



PETRAS CVIRKA STATUE

Vilnius, Lithuania

54.6847, 25.2760

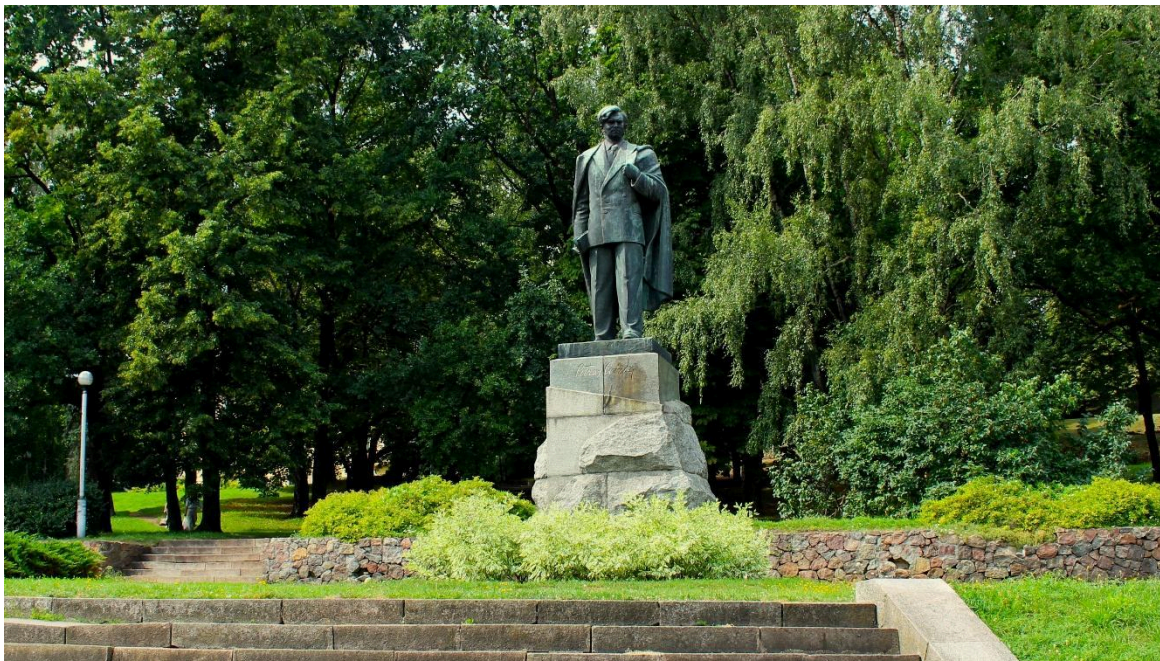


Image by Ieva Čičirkaitė, courtesy of the author.

Executive Summary

The statue for the Lithuanian writer Petras Cvirka was built not only because of his talent as a successful writer, but also due to his collaboration with the Soviet regime after the Soviet occupation in 1940. The new wave of discussions about memory, heritage objects in public spaces, and national identity started on a national level after the Restoration of Independence of Lithuania in 1990. Despite various opinions about the past of Lithuania, the narrative of creating a modern country took a solid position that was created by intellectuals and new-generation pro-Western liberal politicians who took the initiative to re-create the public spaces. Therefore, the taking down of Petras Cvirka's statue in 2021 was a political action with no one-sided supportive opinion from the public.

Introduction

The monument for Petras Cvirka was built in 1959 in the square named after him, which is in the centre of Vilnius, Lithuania. The statue served as a memorial to the famous writer who gained a name as one of the most well-known Lithuanian writers during the Soviet occupation period between 1940 and 1990 and remained after the Restoration of Independence. Some discussions about the commemoration of Cvirka began after Lithuania restored its independence in 1990, but they developed into real actions only around 2015. Before 1990, it is not known if the statue was problematic not only because of the Soviet regime, which lacked freedom of speech, but also because taking down the monument due to ideological reasons would have been illogical. Next to this monument in the capital city, the name of Petras Cvirka was part of the monuments and street names in multiple cities in Lithuania, and some of them were changed in the last ten years, but some remained unchanged until today.

Background

Lithuania's Road to Independence

After the First World War, on 16 February 1918, Lithuania declared its Independence. During the Interwar years, 1918-1939, the country built its own identity as a modern state with a combination of democratic and authoritarian political governments. It was known for its economic and technological achievements. Lithuania's economic growth was influenced primarily by the development of the agricultural sector, and, the country was known as a manufacturer of ANBO aircraft. At that time, this was seen as a huge success for a small but ambitious country and its developing industry.¹

After signing the secret Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union on 15th June 1940. The change in the political situation greatly impacted the country's development. While the world watched the Iron Curtain's landing on Eastern Europe after the Second World War, the Baltic States witnessed a Soviet regime that began a new era with the main objective of creating a new socialist society. These changes had enormous consequences for its citizens in all parts of the Soviet Union, including Lithuania.

Therefore, the loss of independence to the Soviets and Nazis that began in 1940 brought much uncertainty and suffering that was welcomed by the resistance of Lithuanians on various levels. The biggest movement against the Red Army was the Partisan War (1944-1953) between the so-called 'Forest Brothers' – Lithuanian partisans who wanted to bring back independence and

¹ Edmundas Jakilaitis, LRT TV Show "Dėmesio centre", "A.Bumblauskas: tarpukario Lietuvą išgarsino ANBO lėktuvai, krepšinis ir sviestas", 15MIN, February 16, 2016.

the governmental organisation NKVD - People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The latter had a mission to fight any resistance and apply various punishments such as imprisonment, torture, or killing to the 'traitors of the motherland.'² The resistance was coordinated by leaders such as Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, who in 2018 was de facto acknowledged as being the President of the Republic of Lithuania between 1954 and 1957.³ Also, most collected sources mark that around 30,000 Lithuanians were fighting in the Partisan War during the first two years since its start in 1944.⁴

Petras Cvirka: Literature, the State and Monuments

Petras Cvirka was one among a corpus of Lithuanian writers who, upon Soviet occupation, worked with and for the regime which sought to suppress Lithuanian identity and promote Sovietisation by creating a Socialist identity for the country. Though his earlier works focused on an idealisation of nature and village life,⁵ under the Soviet regime, his works emphasised a pro-Stalinist ideology which he adopted, presumably motivated by ambition and hunger for success. As chairman of the Lithuanian Writers' Union between 1945 and 1947, he made changes to Lithuanian literature to become more pro-Soviet. Indeed, his novel "Lakštingala" [The Nightingale], was about a boy who helped Soviet partisans and Cvirka is attributed with the sentence "Don't be sad, brothers, the mother Russia will take care of you!"⁶ Contemporaries of Cvirka included poets Salomėja Nėris (1904-1945) and Liudas Gira (1884-1946),⁷ both of whom similarly collaborated with the Soviets, with Nėris having a monument, school and street named in her honour, all of which have now been removed and renamed.⁸

The first plan to build a monument for Petras Cvirka was known from the documents in 1956 when his name was included in the official list of Lithuanian writers for whom monuments were to be built. Alongside active resistance, Lithuania witnessed drastic changes in many areas, including its culture. The decision to build this monument was made by the Soviet government, which was pursuing Sovietisation policies, part of which was dedicated to memorialising and glorifying those who helped the regime create a Socialist identity for the country. Interestingly, alongside this, at the time of the statue of Cvirka being built in 1959, there was a certain revival of Lithuanian culture.⁹ The sculptor was a Lithuanian artist called Juozas Mikėnas who created the statue in a

² Darius Juodis, "Karo laukimo tendencijos Lietuvoje 1945–1953 m.", *Istorija* [History]. 2021, Nr. 121, p. 143-191.

³ BNS. "Partizanų vadas A. Ramanauskas-Vanagas pripažintas valstybės vadovu", *Kauno diena*, November 20, 2018.

⁴ Vilius Leškys, "Forest Brothers" 1945: the culmination of the Lithuanian partisan movement", *Baltic security & defence review*. 2009, Vol. 11, no. 1, p. 58-86.

⁵ Bronius Vaškešius, "FOLKLORE IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE," *Lituanus*, Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences Vol 36, no. 4 (1990)

⁶ Jūratė Landsbergytė-Becher. "Destinies of the State and its Writers in History. Dimensions of Their Tragedy and Success in Lithuanian Literature". *Питання літературознавства*, 107: 46-7.

⁷ Violeta Davoliūtė, "Lithuania's Postcolonial Iconoclasm – or Politics by Other Means", *Cultures of History Forum*, September 30, 2023.

⁸ BNS/TBT Staff, "Nėris monument in Vilnius must be removed – commission", *The Baltic Times*, August 7, 2024.

⁹ Violeta Davoliūtė, "Lithuania's Postcolonial Iconoclasm – or Politics by Other Means", *Cultures of History Forum*, September 30, 2023.

socialist realism style. He was talented and ambitious and therefore chose to create artworks that praised Soviet ideology rather than become a less visible sculptor with more creative freedom in the periphery of the cultural field.¹⁰ What is unique about this statue is the fact that it was unusual to build such a large monument for someone other than Soviet leaders Lenin and Stalin. This illustrates that the Soviets were using this statue as propaganda, combining a portrayal of Cvirka as an ideal Soviet man with his status as a uniquely Lithuanian role model. Since Vilnius was still recovering from the Second World War around this time, the statue stood out even more because there were no tall buildings around its area.¹¹

After gaining independence on March 11 1990, the political climate meant that people could exercise their freedom of speech to a greater extent. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independent Lithuanian state formed a new official historical narrative and memory culture that emphasised the motif of victimhood and the fight for independence.¹² Events such as Lithuania's occupation by the Soviet Union, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Soviet deportations, and the anti-Soviet resistance movement known as the Partisan War influenced and shaped such memory culture. Moreover, it shaped perceptions of Soviet monuments and street names in Lithuania, which were widely discussed after 1990.

History of the Contestation

The Origins of Removal of the Monument

The image of Petras Cvirka was created when the Communist Party of Lithuania released an official document in which it was announced that he had gained the name of the nation's most respected Soviet writer.¹³ A special dedication was made to him with the intention of portraying him and his unique personality as an example of a true Soviet citizen. Since Petras Cvirka was already dead, it was possible to cast him as a mythical character of a perfect socialist writer whose works should be translated into the Russian language as an example for other writers in Lithuania. However, after 1990, the statue became a symbol of 'the others' – those who were doomed or naively believed in Soviet ideology that, in reality, differed from



Figure 1: Petras Cvirka Statue in Vilnius, Lithuania. Image courtesy of the author.

¹⁰ LRT. Giedrė Kankevičiūtė, Mindaugas Klusas, "Isterija dėl Cvirkos priminė nutildytą Mikėną: kaip sovietų valdžia pasikėsino į skulptoriaus talentą", LRT, January 1, 2022

¹¹ Živilė Mikailienė, "Stalininio laikotarpio Vilnius: Sovietinio mito formavimas", Seminar Patogus ir nepatogus paveldas, April 2, 2015

¹² Goštautaitė, Rasa. "Dissonant Soviet monuments in post-Soviet Lithuania. The Application of artistic practices", Baltic Worlds. 2020, 4, p. 9-19.

¹³ LRT. Putinaitė, Nerija. "Atsisveikinimas su Petru Cvirka", LRT, November 20, 2021.

the ideological representation.¹⁴ Also, there are well-known Lithuanian writers such as Kazys Boruta and Mykolas Biržiška who changed their beliefs after visiting Moscow in the 1930s and reading official declarations provided by Stalin.¹⁵ These examples illustrate that certain decisions could be made despite the active Soviet propaganda that promised a bright future but in reality, was based on lies.

Despite most Soviet monuments being taken down right after the Restoration of the Independence of Lithuania in 1990, some statues remained standing.¹⁶ However, it did not mean that the discussions were over: the media and the public put the topic of monuments in the spotlight from time to time, especially after major geopolitical events related to Russia that took place in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Lithuanian scholar Rasa Baločkaitė demarcated this decommunization process into two waves: the first happened right after the announcement of independence and the second after the events in Crimea. The latter influenced the 'second wave of revisionism' marked by physical deterioration, renovation needs, changing urban infrastructure, the political and cultural Westernisation of former Eastern bloc countries, and Russia's international politics.¹⁷

The latter events received much condemnation towards Russia from Lithuania. Thus, new discussions about memory policy appeared, connecting Soviet crimes with Russia's breaches of International Law, which is seen as a predecessor of the former Soviet Union. Following the events in Crimea, Ukraine, there was a visible change in the creation of memorial boards for Lithuanian Partisans, as the period 2014-2019 was as active as the first five years after the Restoration of Independence. There is a tendency to create a narrative of 'us' against 'others,' and portraying Lithuania as a country with active resistance under the occupation marks the continuation of the tendency.¹⁸ Here, the changes regarding the memorials to Lithuanian Partisans after 2014 are valid for Cvirkas's statue as well because it is a representation of 'the others when new questions related to the meaning of national identity appeared in public.'

The relevance of Cvirkas's statue appeared in the media and became a popular topic to discuss in small cultural circles and in the broad public. One of the first mentions in Lithuanian media of clashes over different opinions regarding the statue appeared in 2015. At that time, the head of the Lithuanian National Commission for Cultural Heritage, Gražina Drėmaitė, stated that the Soviet

¹⁴ Aušra Čebatoriūtė, "Bandytas atsiveikinti su P. Cvirkos paminklu: teisingas siekis ar klaida?", *Bernardinai.lt*, June 8, 2021.

¹⁵ Transcript from a discussion "Lietuvos inteligentai ir saulė iš Rytų", *Voruta*, January 10, 2010.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rasa Goštautaitė, "Dissonant Soviet monuments in post-Soviet Lithuania: the application of artistic practices", *Baltic Worlds*. 2020, 4, p. 9-19.

¹⁸ Viktorija Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė, "Visual Securitization: Commemorating the Partisan War in Lithuanian Foreign and Security Policy", *Politologija*, vol. 106, núm. 2, pp. 11-52, 2022.

sculptures have protection and at least one Soviet monument should be kept in the city due to its importance in signifying the country's history.¹⁹

Many Lithuanian writers expressed their scepticism concerning the possible removal of the statue. One of the well-known writers, Tomas Venclova, described the idea of removal as something that the Soviet government would do to the statues that do not fit into their ideology.²⁰ His, as well as other Lithuanian writers' concerns, were that the future of a square that is strategically located in the centre of Vilnius could be planned as a financial benefit for various groups of interests by building a new office building or a similar commercially successful object. Meanwhile, the vice mayor of Vilnius, Valdas Benkunskas, assured the community that no constructions were being planned at the square, with the square's priority being for the use of the public.²¹

On 24 May 2019, the Board of the Union of Writers of Lithuania sent an official letter to the Minister of Culture and the Mayor of Vilnius that the statue of Petras Cvirka should remain standing at the square because the removal would not cross out dramatic pages of Lithuanian history.²²

Decision-Making Processes

In the summer of 2017, discussions took place at the Vilnius City Municipality, and on April 19 2018, a special memory commission at the Municipality released a statement saying that the statue of Petras Cvirka should be removed.²³ There were a few reasons for this decision, mainly based on the archival documents that proved Cvirka's collaboration with the Soviet regime. Also, according to the workgroup member who made such a decision, Paulė Kuzmickienė, the square needed a new identity to celebrate 100 years of the Independence of Lithuania. Therefore, removing the statue was seen as a 'cleaning of a space' that would create a fresh start for discussions about the square's future, with the most important being that the square represents values such as freedom and is dedicated to the people of Vilnius.

The same institution found and published new documents in 2019, which revealed that Cvirka, president of the Union of Writers, took action against another writer, Kazys Jakubėnas. The latter was known for criticising the Soviet regime, which he was not afraid to address in his poems during public events. Jakubėnas was sent to prison and, not long after that, deported to a labour camp in Siberia; archival documents reveal that it was under the influence of Petras Cvirka.²⁴

¹⁹ DELFI.lt. Mindaugas Jackevičius. "Menotyrininkė: Vilniuje turi likti bent vienas okupacijos ženklas", DELFI, April 30, 2014.

²⁰ LRT, "Venclova apie Cvirkos paminklo nukėlimą: tai yra bolševikinė praktika", LRT, May 20, 2019.

²¹ Ibid.

²² BNS, Ignas Jačauskas "Rašytojai: griaudami Cvirkos paminklą, dramatiškų istorijos puslapių neišbrauksime", 15MIN, May 24, 2019.

²³ BNS, LRT.lt. "Komisija siūlo nukelti P. Cvirkos paminklą Vilniaus centre". BNS, LRT.lt, April 18, 2019.

²⁴ LRT, Domantė Platūkytė, "Diskusijos dėl Cvirkos paminklo netyla: dokumentuose – pirmą kartą paviešinti rašytojo gyvenimo faktai", LRT, October 22, 2019.

Moreover, the same documents revealed new personal details about Cvirka. For example, after the first Soviet occupation in 1940, he wrote around 20 articles that glorified the Soviet regime, including a remark that ‘the Soviet army now is our army.’²⁵ It is worth mentioning that a grandson of Cvirka defended his grandfather’s name against slander in court because he did not believe the revealed archival documents.²⁶

On August 24 2021, the monument was deleted from the Register of Cultural Treasures of Lithuania, which is an official list that includes protected cultural treasures in the country.²⁷ The removal is considered to be a political decision that was made based on the explanation released in 2019 by the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, where it was elaborated that Petras Cvirka actively collaborated with the Soviet regime on a socio-cultural and political level during the years of occupation until he died in 1947. According to the researcher of this centre, Daiva Vilkelytė, Petras Cvirka made certain decisions based on his collaborative beliefs with the Soviet regime. These decisions include being a member of the People’s Seimas – the main governmental institution that was elected by rigged elections to join the Soviet Union.²⁸ Cvirka was one of the responsible persons under the Soviet Government and signed the official letter to the former Leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, in which a declaration to join the Soviet Union was stated.²⁹

On November 19, 2021, the monument was taken down. It happened during the day and was observed by many with differing opinions. A temporary fence was built during the action, where viewers hung posters supporting and criticising the move. The act was accompanied by some negative comments from the crowd, but more significant clashes between the two sides of people were avoided.³⁰

Summary and Conclusions

Long years of Soviet occupation left their mark and shaped the present-day identity of Lithuania. Therefore, signs of communism, such as monuments and street names, recur repeatedly, and this trend will likely persist until the last monument is removed from public space. The disputes over these statues in Lithuania have become more relevant than ever after geopolitical events such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These discussions involve various groups of people – politicians, writers, heritage specialists, and everyone who lives next to the monument, has memories related to it, or has an opinion about the socio-political events in the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ SA.lt. “P.Cvirkos paminklas išbrauktas iš kultūros vertybių registro, nukėlimas – rugsėjis”, SA.lt, August 24, 2021.

²⁸ LRT, “1940 m. rinkimai į Liaudies Seimą: balsuoti „atėjo“ 106 proc. gyventojų”, Bernardinai.lt, July 21, 2015.

²⁹ Daiva Vilkelytė, “Apie lunatikus, kolaborantus ir neišsipildančias pranašystes”, Delfi.lt, September 10, 2021.

³⁰ LRT.lt, ELTA. Klusas, Mindaugas, Augustaitytė, Rugilė. “Istorinė akimirka: nukeltas sovietinio veikėjo ir rašytojo Petro Cvirkos paminklas”, LRT.lt, November 19, 2021.

country. Even if removing the Petras Cvirka statue was a political decision that received criticism from the public, including the writers' community and heritage professionals, active participation in discussions reached a peak in public. It illustrates the pluralism of Lithuanian society and is a living example of an achievement gained by declaring independence in 1990, since under the Soviet regime, these discussions simply could not exist.

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Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

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