

Forum: Special Conference devoted to the Russian Revolution Centenary

Issue: Monuments to Communist revolutionary heroes: preserve or destroy?

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Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was one of the seminal events of the early twentieth century. It is unsurprising that there is a big amount of monuments to communist revolutionary heroes. The October revolution gave a powerful impulse to the world revolutionary process, inspiring the revolutionaries of all countries. The experience of victorious socialist revolutions in Europe, Asia and Latin America, with all the originality of each of them, can be seen as by supporters of revolution as confirming the truth of Lenin's conclusion about the inevitability of a repetition on an international scale the main features of the October revolution. Moreover, from their point of view, the Commonwealth of Socialist Countries, continuing the experience of the October, became a powerful factor of social progress, an impregnable bastion of peace, democracy, and socialism. The October revolution may be seen as an affordance to the oppressed people the prospects of national liberation struggle, though later it led to dictatorship during the reign of Stalin.

So, as far as the monuments are concerned, it might be hard to distinguish between those that praise the Revolution as a means of achieving democracy and prosperity from those that served as one of the ways to legitimize the totalitarian rule. Thus, because monuments can be interpreted differently, they are treated differently as well.

Definition of key terms:

Monument - a statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a notable person or event.

Communism - a political ideology that believes societies can achieve full social equality by eliminating private property. The concept of communism began with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 1840s but eventually spread around the world.

Revolution - an aggressive overthrow of a government structure or social construct; a massive sudden change in societal values.

Bolsheviks – the representatives of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, which under control of Lenin replaced the Provisional government in Russia, cementing their hold of power in the country.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (true surname being Ulyanov) - a renowned Communist revolutionary and the first leader of the Soviet Union, lead the Bolsheviks to power through the civil war in 1917, made peace with the Central Powers, and began to reform the country. Ideologically a Marxist, he developed political theory known as Leninism.

Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (also known as Iron Felix) - a Polish and Soviet Bolshevik revolutionary and a soviet statesman. He was a member of several revolutionary committees such as the Polish Revkom as well as several Russian and Soviet official positions. Dzerzhinsky is best known for establishing and developing the Soviet secret police forces, serving as their director from 1917 to 1926.

UNESCO - the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Its main purpose is to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through education, science, and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the UN Charter.

All-Russian Society of Protection of Monuments of History and Culture - a public organization, which was established in the RSFSR in 1965. The main objectives of its activities is the preservation, restoration and promotion of cultural heritage (monuments of history and culture) of peoples of the Russian Federation.

Background information

1. The history behind the monuments

In the Soviet Union, many cities had statues and monuments of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the revolutionary and leader of the Russian SFSR, better known by the nom de plume Lenin. Unfortunately, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of them were broken with no permission from their authors. This happened even earlier in the European post-Communist states and in the Baltic states. However, in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine numerous monuments survived, and even new ones have been erected.

Felix Dzerzhinsky is an equally important person for the Russian revolution. In the post-Soviet space monuments of the statesman remained. Most of the sculptures and busts were dismantled in the first years of Perestroika. Such actions make us believe that the demolition of the monument to Dzerzhinsky is a mandatory ritual which is vital for the transition to the era of "wild" capitalism. Despite a series of riots, in some cities there are still mentions of Felix Dzerzhinsky, for example, monuments of him can be found in squares and parks of Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Transnistrian Republic, Kyrgyzstan.

Aside from the post-Soviet states, monuments to Lenin stand all around the world:

- Cuba, which still embraces the Communist ideology, has an entire park named after Lenin.
- The United States also have several monuments to the communist leader (Las Vegas, New Jersey, New York, Seattle).
- A bust of Lenin can be found in Antarctica, where it was brought by Soviet researchers in 1958.

Talking about Felix Dzerzhinsky, his monuments can be found:

- in Zaporozhye (Ukraine), located on Freedom square; however, it was removed on March 11, 2016.
- in Minsk, where it was established in 1947. The monument was established to the 70th anniversary from the birthday of the famous revolutionary and statesman.

2. The question of cultural heritage

Much of the monument debate focuses on whether a monument is a work of art or merely an artifact. This issue is difficult to be resolved.

The monument is a very powerful symbolic "education". If we ignore the monuments which have mainly cultural value, for example, ancient buildings, the monument contains the political semantics which is relevant to the political system and its historical milestones. To destroy such a monument means to express attitude to the past, to leave behind the idol of the former regime. It is a symbolic struggle, through a very clear and violent statements. Apparently, by doing this people intend to build their state from scratch.

There is an invisible connection between monuments and society. Monuments are a part of historical-cultural environment that develops and forms a view of the world of each resident. In addition, monuments of history and culture, representing historical milestones, may also serve as triggers for the information that makes people think about or predict future processes within society. No doubt, the higher are the educational, cultural, economical rates within society, the more humane its ideology, the more consciously it treats its historical and cultural heritage.

The problem of the war of monuments in Ukraine and Russia is especially complex and controversial.

In the evening of 22 August 1991 after the failed coup attempt thousands of people began to gather around the former KGB headquarters on Lubyanka square. The crowd rushed to overthrow the monument of Dzerzhinsky. The city council urgently adopted a resolution on the

removal of the monument, after which the sculpture was carefully removed from the pedestal with a construction crane and taken away.

Cases of vandalism against monuments became more frequent in Ukraine due to political crisis, which was accompanied by riots in Kiev and ended with the opposition coming to power. During Euromaidan it has become a widespread phenomenon and dubbed by Ukrainians «Leninopad», a pun literally translated as «Leninfall». On the territory of Ukraine within the law of the decommunization almost 2,5 thousand monuments were demolished, including more than 1.3 thousand monuments of Lenin.

An important case for consideration is a private Grūtas Park in Lithuania – one more example of a way in which communist monuments may be treated. This Park is a sculpture garden that unites numerous statues and expositions related to the Soviet time. Among the sculptures there is a monument devoted to Lenin that was taken down in Vilnius and later moved to the Park. Even though the Grūtas Park has some controversies with the Lithuanian authorities, it shows an alternative strategy of preserving monuments to communist heroes.

Major countries and organizations involved in the protection of cultural monuments

UNESCO

UNESCO is responsible for coordinating international cooperation in education, science, culture, and communication.

Russia

The main activities of All-Russian Society of Protection of Monuments of History and Culture:

- 1) Protection of historical and cultural heritage
- 2) Preservation of historical and cultural heritage
- 3) The use of historical and cultural heritage
- 4) Popularization of historical and cultural heritage

China

As a communist state, China is undoubtedly involved in the issue.

The work on the protection of historical and cultural values in China began in the 20-ies of XX century. In 1928 was formed a Committee for the storage of ancient monuments.

Currently, the historic preservation is handling by the State Office for the protection of ancient monuments.

The United States of America

The main task of preserving the national cultural heritage in the United States of America is accomplished through the Ministry of the interior.

In 1966, in accordance with the Law "On protection of historical monuments of national importance" the Advisory Council on preservation of historical monuments was established.

United Kingdom

In accordance with the Law on national heritage in 1983 an independent organization was established - the Commission on historical buildings and monuments of English heritage.

Germany

Protection and preservation of monuments of history and culture is a system of institutions in Germany. The highest institution of protection of monuments is the Ministry of culture of the land.

France

In the framework of the Ministry of culture at the General Directorate of architecture operates the Commission for protection of monuments of culture and art.

Poland

Issues of cultural heritage in Poland are accomplished through the Ministry of culture and national heritage and the Office of General conservator of monuments, which includes the Service of protection of monuments.

Within the framework of the issue discussed, former Soviet states, such as Ukraine, Baltic states, and Belarus, are as well involved since their experience in this issue and those ways of treating monuments to communist heroes that occurred in these states must be taken into consideration and discussed.

UN Resolutions and relevant treaties

- The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris from 17 October to 21 November 1972. The purpose of this Convention was the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage.
- The Roerich Pact or Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments. The most important idea of the Roerich's Pact is the legal recognition that the protection of culture always has supremacy over any military necessity.

- Resolutions of the First Conference of European Ministers responsible for the Preservation and Rehabilitation of the Cultural Heritage of Monuments and Sites (Brussels, 25-27 November 1969). The European Ministers recognized the economic and social value and potential of the built heritage and the threats placed on it due to the pressures of modern life.

Possible solutions

Obviously, preserving monuments should be a priority as opposed to the destruction. In those cases when the preservation and protection of a particular monument on its original place turns out to be impossible, there is always an opportunity to move the monument to a different location, either to a special sculpture park such as Grūtas Park in Lithuania, or to a historical museum where it will be perceived in a historical context as a part of a particular historical period. However, the neutral historic-architectural expertise should always take place first before any decision about the monument is taken.

Particular educational activities aimed at awakening and strengthening of the respect to cultural heritage may work on a long-term perspective, preventing possible aggression towards particular monuments.

Useful links

General Conference at its seventeenth session Paris, 16 November 1972

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001333/133369e.pdf>

Roerich Pact

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roerich_Pact

Protection of monuments

https://www.uni-trier.de/fileadmin/fb5/inst/IEVR/Arbeitsmaterialien/Staatskirchenrecht/Deutschland/Religionsnormen/German_Legal_Provisions/II_G_-_German_Legal_Provisions.pdf