



MONUMENT OF GRATITUDE TO THE SOVIET ARMY

Legnica, Poland

38.0318, 78.4805



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Executive Summary

Soviet memorials have been the subject of removals in Poland since the 1980s, with the Monument of Gratitude to the Soviet Army have faced the same destiny. After 70 years of reminding locals of the country's soviet past in Legnica, Poland, the monument was removed in 2018 and moved to a museum. The decision was based on following through with de-communization and memorial laws. However, this removal has not been taken lightly by Russian officials, who, in addition to seeing it as an unnecessary act of fueling tensions between the two countries, also view it as breaking an agreement signed in 1994.

Introduction

The Monument of Gratitude to the Soviet Army stood in the western Polish city of Legnica for almost 70 years until it was removed on March 24, 2018. The monument's removal partakes in a wider movement to remove memorials and statues celebrating Poland's Soviet past, which has gained momentum since the arrival in power of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* - PiS (Law and Justice Party) in 2015. This removal policy was first entrenched by law no. 744/2016 on the prohibition of promoting communism or other totalitarian regimes by names of buildings, facilities, and public utilities, passed on April 1, 2016, and the Supreme Court decision no. I CSK 487/May 16 May 24, 2017, on lustration and decommunisation.¹

The recent history of the town of Legnica was deeply marked by the decades of the Polish People's Republic (1947-1989) since it hosted the largest Soviet military base in Poland during the Cold War. For this reason, it was known as Little Moscow. The monument's removal occurred after previous attacks and degradations but within a political context that facilitated this transition. Although the ultimate decision lay with the local authorities, they acted under pressure - they had to act before the end of March 2018 to qualify for a state refund of the removal costs.² The decision was condemned by Moscow and some national and foreign observers, wary of the Polish government's attempts to rewrite the country's recent past.

Background

Legnica and the Soviet front in the Second World War

Legnica is a Polish city in Lower Silesia, near the southwestern border with Germany, which the Polish Piast Dynasty has at different times ruled, the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Austrian Habsburgs, the Kingdom of Prussia and the German army. It is an important site of Polish national history, with the Battle of Legnica in 1241 marking the defeat of the Polish army led by Henry II the Pious – a man later idealised as the perfect Christian knight and martyr – at the hands of the Mongols.³ In the twentieth century, its history became controversial once more. After being taken by the Soviet Army from the Germans as a means to compensate for the loss of Eastern territories, the renegotiations at the Potsdam Conference surrounding the western Polish borders made Legnica part of the new Polish People's Republic. Its German population, which as late as 1910 had made up 95.86% of Legnica's population, was expelled and repopulated by Polish families from the annexed Eastern territories (present-day Belarus and Ukraine). For another 48 years after the end of World War II, the city hosted the Headquarters for the Soviet Northern Group of Forces (the military formation of the Soviet Army stationed in Poland). According to historian Ewa Ochman, over one-third of the city was turned into an extraterritorial enclave, which is why Legnica is also known as Little Moscow.⁴

¹ Polish Supreme Court decision on lustration and decommunization [2017] I CSK 487/16, [2017].

² AFP News Agency, "Poland consigns communist-era monuments to dustbin of History," *AFP News Agency*, April 30, 2018.

³ Ewa Ochman, *Post-communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The Monument of Gratitude to the Soviet Army in Legnica was the first monument erected in Legnica after World War II. It was built on February 11, 1951, in the centre of the city, on Słowiański Square, and took the form of a 2.5-tonne bronze statue. Before the war, in the same square, there had stood a monument to the Prussian King Frederick – the new sculpture, designed by Józef Gazy, was made using the metal of the previous one, knocked down a few years prior, and another of the city's monuments featuring the emperor of Germany, Wilhelm I.⁵ The new Soviet monument shows two soldiers, one Polish and one Soviet, and a little girl between them, dressed as a communist youth pioneer. The girl sits equally on the shoulders of the two men but looks at the Soviet soldier in gratitude. The Polish and the Soviet soldiers shake hands, and together with the little girl, symbolise a bright and unified future.

The Great Patriotic War in Russia involved the sacrifice of about 600,000 soldiers for the liberation of Poland. Regardless of the various tides of criticism of the Soviet era and especially of Stalinism, the USSR's involvement in the Second World War is generally conceived of as positive, with the idea that it was the Soviet Union that liberated Poland from Nazi Germany and rescued the Jews detained in concentration camps.⁶ In Poland, however, the focus is placed instead on the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression Pact of 1939 between the Soviet Union and Germany, the 1940 massacre at Katyń of Polish elites, which was covered up for decades by the USSR, and the half-century of totalitarian order imposed upon Poland. During the war, the liberation brought by Soviet soldiers to Polish territories did bring some improvements to the lives of the Polish people. Still, in the aftermath of Poland's decommunisation, iconoclasm became an important tool for asserting national identity. Russia's defence ministry launched an online project in July 2017 titled *The Liberation of Poland: The Price of Victory*, featuring scans of wartime reports from Soviet officers and Polish communists citing widespread gratitude among Poles towards the Red Army.⁷



Figure 1: 'Close up of the statues' by Aw58 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The History and Memory of Soviet Rule in Poland

⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁶ Matthew Luxmoore, "Poles apart: the bitter conflict over a nation's communist history," *Guardian*, July 13, 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

Legnica was referred to as 'Little Moscow' from 1945 until September 1993, when the last Russian army official left the city. For much of these 48 years, the city was divided between Polish and Soviet areas, the latter being forbidden to Polish citizens, who had been forcefully ejected from their neighbourhoods to make room for Soviet forces. According to official estimates from 1946, Legnica was home to 16,700 Poles, 12,800 Germans, and 60,000 Soviets.⁸ Many other traces of the Soviet presence remain in the urban landscape, with the city also featuring:

A Soviet airport... Soviet barracks (where every road leading out of town led to) ... a Soviet part of the railway station, and special stores for Soviet soldiers. (...) There was a Soviet military prosecutor, a court and even a prison. (...) One could often hear Russian on the streets and the sight of Russian soldiers and vehicles marked with red stars was commonplace. The railway schedule included regular departures for trains heading to Moscow.⁹

Famously, because of its function as Headquarters for the Soviet Northern Forces, the 1968 invasion of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia was prepared in Legnica by Soviet generals and their Polish allies.¹⁰

From the 1980s onwards, streets and squares across Poland began to be renamed, while monuments were removed or defaced. This happened on a case-by-case basis. However, many of these actions sparked local opposition. In February 1994, following the fall of the USSR, Poland and Russia signed an agreement related to the 'establishment, registration, installation, preservation and proper maintenance of places of memory and grave sites, any attempt to remove commemorating objects or memorials requir[ing] the consent of both states.'¹¹

However, 'the two authentic versions of the agreement differ in their wording,' with the Russian version encompassing monuments of gratitude. In contrast, the Polish version refers more specifically to cemeteries.¹² The joint commission listed 415 monuments to fallen Soviet soldiers and 77 obelisks, all outside cemetery grounds. Historian Dominika Czarnecka reports that by 2012, only one-third of such monuments of gratitude had been fully dismantled – a majority had been repurposed, moved to cemeteries or altered to remove their Soviet symbols.¹³ The Legnica monument had been at the centre of controversies and debates for several years. Still, its ultimate removal was spurred by



Figure 2: 'Statue in Legnica' by Aw58 CC BY 3.0

⁸ Institute of National Remembrance Bulletin, "Armia Czerwona Na Dolnym Śląsku," *Institute of National Remembrance*, May, 2001.

⁹ Grzegorz Żurawiński, "Legnica with a View to Russia," *New Eastern Europe*, no. 6 (29) (2017): 160-161.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹¹ Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Dissonant Heritage: Soviet Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism*, ed. Agnieszka Mrozik and Stanislav Holubec (London: Routledge, 2018), 105.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Matthew Luxmoore, "Poles apart: the bitter conflict over a nation's communist history," *Guardian*, July 13, 2018.

the de-communization process and memorial laws initiated by the PiS government. The monument was finally taken down on March 24, 2018, after having stood in the centre of Legnica for more than 67 years.

History of the Contestation

Early criticism of the monument

The Legnica Monument of Gratitude to the Soviet Army had encountered criticism before the more recent state-led de-communisation process. The first protest to remove it occurred in 1956, during destalinisation. Throughout the later decades of communism, the monument was a backdrop to First of May celebrations and anniversaries of the National Day of the Rebirth of Poland on July 22¹⁴ and the October revolution. After 1989, attempts were made to remove this monument, but the mix of nationalities and symbols of the monument created divisions. Local inhabitants felt uneasy at the destruction of a statue featuring a Polish child (nicknamed 'Peerelka'), and former combatants did not want the monument to go into a Red Army cemetery because of its Polish soldier.¹⁵ The architect of the monument himself offered a creative solution: to 'bury the monument two meters underground, making it an archaeological monument that will be unearthed after a hundred or maybe several hundred years.'¹⁶

In the 1990s, satirical happenings were organised by a local theatre, auctioning the monument for as little as 1 Polish Zloty or debating the question of the nationality of the three statues, still divisive in the city.¹⁷ In 1996, after the monument was removed for a time for renovation, it came back without the former inscription of gratitude. Later, a display board was added to explain the site's history in Polish, German, and Russian. As historian Ewa Ochman suggests, writing before the monument's removal, the role of Legnica started to shift from a contested public space to a space engaging with the transformable nature of memorial sites. The city was becoming a palimpsest:

If the monument is discarded as one which symbolises the Soviet occupation rather than liberation from the Nazis, then those who cooperated with the Soviets are equally as guilty of crimes perpetrated during the communist years.¹⁸

In 2009, the city council developed a 'Little Moscow' trail to engage the public with the city's complex historical past – at the intersection between Polish, Soviet, and German narratives. The initiative proved very popular but was firmly criticised by local politicians, and the monument remained a site of controversy. Because Legnica had been an important city in Soviet history – one of the largest Soviet military bases outside of the USSR – former Soviet officers kept ties with the city. In September 2013, a five-day reunion was planned, bringing in many guests and performers from Russia, with the main celebrations taking place on a stage by the 1951 monument. The night

¹⁴ A former national holiday in the former People's Republic of Poland and a fraternal anniversary in the Polish United Workers Party and all Polish communists, celebrated from 1944 to 1989. It commemorates the signing of the PKWN Manifesto on July 22, 1944.

¹⁵ Mariusz Urbanek, "Dziewczynka z pomnika wdzięczności," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 18, 2007.

¹⁶ Ewa Ochman, *Post-communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

before the reunion event was to take place. However, the monument was covered in red paint and adorned with the symbol of the National Radical Camp.¹⁹ This was more than a protest against the idea of Poland and the USSR as brother nations: it was meant to proclaim the suffering of Poles and the years of occupation. The nationalist sign on the monument symbolised a Polish pre-war Fascist movement, which has been active again since the fall of communism – the man who defaced the statue, Piotr Borodacz, is a member. A nationalist rally followed a few hours later, with an attendance of about 100 supporters:

Waving Polish flags and banners of the far-right All-Polish Youth, the protestors marched through town, congregating before a stage on which a folk band was performing songs for the reunion event.²⁰

At the time, Borodacz was arrested, and the festivities continued undisturbed, with police protection. The following year, in 2014, signatures of Legnica residents were collected to transfer the monument from the city centre to a less representative location, at the time to show solidarity with Ukraine and its war with Russian politics in the east of Ukraine. By this point, Crimea was annexed, and the war started in the Donbas region of Ukraine with regular military fights.²¹

The Law and Justice turn

Within a few years, the political landscape had significantly changed, and the new PiS (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, meaning Law and Justice) government made the removing of communist monuments one of its goals – under the supervision of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). The initial list calls for removing over 300 monuments across Poland and renaming 1,500 streets and organisations. IPN itself was launched in 1998, funded partly by money taken from the Polish Academy of Science, to ‘document crimes committed against Poles during the periods of Nazi occupation and Soviet domination.’²² Paweł Ukielski, the deputy head of IPN, wrote that these monuments ‘popped up like mushrooms’ after the war and that ‘under the false guise of gratitude, they hid the true symbolism – the Polish enslavement and dependence on the totalitarian Soviet Union.’²³ The former communist-era memorials are being replaced by new statues and murals approved by the state, commemorating Polish generals, ‘cursed soldiers,’²⁴ and freedom fighters of the Home Army.

2018 was a particularly important year in Poland, as it celebrated the centenary of its rebirth on November 11, 1918, in the aftermath of the First World War. For 123 years, the territories of Poland were partitioned between the Russian Empire, Prussia, and Austria through three treaties (in 1772, 1793, and 1795), ultimately leading to the erasure of the country from the map of Europe. The fall of communism in 1989 is coined as another rebirth. Polish nationalism thus not

¹⁹ Matthew Luxmoore, “Poles apart: the bitter conflict over a nation’s communist history,” *Guardian*, July 13, 2018.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ TVN24 Wrocław, “Legnica. Dismantling of the Gratitude Monument for the Soviet Army,” *TVN24 Wrocław*, March 25, 2018.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Charles Merewether, *In the Sphere of The Soviets: Essays on the Cultural Legacy of the Soviet Union* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 101.

²⁴ A term applied to a variety of anti-Soviet and anti-communist Polish resistance movements formed in the later stages of World War II and its aftermath by members of the Polish Underground State. This all-encompassing term for a widely heterogeneous movement was introduced in the early 1990s. For more information, please visit Sebastian Łupak, “Od wykłębnych do Smoleńska: jak - i po co - PiS przepisuje najnowszą historię Polski?” *GDANSK*, September 20, 2016.

only grapples with the legacies of its multicultural past and even more with the relics of the recent Soviet years.

The removal of Legnica's Monument of Gratitude in March 2018 was met with anger in Russia, with officials accusing Poland of violating the 1994 agreement. Its removal was concomitant with the coming into force of the amended 'decommunisation law,' which allowed for the removal of up to 230 Soviet war monuments by local authorities within the year – with a refund of the costs if done before April 2018. Different Russian State officials, as well as the Kremlin, have warned of retaliation. While Russia now recognises the initial agreement between the USSR and Nazi Germany to jointly invade and divide Poland in 1939, the removal of the monuments of gratitude in Poland is seen as a sign of ingratitude towards the sacrifices of the 600,000 Soviet soldiers who died while fighting against Germany to liberate Poland after 1943.

Poland's decommunisation process is mirrored by similar monument and statue removals across the former communist bloc. Outside the political sphere, commentators have wished that rather than fuelling tensions through removals, the authorities would let these memorials rot and 'decay naturally' to symbolise the decline of the USSR.²⁵

There were two options regarding the relocation of the Legnica monument. An initial proposition was to bring it, alongside others, to the distant forests of northern Poland, outside the village of Podborsko. A formerly hidden nuclear bunker (Object 3001) with the capacity to hold 160 atomic warheads has been repurposed by IPN to gather all of Poland's monuments of gratitude to create a Museum of the Cold War to denounce the communist system and totalitarianism. The second option, favoured by local stakeholders, was the project to create a 'lapidarium' where the statues could be used for scientific research and educational and artistic purposes.²⁶

Following these disputes, the local 'Museum Miedzi w Legnicy' (Museum of Copper in Legnica) now houses the monument as part of an outdoor exhibition dedicated to elements of communist monuments that had been removed from the urban public space.²⁷ Today, the latter option seems to have been preferred, and the local 'Cień Gwiazdy. Relikty Legnickich Pomników PRL-U,' or 'The Shadow of the Star. Relics of Legnica Monuments from the Polish People Republic Times' exhibition remains in possession of the monument.²⁸

Decision-Making Processes

In the case of Legnica, the decision-making process happened at a national and a local level, while international tensions with Russia also weighed significantly on the debate. The laws promulgated by the PiS-led Polish government, particularly law no. 744/2016 of April 1, 2016, on prohibiting promoting communism or other totalitarian regimes by names of buildings, facilities, and public utilities, and the Supreme Court decision no. I CSK 487/16 on lustration and decommunisation of May 24, 2017. The state-back Institute of National Remembrance (IPN),

²⁵ Christopher Cytera, "Soviet monuments in Poland should be left to rot," *Guardian*, July 19, 2018.

²⁶ TVN24 Wrocław, "Legnica. Dismantling of the Gratitude Monument for the Soviet Army," *TVN24 Wrocław*, March 25, 2018.

²⁷ Muzeum Miedzi w Legnicy, "Elementy z Pomnika Wdzięczności dla Armii Radzieckiej, 1951 r.," Muzeum Miedzi w Legnicy, n.d.

²⁸ Muzeum Miedzi w Legnicy, "Cień Gwiazdy. Relikty Legnickich Pomników PRL-U," Muzeum Miedzi w Legnicy, n.d.

whose budget rose by PLN110 million between 2017 and 2018. PiS also amended the law on IPN, increasing politicians' influence over the institute.²⁹ The local Silesian authorities, including the Legnica city council, want the object to stay in the city rather than moving to a monument park on the other side of the country even though there was not, at the time of the removal, a designated space to host the statue locally. The time-bound promise of a refund of the state's costs dictated the city council's decision to remove the Legnica memorial by April 2018. In December 2018, the Memorial of Gratitude stood next to the local Soviet Cemetery.³⁰ The Russian Foreign Ministry officials have repeatedly warned of 'asymmetric measures' against Poland should it continue to remove Soviet War monuments. Such measures would affect the granting of visas for Polish officials and the quality of trade relations.³¹

Summary and Conclusions

The Legnica Memorial of Gratitude to the Soviet Army has been removed for a few years, and debates are still ongoing regarding what should replace it on the city's main square. In line with a refocus of Polish history on Poland itself, a statue of Henry II the Pious, who died during the 13th-century Battle of Legnica against the Mongols, has become a strong contender. Competition is ongoing between different projects for fully revitalising the square, most of them turning away from constructing a new statue or monument. Contrasting approaches adopted in different Polish towns and cities after the removal of Soviet-era monuments could be a fruitful investigation.

Some of the conclusions of Ewa Ochman's work on Legnica, prior to the removal of the monument, provide interesting avenues for further investigation. She suggested that the 'growing heritage industry [was] one of the driving forces behind the city's recognition of its Soviet Past,' Legnica offers a different approach which 'contrasts with many other Eastern European municipalities, in which the remembering of a multicultural heritage works more selectively, and where the Soviet heritage is usually deleted from the multicultural credentials.'³² Removing Legnica's Monument of Gratitude seems to be a step back, a 'revision of the historical topography of the city.'³³

Research Contributed by Olivia Durand, Katherine Wood and Ulrika Stevens

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. 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.

The Contested Histories project 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, and, 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 EuroClio - European Association for History Educators 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.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen

Program Director

+33 66828327

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139

2585HP The Hague The Netherlands

secretariat@euroclio.eu www.euroclio.eu

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