whose daring acts obliged others to follow closely in their footsteps and to try to be worthy of their example.

After the collapse of the socialist ideology in 1989, this strongly sacralized discourse started to wither away dramatically. Not only did the pantheon of heroes and the consistency of the communist heroic cult crumble down under the new perspective of distancing from the socialist past, but the whole notion of sacrifice was disclaimed and considered as a mere tool of the striving to achieve symbolic power. Heroes and emblems of the regime could not be considered as worth commemorating anymore, since the validity of the ideas they gave their lives for had lost its legitimizing ground. Heroes were not "immortal" anymore, but untrue and thus vulnerable: it was not a feeling of gratitude, which one could address to them, but rather of offense, retribution and disrespect.

Monuments as chief representations of this particular discourse of the sacred were primary objects of these new attitudes. Already in the first months after the changes, they turned into a major focus of public discussions and debates, of protests and demands for replacement. Covering with denigrating labels, partial dismantling or destruction, threatened almost any monument and memorial built in the socialist period. Sometimes even those not closely related to the socialist ideological realm were targeted. It is impossible to go through all the various cases and curious examples of the treatment of socialist monuments, even only in Bulgaria: they are numerous and often need a closer and detailed approach to understand properly the meanings of the symbolic acts and strange utilizations, which monuments underwent. What is important is that in all these cases we can see an emphasized impulse to "inspect" the sacredness of death and to question the ways it was interpreted in before 1989. Whether related to the monuments of the Soviet army, to the dead in World War II, to the brotherly mounds of socialist heroes, or to

partisan and antifascist resistance in the country, the chief issue addressed was what a monument actually stands for: what was the validity of the death represented and what may be considered desecrated with the monument's preservation or destruction.

For some of the monuments in which the representation was clearly an ideological emblem, such as those of Lenin, Marx and Engels, the association with the moment and the meaning of death was a relatively scarce one. Their destruction or swift replacement was rarely obstructed by a troubling memory to the dead; rather, the actions undertaken against monumental representations were guided by the impulse to revert the everlasting vitality of those figures-emblems. However, the case of the monuments of some prominent communist figures who had taken active part in the construction of socialism in post-1945 Bulgaria was different. The fate of their monuments varied from removal to towns' margins, replacement, and possible subsequent re-installations. For example, after the changes of 1989, the monument of the prominent leader of Bulgarian Communist Party, G. Dimitrov, in the central square of Dimitrovgrad, was deconstructed and, together with its pedestal, was removed to a distant park. In 1997, it was reinstalled out of "fears" that the town might lose its identity without a monument to its emblematic founder. In Shumen, Dimitrov's monument in front of the Military School was replaced by a rocket, while in Kurdjali, proposals were made to replace Dimitrov's sculptured figure with a monument to the medieval Bulgarian king Simeon the Great. In the Bulgarian capital, the mausoleum of Dimitrov was for a whole decade an object of attacks and protests, ending eventually in its destruction in 1999 and to the effacement of all the traces of its presence.

In a different group of monuments we can look to are those dedicated to the Soviet Army, built in several larger towns in the country. The one in Sofia, for example, was the focus of ardent debates and skirmishes for years. Regularly covered with graffiti and subsequently cleaned, protested against or protected by live chains of people, it managed to preserve its place in one of the central squares of the Bulgarian capital. In the numerous debates throughout the years, the interpretation of what the monument represented varied widely. It was considered a

symbol of enslavement throughout the years of socialism, a memorial sign to the war dead, an element of the recent history currently emptied of powerful meanings and merely a reminder of the curiosities of the socialist past, etc. The fact that no Soviet soldier was killed in Bulgarian territory in the last months of World War II was used to interpret the monument as dedicated to the ordinary soldier in general, or as a controversial sign of the thousands of victims of the communist regime. The alterations in the meanings of death and the inability to come to an ultimate conclusion about the limits of representation determined the monument's fate and contribute to its continued survival.

If, for the monuments of the Soviet Army, one could interpret death as having insufficient "facticity" to deserve commemoration, there was a realm of death, whose 'real presence' could not be questioned, and the debates concentrated rather on the legitimacy of commemorating the dead. Such was the case with the monuments dedicated to the participants in the partisan and the antifascist movement in the 1920s through the 1940s in Bulgaria. The memory of these people was shaped in a particular way by the socialist regime and was used as a significant legitimization pillar for its ideological discourse. In the post-1989 period, there was thus real difficulty with how to interpret their death and how to treat the monuments to those who sacrificed themselves as anti-fascists. Their sacrifice was not easy to bracket and any attempt to clear a monumental site from its ideological associations had the shading of a desecration act and of claiming validity to the ideas these people fought against. In numerous cases, it was particularly the inherent sacredness of death, which appeared to protect such monumental sites and prevented iconoclastic accusations against them. Quite often, proposals to remove or reshape such monuments were even interpreted as a second murder of the heroes, as a troubling sacrilege to the bones of the dead.

An especially telling example of such critical points in commemorating the dead was the decision of the Mikhailovgrad (currently Montana) municipality in 1993 to turn the monument to H. Mikhailov and other dead in the 1923 September uprising into a monument to the prominent figures of nineteenth-century Bulgarian enlightenment. The plan was to change the grandiose memorial dedicated to the

heroes of the uprising--claimed by communist historiography to have been the first antifascist uprising in the world--into a monument to the dead for Mother Bulgaria. The municipal authorities suggested the figure of H. Mikhailov to be preserved in the historical museum and his deadly remains to be buried according to the will of his heirs. The replacement of the sculpted figures and the inscriptions on the monuments to the September uprising in Montana with new ones, this time referring to figures belonging "only" to the national pantheon, was considered a vandal's act by a large part of the town population. Protectors of the monument guarded it day and night and 10,000 signatures were collected in favor of its preservation. A similar wave of reactions occurred when the municipality of Pleven sought to build a monument to the Unknown Soldier at the place of the brotherly mound created during the socialist period. The idea was to a great extent a compromise aiming to avoid the destruction of one of the symbols of the communist regime in the town. But at the same time, it was thought to be itself a desecration against the monument, which commemorated more than 200 antifascists who died in the period of 1923-1944. The intention to replace the monument provoked protests on behalf of antifascist organizations and ordinary citizens, and for the time being its replacement has been cancelled.

Destroying or reshaping monuments reassigns new identity to places and suppresses and deconstructs meanings previously associated with commemorative forms. The treatment of socialist monuments described here applied attitudes and techniques of representation, which were considered unthinkable in the preceding epoch. In most cases it was a matter of reshaping the symbolic space in order both to remind and to refuse reminding and also a way to dissociate death from the already unsacred symbols. In attempts to solve this dilemma, most of the socialist monuments in Bulgaria underwent long and curious metamorphoses. They were replaced by monuments to freedom,⁸ to national heroes, or to all the heroes of a particular region; wrapped in artistic installations, etc. Apart from the constant threat of complete destruction, the monument to the Soviet Army in Plovdiv faced the possibility of being replaced by a monument to the Bulgarian national hero V. Levski, by a church, by a large bottle of Coca-cola, or by a metal sphere, symbolizing the sun. The mausoleum of Dimitrov in Sofia was to become

alternatively a museum for the history of socialism, a basement for preserving the national treasury, an open space for theater and opera performances, or an immense sundial to measure the time after the fall of socialism as state ideology. A frequent solution to some monuments was to exhibit them in museums of totalitarian art or in park alleys of former immortals. Many of these initiatives were frequently guided by the idea that they might somehow protect the legacy of the recent history, or that modifications might facilitate the preservation of the memorial character of such sites. Whatever the intentions, however, they were generally regarded as insulting the memory of the dead, and organized attempts were made to obstruct the realizations of such projects.

The treatment of socialist monuments and of the dead, which they represented, has contributed in a crucial way to the shaping of postsocialist identities. From the perspective of those who sided with the need to destruct or reshape them with respect to the changed social and cultural environment, it was a matter of destroying idols, of clearing the public space from traces of offending reminiscences to communist idolatry. It was thought to be a necessary act as long as it symbolized in a very articulate way the willingness to change and the eagerness to distance the new society from its recent past. Destroying monuments to the dead meant destroying the power's embodiment in idols and refusing to pay respect to those whose sacrifice paved the path to the legitimization of the socialist regime. It was, in a way, reducing the powerful location of death in monuments and seeing them mainly as fossilized representations, which were already emptied of their meaning after the collapse of socialism. The position of those who refused to accept any change in the monuments of the socialist past was radically different and found its justification mostly in the "reality" of death present in those sites of memory. For them, to destroy a monument meant to attack overtly the sacredness of death and thus to bring pollution and danger into sites, where death has found refuge and exercised protection. In their view, these acts should not be labeled as idoloclasm, but rather as iconoclasm; and those willing to reshape monuments were nothing but "vandals" who not merely aimed to destroy sites and monumental objects, but were "desecrating" public memory and acting sacrilegiously against death.

The public debates about monuments in the period after 1989 testify to two major discourses on the notion of sacred death inherited from the socialist period. The first one regarded death as a "construction" of the socialist regime--developed as such owing to a set of clearly outlined intentions to achieve and preserve symbolic power--subject to possible changes and interpretations when the demystification of socialist techniques and their deconstruction became possible. The other discourse insisted on the "facticity" of death, on its natural becoming as a fact in the modern history of the country, as a set of "illuminating" points, which do not, cannot, and should not, be changed and treated in any way different from their heroic meaning. In this position, death had to remain untouched and unchanged as initially represented in monuments. It was seen not so much as a product of a certain historical interpretation, nor as a reality possible mainly under a particular ideological discourse, but rather as a reality out of time--true and eternal in itself. As such, the action against it could not be termed in other way but as "desecration."

The irreconcilable nature of these two understandings of the formerly considered sacred death can be traced in the entire post-1989 discourse on the legacy of the socialist past. It is exactly this contradiction, which destined the problematic identity of the socialist monuments in Bulgaria after 1989--as protecting or polluting, worth preserving or worth destroying.

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Endnotes

1. About dead bodies as symbols of political order, cf. especially K. Verdery's path-breaking book (1999).
2. See Verdery 1999: 37.
3. The anthropological and historical literature on death and the constitution of the sacred is too extensive to be encompassed here, and I would mention only the works of Aries 1977, Bloch and Parry 1982, Bynum 1995, Geary 1994, Geary 1995, Hertz 1960 [1907], Huntington and Metcalf 1991.
4. About the specific relationship between the sacred and the desecrated, I have depended chiefly on the interpretations of M. Eliade, R. Girard, and M. Douglas. The historical development of the notion of desecration is paid thorough attention in the works of M. Rubin (1992) and D. Lowenthal (1985).
5. About the specific relationship between death and life in socialist monuments, see Vukov 2002b.
6. A detailed analysis of the characteristic aspects of socialist rituals is provided in Lane 1981.
7. Dimitrov's embalmed body was taken out of the mausoleum in 1991 and cremated. See about the various transformations and destruction of Dimitrov's mausoleum in Gradev 1992 and Vukov 2002a.
8. See for example the monument to the Soviet Army in Pleven, which was taken down in 1991 and was replaced in 1998 by a newly built monument to freedom.
9. See for example the plan for a museum of the totalitarian art at the former House-monument of the Bulgarian Communist Party on the peak of Buzludzha; or of an alley of fallen monuments in Dimitrograd.
10. An example in this respect is the brotherly mound in Plovdiv, considered as

one of the most prominent monuments of communist heroic representations. In 1997, after protests were raised against its preservation, a suggestion was made to reconstruct it according to its "initial" idea, i.e., not as a communist pantheon, but as a memorial complex of all who died for freedom from the Plovdiv region.

11. About the major aspects of monumental representations of death as shaping the identities of the living, see especially Kosellek 1997 and Young 1993.
12. An explicit example of fighting pollution and unsacred death is the reconstitution of the crypt on the peak of Okolchitsa, associated with one of the most sublime moments of nineteenth-century Bulgarian history. According to the wish of the people from the town of Vratsa the red star, which stayed on the peak for about 42 years, was destroyed and the cross of the national fighters in the Russian-Turkish war was reinstalled after the original project.
13. Destroying a monument and replacing it with a new one is, as M. Yampolski observes, a twofold symbol of victory. Firstly, it is a privilege of the victors to represent their ideals, and secondly the new monument stands as a trace of what is vanquished and already absent (Yampolsky 1995: 100; James 1997: 5).
14. Note the specific meaning of the word "vandal," initially outlining limits of exclusion from the civilized community. About the historical roots of iconoclasm in the acts of striking against a sacred prototype, see Gamboni 1997: 13-18.