



BROTHERHOOD IN ARMS MONUMENT

Warsaw, Poland

52.255200, 21.034200



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Executive Summary

The Brotherhood in Arms monument was the first post-Second World War monument placed in Warsaw in Vilnius Square. The public contestation of the monument began after Poland gained independence in 1989, although grievances against it might have been aired within opposition circles in prior years, too. After the exit of the Soviets, right-wing and far-right nationalist movements, in particular, urged for the removal of the monument. However, city officials were unwilling to do so, citing the international obligation to preserve the monument inscribed in the 1994 agreement with Russia. The monument was temporarily removed in 2011 when the underground station in Vilnius Square was constructed. Following a new series of contestations and controversies, the city council decided not to reinstate it in 2013. In 2018, the city finally donated the monument to the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw, and it has been displayed there since.

Introduction

Pomnik Braterstwa Broni (the Brotherhood in Arms monument) stood on Vilnius Square in the Praga-Polnoc district of Warsaw from 1945 until 2011. The monument was erected to commemorate the brotherhood of Polish and Soviet soldiers.¹ It was a tribute to the approximately 600,000 Red Army soldiers who died on Polish soil during World War II.

The Brotherhood in Arms was the first monument erected in Warsaw following World War II, standing in front of the then-government headquarters in Warsaw's Praga district. In November 2011, it was dismantled during the construction of the Dworzec Wilenski metro station, and the sculptures and plinth linings underwent restoration and conservation works. A few years later, in February 2015, it was announced that Warsaw City Council had decided the monument would not be re-erected in Vilnius Square.

Background

The Second World War and Soviet Poland: 1939-1989

The short-lived Second Polish Republic was born after the First World War as an independent 'buffer state' separating the turbulent (and decaying) Russian empire from a defeated Germany. In 1939, however, the two neighbours – now under the totalitarian guises of the Nazi Third Reich and the USSR – once again invaded and occupied the Polish territories, effectively dividing them amongst themselves through the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Relations between the Polish authorities in exile and the Soviet leadership briefly improved following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and Polish units fought alongside the Red Army for the remainder of the conflict. As the end of World War II drew closer, however, Stalin sought to impose Soviet control over the country, truncating relationships with the government in exile while also covering up atrocities committed by the Red Army, such as the Katyń massacre. In 1945 the Red Army, along with its Polish allies, succeeded in pushing out the Nazi forces from occupied Poland,² and in the following months the question of Poland's fate was debated amongst the victors.³

The conference of the Big Three at Yalta in February 1945 was held to discuss the fate of postwar Europe. The Polish government-in-exile was ignored, and it was agreed that the best option would be to create a new government composed of Poles both in the country and abroad,⁴ one tasked to hold free elections.⁵ The Provisional Government of National Unity was composed of the representatives of different political parties, but the communists dominated it.⁶

¹ Barbara Petrozolin-Skowrońska (ed.), *Encyklopedia Warszawy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 660.

² R.F. Leslie (ed.), *The History of Poland since 1863* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 280.

³ Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 160.

⁴ R.F. Leslie (ed.), *The History of Poland since 1863* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 281.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 165.

The first postwar elections were held in 1947. They were preceded by manipulation and intimidation and conducted without ensuring their fairness.⁷ Notwithstanding earlier commitments at Yalta, both the US and the UK confined themselves to only lodging protests.⁸ The official results of the 1947 elections gave 80,1% of votes to the 'Democratic bloc' dominated by communists.⁹ Following the elections, the destruction of what could have become a legitimate opposition consolidated Soviet control over Poland.¹⁰

Poland never became part of the Soviet Union, but it developed into a satellite state under the effective control of Moscow, being ruled for the next 45 years by the Polish United Workers' Party, created in 1948 by the communists. The postwar Polish Republic was renamed in 1952 the Polish People's Republic.¹¹

Independence in 1989 and the Third Polish Republic

The grip of the Polish United Workers' Party over Poland began to loosen in the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1978, Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope, and a visit to his homeland in June 1979 resulted in an upsurge of national pride and unity.¹² Moreover, the communist government led by Gierek faced significant economic challenges: high foreign debt rates coupled with declining production led to shortages and price increases – most notably in 1980, when a hike in the price of essential foodstuff led to large-scale protests and strikes.¹³

A strike at the Gdansk shipyard led by an electrician and union leader, Lech Walesa, in 1980 led to negotiations being held with the government and the creation of an independent trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity).¹⁴ Solidarity became an organisation leading efforts towards independence for the next ten years.

In 1985, Gorbachev became the leader of the USSR, and his reforms created an opportunity for Polish independence.¹⁵ In 1989, the Polish government and Solidarity began the Round Table Talks, which steered Poland towards democratic transformation. It was agreed that general elections would be held and a new government would be formed.¹⁶ Whilst the communists retained a number of seats that had been explicitly reserved for them, the places allocated for free elections were overwhelmingly won by the representatives of the anti-communist opposition.¹⁷ Debates and contestations that had hitherto remained confined

⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁹ R.F. Leslie (ed.), *The History of Poland since 1863* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 294.

¹⁰ Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 168.

¹¹ Jerzy A. Kondracki et al., "Communist Poland," Britannica, last updated June 5, 2021.

¹² R.F. Leslie (ed.), *The History of Poland since 1863* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 458.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jerzy A. Kondracki et al., "Communist Poland," Britannica, last updated June 5, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 268.

¹⁷ Jerzy A. Kondracki et al., "Communist Poland," Britannica, last updated June 5, 2021.

to the private sphere could not be aired openly, and new discussions on several issues - including the Brotherhood in Arms monument - could now take place legally.

In October 1991, the first completely free elections took place.¹⁸ The Soviet troops left Poland in 1992.¹⁹

History of the Contestation

The monument itself

The monument was unveiled on November 18, 1945, as a tribute to the Polish and Soviet soldiers, of whom approximately 600,000 died on the territories of Poland during the Second World War. The monument was located on Targowa 74, which was the temporary seat of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland at the time.²⁰ Its official name was 'Brotherhood in Arms,' but in the 1940s and 1950s, it was known by the locals as the 'Monument of Gratitude, Liberation, Heroes.'²¹ Later, it jokingly became known by Warsaw's citizens as the 'the Four Sleepers' or 'the Four sad ones' due to the way the soldiers were depicted.²²

The Brotherhood in Arms monument was a collective work created by Polish and Soviet artists. The concept of the monument was developed by sculptor and Major of the Red Army Karlow (although other sources identify A. Nienko as the author), and, on the Polish side, the project was carried out by architects and sculptors associated with the Capital Reconstruction Office: Stanisław Sikora, Stefan Momot, Jozef Trenarowski, Jozef Gazy, Bohdan Lachert with the assistance of Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz.²³ However, the final list of people involved in the creation of the monument is difficult to establish as both the number and names of the authors vary depending on the source.²⁴

The unveiling ceremony had a strong official and military presence, with the attendance of the then President of the State National Council, Bolesław Bierut, Prime Minister Edward Osóbka-Morawski, Chief Commander of the Polish Army, Michał Rola-Żymierski, and the military attaché of the Soviet Union, General Mikhail Stepanovich Maslow.²⁵

The upper half of the sculpture is made up of three Soviet soldiers ready for combat, facing towards the west. The pedestal on which they stand is made of red sandstone. At the

¹⁸ Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 240.

¹⁹ Jerzy A. Kondracki et al., "Communist Poland," *Britannica*, last updated June 5, 2021.

²⁰ Filip Lech, "Braterstwo smutnych i walczących, czyli znikające pomniki," *Culture.pl*, February 3, 2015.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Barbara Petrozolin-Skowrońska (ed.), *Encyklopedia Warszawy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 660.

²³ Paweł Gierson, "Warszawa - Pomnik Braterstwa Broni," *Sztuka.net*, 2004.

²⁴ Zuzanna Derlacz, "Ciężar historii pomnika Braterstwa Broni, czyli co robiło czterech, gdy trzech walczyło," *Pomnik.art*, last updated November 1, 2018.

²⁵ Krzysztof Komorowski, ed., *Warszawa walczy 1939–1945: Leksykon*, (Warsaw: Fundacja Polska Walczy i Wydawnictwo Bellona, 2015), 737.

bottom of the stand, four soldiers, two Polish and two Soviet, placed facing outwards, heads hung, on four low corner pedestals.

Initially, the inscription on the monument, in Polish from one side and Russian from the other, read: 'Glory to the heroes of the Red Army who gave their lives for the freedom of Poland'. This was later amended to

Glory to the heroes of the Soviet Army, comrades in arms who gave their lives for the freedom and independence of the Polish nation. This monument was erected by the residents of Warsaw, 1945.²⁶

In August 1947, the original plaster versions of the sculptures were replaced by the bronze ones, and the stand was covered in marble.²⁷

The material from which the stand was made turned out to be non-durable as it would scratch easily (which was used by the youth from the district of Praga).²⁸ In 1960-61, the monument was renovated, and the stand was covered in red limestone. In 1966, the monument was moved slightly by approximately 8 meters because of the redevelopment of Targowa Street.²⁹

The contestation after 1989

There were few chances to raise issues regarding the monument throughout the era of Soviet control over the People's Republic of Poland - for the most part, locals seemed to treat it with indifference,³⁰ although the nicknames that were used to refer to it seemed to suggest that they were not overtly respectful or awe-struck by it.

Attempts to dismantle it, however, began after 1989, when Poland gained independence and ceased to be a satellite of the Soviet Union. The city's authorities first considered the removal of the monument in 1992.³¹ They were, however, unsuccessful, as the monument was defended by Stefan Momot, a well-known and accomplished artist who came forward as one of the creators of the monument.³²

In February 1994, Poland and Russia signed an agreement to protect and maintain graves and 'places of memory' on each other's territory.³³ The Brotherhood in Arms monument was added to such places, effectively hindering any further effort to dismantle or remove it.

²⁶ Translation by author, Filip Lech, "Braterstwo smutnych i walczących, czyli znikające pomniki," Culture.pl, February 3, 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Paweł Gierson, "Warszawa - Pomnik Braterstwa Broni," Sztuka.net, 2004.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Zuzanna Derlacz, "Ciężar historii pomnika Braterstwa Broni, czyli co robiło czterech, gdy trzech walczyło," Pomnik.art, last updated November 1, 2018.

³² Ibid.

³³ Matthew Luxmoore, "Poles apart: a bitter conflict over a nation's communist history," *Guardian*, July 12, 2018.

Despite this, demonstrations against the monument continued. Protests against it were, for the most part, led by far right-wing patriotic organisations, such as All-Polish Youth and National Radical Party, and the right-wing party PiS - entities that built their patriotic identity and credentials on being anti-communists, effectively claiming Polish decommunisation processes as their domain of action. With regards to the Brotherhood in Arms monument specifically, Maciej Maciejowski, Councillor of PiS, described the monument in 2010 as the 'nightmarish monument of the Soviet occupant' and argued that it should be blown up as a 'relic of a justly bygone era.'³⁴ Tomasz Kaczmarek, another PiS MP, said he would vote to melt the monument into razor blades.³⁵

These contestations, however, might also have reflected a broader consensus amongst the population and larger processes of historical reckoning. As the Soviet Union crumbled, Poles embarked on a difficult and often contentious journey to reshape their national identity and disentangle the complex legacies that formed part of it. In the case of the monument, years of Soviet propaganda finally came to clash with re-discovered instances of Russian oppression, highlighting the blurring of the lines between liberators and perpetrators. Hence, historical debates and controversies surrounding monuments and statues took on a new and enhanced significance and became part of the larger discourse on memory, identity, and politics.

The construction of the underground and the 'temporary' removal of the monument

In 2011, construction work for the underground station in Vilnius Square started, requiring the Brotherhood in Arms monument to be dismantled. This proposition was lodged for consideration at the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, a government body charged with the preservation of historical sites of wartime persecution of the Polish nation.³⁶ The Council decided that Russian officials had to be notified of the plans because of the Polish obligations under the 1994 agreement. The Russian officials did not respond to the notification, and the City Council decided that their notice satisfied the duties under the 1994 agreement.

The City council then passed a resolution to dismantle the monument temporarily and later, after the end of construction, to place it in the northern part of Vilnius Square.³⁷ The PiS members accused the city council PO's majority of promoting communism.

Shortly before the dismantling, on the night of September 16, 2011, two young men poured red paint over the pedestal and painted the words 'Red Plague' over the inscription.³⁸ The two young men were charged with destroying the monument (contrary to Art. 261 of the

³⁴ Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, "Pomnik 'Czterech śpiących' będzie przesunięty," last updated May 20, 2011.

³⁵ Wprost, "Poseł PiS: pomnik Czterech Śpiących? Przetopiłbym na żyletki," last updated October 2, 2013.

³⁶ Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Answer to Interpellation no. 503, August 3, 2011.

³⁷ Resolution no. XVI/300/2011, Warsaw City Council, May 26, 2011.

³⁸ Warszawa.naszemiasto.pl, "Wandale pomazali pomnik czterech śpiących," last updated September 18, 2018.

Criminal Code) but were later acquitted by the Court.³⁹ The Court found that the act was of negligible social harm. They also observed that it was a paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, propagating totalitarian regimes, including communism, is illegal (contrary to Art. 256 § 1 of the Criminal Code), but the law protects monuments that may potentially glorify such a totalitarian regime.⁴⁰

Following the incident, in November 2011, the City Council still proceeded with the plan to dismantle the monument, and the monument's parts were stored to be cleaned and renovated.⁴¹ In 2013, because of the controversies around the monument, City Hall decided to conduct a survey concerning its future. According to the survey, 72% of Warsaw's residents wanted the monument to remain in Vilnius Square, 12% wanted it to be moved somewhere else, and 7% wanted the monument to be dismantled.⁴² It seemed that many of Warsaw's residents had gotten used to it being there: "Let it be. It's not bothering anyone!" said one of the locals.⁴³

In response to this, the Institute of National Remembrance, a government-sponsored commission that documents crimes committed against Poles by the Nazis and the Soviet Union, prepared an information campaign with the intention of 'showing the true intentions' behind the erection of the Brotherhood in Arms monument.⁴⁴ On leaflets distributed in Vilnius Square, the Institute of National Remembrance argued that the monument was propaganda and, rather than paying homage to the fallen soldiers, it legitimised the post-war Soviet forces.⁴⁵ Similar campaigns had already been organised by the Social Committee for Protest Against the Restoration of the Monument to the Brotherhood in Arms, which collected nearly 10,000 signatures from the citizens of Warsaw urging the city council for the monument to remain in storage or be sent to a museum in Kozłowska, collecting remnants of the communist regime.⁴⁶ PiS members of the City Council also urged not to reinstate Brotherhood in Arms. At the time, Olga Johann, a PiS member and Vice-President of Warsaw, suggested moving the Brotherhood in Arms monument to the Museum of Communism or the Cemetery of Soviet Soldiers.⁴⁷ Maciej Wasik, a city councillor from the PiS party, proposed replacing the Brotherhood in Arms monument with a statue of Witold Pilecki, a Second World War resistance leader.⁴⁸

³⁹ Piotr Machajski, "Sąd: Atak farbą na "czterech śpiących" był nieszkodliwy," *Wyborcza*, August 21, 2015.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Tomasz Urzykowski, "Pomnik czterech śpiących rozpada się z hukiem," *Wyborcza*, November 23, 2011.

⁴² Iwona Szpala, "Są wyniki sondażu dot. usunięcia "czterech śpiących," *Wyborcza*, January 19, 2013.

⁴³ Translation by author, Martyna Śmigiel, "O tym mówi miasto: Obudzili śpiących i jest zadyma," *Wyborcza*, January 19, 2013.

⁴⁴ Polskieradio.pl, "IPN: pomnik Braterstwa Broni to symbol władzy Stalina nad Polską," last updated January 17, 2014.

⁴⁵ Zuzanna Derlacz, "Ciężar historii pomnika Braterstwa Broni, czyli co robili czterech, gdy trzech walczyło," *Pomnik.art*, last updated November 1, 2018.

⁴⁶ Wpollyce.pl, "Protest Przeciwno Przywróceniu Pomnika Braterstwa Broni - do magazynu albo skansenu. Podpisz petycję," last updated September 17, 2013.

⁴⁷ Polskieradio.pl, "IPN: pomnik Braterstwa Broni to symbol władzy Stalina nad Polską," last updated January 17, 2014.

⁴⁸ Tomasz Urzykowski, "Pomnik Pileckiego stanie na Żoliborzu? PiS ma inny plan," *Wyborcza*, September 23, 2013.

On February 26, 2015, because of the controversies around the monument, the city council repealed its 2011 resolution to return the monument to Vilnius Square.⁴⁹ However, no decision was made about what would happen to the monument.

Following the repeal of the 2011 resolution, the Russian Embassy expressed their concern about the monument and urged for it to be returned to its original place.⁵⁰ This reaction was part of the more general concern expressed by Russian officials over a developing practice of removing Soviet monuments in Poland. According to Russian officials, these removals were to be considered in violation of the 1994 agreement, and they would contribute to ignoring the historical role of the Red Army in the liberation of Poland.⁵¹

The Fate of the Monument after its Removal

In January 2016, the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw applied to the City Council to take charge of the statues and include them in the exhibition about the communist era in Poland.⁵² A few months later, the Institute of National Remembrance also requested the statues to be displayed at the newly inaugurated open-air museum in Borne Sulinowo.⁵³ The City Hall made an official statement claiming that the decision about handing over the monument was not within their jurisdiction, as the monument is of national importance and not merely a local concern.⁵⁴ According to the City Hall, the decision was to be made by the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites. However, the Secretary of the Council, Professor Andrzej Kunert, denied having such jurisdiction over the case, describing the Council as a merely advisory body whose decisions do not have legal consequences.⁵⁵ In 2018, the City Hall eventually agreed for the bronze statues of the soldiers to be given to the Museum of Polish History.⁵⁶

Many other Polish monuments have met or are awaiting a similar fate to the Brotherhood in Arms monument, thanks to the Decommunization Act of 2017. The Act bans monuments that symbolise or propagate totalitarianism. The Russian parliament has called this Act the result of a politically short-sighted, ideologically-driven approach and pledged to retaliate.⁵⁷

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process about the fate of the Brotherhood in Arms primarily involved city council officials. However, those decisions, especially the 2015 decision not to reinstate

⁴⁹ Resolution no. VI/105/2015, Warsaw City Council, February 26, 2015.

⁵⁰ Dziennik.pl, "Pomnik "czterech śpiących" do magazynu. Rosja czeka na wyjaśnienia," last updated February 26, 2015.

⁵¹ Polskieradio24.pl, "Ambasador Rosji oburzony "niszczeniem" pomników radzieckich w Polsce," last updated August 20, 2019.

⁵² Tomasz Urzykowski, "IPN i muzeum chcą przejąć pomnik "czterech śpiących". Miasto nie chce go oddać," *Wyborcza*, July 5, 2016.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ TVPInfo, "Pomnik „czterech śpiących” trafi do muzeum," last updated June 26, 2018.

⁵⁷ Mikhail Klikushin, "Tensions Mount and Insults Fly for Russia and Poland Over Memorials," *Observer*, August 14, 2017.

the monument, were influenced by the acts of the central government and by external agents, including the Institute of National Remembrance, as well as bottom-up, citizen-led initiatives. The City Hall conducted a survey in 2013 on the issue of the monument's fate, but ultimately its results were not considered. Ultimately, the city council had to navigate and balance the interplay of local voices with Poland's international obligations towards Russia flowing from the 1994 agreement.

Overall, it is also important to remember that the processes of decommunisation in Poland are conducted against the background of competing historical interpretations about the heritage of the communist era but also against an unclear legal background. On the one hand, legislation like the Decommunization Act of 2017 makes propagating communism illegal. Conversely, the Criminal Code and various other measures, such as the 1994 agreement, protect the monuments.

Some of the dynamics to consider in the decision-making process, therefore, include the role of having numerous (possibly conflicting) memory laws in place, the weight to be given to views held by locals (as opposed to trying to educate them about certain preferred historical interpretations), and the consequences of decommunisation being typically dominated by a set of political actors on the right and far-right side of the spectrum.

Summary and Conclusions

The contestation connected to the Brotherhood in Arms monument in Warsaw shows the challenges posed by the process of decommunisation in Poland. The communist era is a historically divisive and contentious topic among Polish people, and decommunisation has become, for the most part, the domain of right-wing and far-right movements. Additionally, the situation is complicated by the need to uphold relations with Russia. Many other Soviet-related monuments will presumably meet a similar fate to the Brotherhood in Arms monument - they will be dismantled and displayed in the museum. This is especially so after the enactment of the 2017 Act.

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About Contested Histories

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.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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