



Statues of Red Army soldiers at the Antakalnis Military Cemetery in Vilnius.

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Lithuania's Postcolonial Iconoclasm – or Politics by Other Means

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The reaction of the Baltic states to Russia's aggression in Ukraine has been debated among academics as a 'postcolonial moment of sorts' as it triggered a new wave of anti-Soviet(Russian) iconoclasm across the region. The article focuses on the politics surrounding the latest wave of dismantling and renaming of monuments, public spaces and paradigms in Lithuania, discussing the arguments and actors involved as well as their motivations.

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Lithuania's Postcolonial Iconoclasm – or Politics by Other Means

Russia's unprovoked assault against Ukraine triggered a wave of indignation and vigilance across the West. As Vladimir Putin explicitly framed this aggression as denying Ukraine's right to exist as an independent nation, the war has also catalyzed anti-colonial sentiment across the various regions with a history of Soviet or Russian rule.^[1]

In the academic debate, the reaction of the Baltic states to Russia's renewed aggression has been characterized as a "postcolonial moment of sorts"^[2] and as a form of vicarious identification, through which society and the state do more than simply voice solidarity but live through and identify with Ukraine's experience of suffering, evoking the memory of analogous periods of imperial and totalitarian subjection in the past.^[3]

One of the most vivid examples of this transference from the Ukrainian political theatre to the Baltics concerns the waves of anti-Soviet and anti-Russian imperial iconoclasm – the dismantling, renaming and revisioning of monuments, public spaces and paradigms that are now seen as dangerous holdovers from the Soviet and imperial past.

[The toppling of the 79-metre-tall obelisk called the "Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders" on 25 August 2022](#) was perhaps the most spectacular example of this process. Erected in 1985, the monument had been a source of controversy and conflict between the critics and defenders of the Soviet role in the Second World War and the postwar occupation of Latvia ever since re-independence. But for various reasons, the obelisk remained standing and increasingly became the site of larger memory political clashes between mostly Russian-speaking commemorators of the great victory over fascism and nationally-minded Latvians who rejected this narrative.^[4]

But in the wake of revelations of genocidal violence in Bucha and other sites in Ukraine that had fallen under the control of Russian troops after the 2022 invasion, such considerations fell by the wayside and are now widely perceived as immaterial. A crowdfunding campaign raised the hundreds of thousands of Euros necessary to perform the demolition work. In May 2022, [Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš announced](#) that the removal of the monument was inevitable, and the Latvian parliament ultimately agreed. In August that same year, the obelisk was taken down.

The aim of this article is to take a deeper look at the most recent wave of iconoclasm in neighbouring Lithuania, to examine the arguments made by various stakeholders and to assess the motivations of the key actors with regard to three recent measures: one, the adoption of a law banning totalitarian monuments; two, the renaming of the Russian Theatre in Vilnius, and three, debates over monuments to Soviet-era Lithuanian creative intelligentsia. Do these developments represent a new, anti-colonial stage in the memory discourses or are they the mere continuation of previous waves of anti-Soviet iconoclasm? The short answer is both – but with a strong undercurrent of domestic politics concerning the legacy of collaboration with foreign rule.

A Domestic Affair

As in Latvia, the main target of iconoclasm in Lithuania was the main Soviet war monument, where

annual rallies commemorating the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War have been organized every 9 May by the Russian Embassy. Located in the Antakalnis cemetery in Vilnius, this monument was built in 1984 by the Lithuanian sculptor Juozas Burneika and architect Rimantas Dičius and tagged by the municipality for urgent removal in the Fall 2022.

Pro-Russian activists managed to convince the United Nations Committee on Human Rights to issue an “interim measure” against the removal, but the mayor of Vilnius insisted that no delay could be tolerated while Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and the threat of the same against Lithuania, continued. He called the Soviet practice of turning cemeteries into ideological monuments “repulsive” and distinguished the monument from the graves and gravestones of buried soldiers, which would not be disturbed. The statues were removed and installed at Grūtas Park, a resting ground for several Soviet monuments removed during the first wave of anti-Soviet iconoclasm in the early 1990s.

That said, the terms of the debate over the Soviet past are somewhat distinct in Lithuania, compared to Latvia and Estonia. One major difference arises from the ethno-demographic structure of Lithuanian society. Owing to several factors, including a markedly lower level of urbanization and industrialization, Lithuania received fewer immigrants from the USSR in the postwar years, such that the percentage of individuals self-identifying as Russian in 1991 was considerably lower in Lithuania than in Latvia and Estonia.

Upon the restoration of independence, Lithuania granted citizenship to all those residing on its territory, thus avoiding some of the tensions that have troubled inter-ethnic relations in Latvia and Estonia, which decided not to grant automatic citizenship to post-1940 settlers, thus creating a sizable group of mostly Russian-speaking non-citizens, many of whom decided not to naturalize, but rather to obtain Russian citizenship. Public debates about the Soviet past in both countries thus often run along ethnic lines.

While emotions over the Soviet past are no less strongly felt in Lithuania than the other Baltic states, debates are conducted more among Lithuanians themselves than between Lithuanians and Russians as such. The current impulse in Lithuania to cut all ties with the Soviet past cannot be fully explained by the fear of hybrid threat, but draws on a deeply rooted, psychological need to purge public spaces, the body politic, and collective memory of the taint of past collaboration with foreign powers.

One might thus argue that the strength of the current impulse to reject the Soviet past is directly proportional to the strength and cohesion of Lithuanian national communists during Soviet rule, led for decades by Antanas Sniečkus (1903-1974). Active in the communist underground since 1918, Sniečkus was appointed head of the Lithuanian Communist Party in 1926 and would keep this position until his death in 1974, making him one of the longest serving communist leaders in history.

He is said to have enjoyed the trust of Joseph Stalin, supported the coup against Nikita Khrushchev, and to have shielded Lithuania from excessive interference from Moscow. In sharp contrast the national communist party and cultural elites in the other national republics, the Lithuanian communists were never purged, and maintained an unusual level, by Soviet standards, of corporate autonomy in their affairs, especially in terms of economic and cultural matters. It is widely thought that Sniečkus made a deal with the creative intelligentsia of Soviet Lithuania, whereby they would enjoy a degree of freedom in terms of national self-expression so long as they did not rock the boat by criticizing the regime.^[5]

Something like this occurred in all post-Soviet states, but the extent of national Lithuanian agency in the management of the Soviet regime is easy to forget due to the sweeping success of the popular

movement against Soviet rule in the late 1980s, and the nearly absolute emphasis placed in subsequent years on commemorating the role of the postwar anti-Soviet partisans as the true representatives of the nation.^[6] Indeed, it is increasingly forgotten that Sąjūdis, the popular movement against Soviet rule, was led by members of the official intelligentsia and members of the communist party, with dissidents often pushed to the side-lines.

By the time Lithuanian independence was restored, the national communists rechristened themselves in the form of European-style political parties. Elite continuity was largely unruffled because Lithuania had never gone through a comprehensive process of lustration. As a result, every act of symbolic de-Sovietization today is aimed as much against the national communists, and all those seen to have collaborated with the Soviet regime, as it targets the ideology and materiality of totalitarianism itself.

The Law

Three decades later after the restoration of independence, national communism has all but disappeared as an ideological force, but it persists as a shadowy legacy that many in society feel must somehow be purged. The law adopted on 13 December 2022 does not single out the Soviet war monument in Antakalnis, but establishes a system that, if implemented fully, would remove all monuments associated with the Soviet or German occupation regimes from public spaces in Lithuania. Specifically, the purpose of the law is “[to establish a ban on the promotion of totalitarian, authoritarian regimes and their ideologies](#),” along with a procedure for recognizing and removing or amending public objects determined to be in violation of the ban.

The law thus represents a significant addition to earlier measures that ban the distribution and display of “Nazi or communist symbols, symbols of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes” (Art. 524 of the Code of Administrative Offences, adopted in 2008), and the ban on the public “condoning, justification, trivialisation or denial of the aggression of the USSR or Nazi Germany against the Republic of Lithuania or their crimes of genocide or other crimes against humanity, or war crimes or other grave crimes or felonies” (Art. 170.2 of the Criminal Code, adopted in 2010).

These bans emerged as part of a wave of new laws across Europe that sought to implement the [European Council’s Framework Decision of 2008](#), which calls on EU member states to criminalize “publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivialising crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes,” when “directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin,” and when the conduct is carried out in a manner likely to incite violence or hatred against such a group or a member of such a group. When Lithuania implemented this decision through national legislation, it specifically listed Soviet and Nazi German aggression and other state crimes committed by these regimes as a target of the ban.^[7]

The 2022 law also built on the precedent established in a 2014 amendment to a Ministry of Culture regulation, which added Nazi and Communist symbols, as well as “[images of German national socialists or leaders of the Communist Party of the USSR responsible for the repression of the Lithuanian population](#)” to the list of criteria used to determine the status and significance of immovable cultural property. The amendment did not ban such monuments outright, but enabled municipalities to remove them if they so decided, without violating laws on the preservation of heritage objects. This amendment was introduced to enable the removal of the four communist statues that adorned the Green Bridge in Vilnius.^[8]

The 2022 law makes the removal of “offending” monuments mandatory and extends it to a broader category of existing monuments, persons, organizations, events, and dates. This includes the names of streets and buildings, celebrations of Soviet victory on 9 May, statues of Soviet soldiers, of which there are still over a hundred across the country, as well as statues of Lithuanians who collaborated with the Soviet or Nazi regimes. The prohibition does not apply to the work of museums, archives, and libraries, or any activities pursued for the purpose of education, scholarship, art, or collection.

The law came into effect on 1 May 2023 and its implementation began within a 20-day period during which municipalities were obliged to produce a list of objects within their boundaries that were potentially in violation of the ban to be submitted to the [Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania \(GRRRC\)](#). The decision to remove a monument rests with the Director of the GRRRC on the advice of a commission of nine individuals delegated by the Ministry of Culture, Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University, the Vilnius Academy of Arts, the [Institute of Lithuanian History](#), the [Secretariat of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania](#), the [Union of Lithuanian Political Prisoners and Exiles](#), and the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities.

Final decisions are subject to challenge under administrative law by individuals whose rights or legitimate interests are affected, or by the public prosecutor defending the public interest. Notably, the assessment procedure can also be initiated by a municipality with respect to a newly created or planned monument. The removal of an object is to be financed by the budget of the municipality in which the monument is located.

Curiously, [the law](#) also seems to impose a duty on the GRRRC, non-governmental organizations, and institutions of higher education to “carry out the prevention of the dissemination of the ideologies of totalitarian, authoritarian regimes” by “(1) implementing projects and programmes, disseminating information, expanding public knowledge and understanding of the harms of totalitarian, authoritarian regimes and their ideologies, crimes committed or committed by these regimes; (2) enabling the public to strengthen the knowledge and skills that increase their resilience to disinformation; (3) conducting research and ensuring the presentation of its results to the public.”

This provision appears exhortatory, as there is no indication of what resources will be allocated to perform these tasks, or how their implementation will be monitored or measured. Indeed, the gap between the sweeping intent of the law and its practical implementation may widen over time. The costs associated with the removal of monuments are not insignificant, and it is not clear whether the smaller municipalities will muster the necessary will and resources to complete the task.

Moreover, in the media and in public discussions, the law is routinely called the “de-Sovietization law,” despite its careful balancing of the Soviet and Nazi period of occupation. Those promoting the law made no call to action to “de-Nazify” public space or to hold debates over the collaboration of Lithuanian cultural elites, many of whom continued to write, paint, and perform throughout the occupation, even though there are several notorious monuments in Lithuania to individuals who collaborated with the Nazi regime.^[9]

An Anti-Colonial Moment

If there is an anti-colonial dimension to the iconoclasm of the day, it is most visible in the renaming of

the “Russian Theatre” in Vilnius. This move was not made to implement the law but was instead a voluntary decision by the Ministry of Culture, in response to calls from members of the cultural community and the widespread desire to reject any vestiges of historical Russian influence on Lithuanian society.

Those involved in the decision-making were careful to avoid any statements expressing animosity towards Lithuania’s Russian community. Marius Ivaškevičius, a playwright and member of the taskforce established by the Ministry to examine the issue, has noted that the ‘Russian Drama Theatre’ no longer reflects the full range of its repertoire.

Olga Polevikova, the director of the theatre and a member of the taskforce, argued that the name change should be more than a formality in response to popular demands, and instead provide a new creative impulse to the work of the theatre.^[10] Several replacement names have been suggested, including that of the Polish-Lithuanian poet Adam Mickiewicz or the early twentieth-century Lithuanian author Jurgis Baltrušaitis, who translated several works from Russian into Lithuanian. Ultimately, the theatre was renamed the “Old Theatre” – a neutral solution.

The renaming evoked little public controversy, except for a sharp exchange of views between two writers: Georgiy Yefremov, a Russian poet and translator who was an active member of Sąjūdis, was deeply critical of the decision, which he described as childish, “a mixture of a kindergarten and an insane asylum.”^[11] Yefremov compared the public climate of anti-Russian sentiment to the conformism of society under late socialism and criticized the impulse to scapegoat the Russian nation and language in response to the acts of Russia’s despotic leader.

Yefremov’s critique was rebuked by Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, who asserted that the name change was long overdue since the building housing the theatre was originally built and gifted to the municipality of Vilnius in the early twentieth century with the explicit intent to support Polish theatre and culture in the city. In the postwar era, the theatre was initially commandeered to serve as a Soviet officer’s club, and later as a venue for Russian-language theatre. As such, according to Sabaliauskaitė, the name change is indeed an act of de-Sovietization, as well as a reflection of the anti-imperial mood in Lithuania. In view of the ongoing brutality committed by Russian troops in Ukraine, she asserts that is intolerable to endorse any manifestation of Russian aggression and imperialism, which indeed predates the Soviet period.^[12]

Purging Collaborators

While the renaming of the Russian theatre manifests an anti-colonial sentiment of sorts, most controversies have arisen over the role of Lithuanians during the Soviet occupation, specifically, the role of Lithuanian artists and writers. During the first wave of anti-Soviet iconoclasm in the early 1990s, monuments to Soviet-era writers and artists were left untouched, a compromise based on the notion that writers and artists who continued their work during the Soviet period were engaged, albeit covertly, in a form of cultural resistance.

This compromise had eroded already before the full scale invasion of February 2022, marked by [the removal of a statue of the Lithuanian writer Petras Cvirka \(1909-1957\) in November 2021](#). This monument, created by the famous Lithuanian sculptor Juozas Mikėnas (1901-1964), was erected during the post-Stalin Thaw in 1959, a period marked by a certain revival of Lithuanian culture. Although the

dismantling of the statue was based on the GRRC's assessment that Cvirka had "actively collaborated" with Soviet authorities, this decision was criticized by a handful of artists and historians like Valdemaras Klumbys, who asserted that the impulse to excise representations of prior regimes from the public was itself a "genetic inheritance" from the Soviet period and a manifestation of Soviet ideology, echoing the current practice in Russia of re-writing history.^[13]

Similar debates are continuing regarding the [Venclova House museum](#) in Vilnius which was the home of Antanas Venclova (1906-1971). Like Cvirka, Salomėja Nėris (1904-1945), Liudas Gira (1884-1946), and other "progressive" writers and intellectuals, Venclova was coopted by the Soviets. He was "elected" to the sham parliament established in July 1940 and signed a petition requesting the Moscow to admit Lithuania to the USSR.

That said, the Venclova House was also home to Tomas Venclova, the son of Antanas and a famous Soviet dissident, who was forced to leave Lithuania in the 1970s, settling in New Haven, Connecticut. To this day, Tomas Venclova is active in Lithuanian literary and intellectual life, and the Venclova House is an active and lively cultural center. The campaign against the museum is thus seen in an ambivalent light, as a politicized act aimed at shifting the electorate towards the populist right, rather addressing genuine concerns about the legacy of Soviet rule.

But with Russia's ongoing annexation of Ukrainian territories, the memory of how the cohort of Cvirka, Antanas Venclova, and other Lithuanian writers participated in the betrayal of national interests has become acute, leading to calls to rename streets and edifices associated with their legacy. The administration of the Salomėja Nėris Gymnasium, for example, is searching for a new name for this once prestigious institution in the centre of Vilnius, which nurtured several generations of Lithuanian elites.^[14] One alternative name under consideration is Jonas Mekas, who gained worldwide fame as a New York-based artist and filmmaker, but who is also under scrutiny for having worked for a newspaper that spread anti-Semitic propaganda during the Nazi occupation.^[15]

The complexity of collaboration is nowhere more evident than in the controversy provoked by the decision of [the Lithuanian Writers Union](#) to erect a monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930-2011). As distinct from the "Stalinist" generation of Soviet Lithuanian writers, who participated in the annexation of Lithuania to the USSR, Marcinkevičius belonged to the postwar "Generation of 1930," writers who came of age after the war and who emerged as public figures during the post-Stalin Thaw. Marcinkevičius would become Lithuania's most popular writer during the period of late socialism, and a highly visible and revered personality of the anti-Soviet popular movement of the late 1980s.^[16]

Until very recently, Marcinkevičius was seen as a national icon, the author of a fantastically popular trilogy of historical dramas focussed on Lithuania's medieval history with nationalist overtones that resonated deeply with popular sentiment. During the late Soviet period, passages from these texts were chanted in unison by theatre audiences. At the peak of Sąjūdis, these same refrains were chanted by hundreds of thousands of ecstatic Lithuanian protestors at public rallies, a phenomenon that astounded foreign observers like Anatol Lieven, who described these theatrical events as something of a cross between a communist convention and a Catholic mass.^[17]

Marcinkevičius did not pursue politics after Lithuania regained independence. When he died in 2011, he was mourned as a national hero. The pathos of headlines proclaiming "The Nation Grieves the Loss of its Shepherd" or "The Death of the Poet Leaves the Nation Orphaned" was reinforced by the timing of his death, on 16 February – the anniversary of the declaration of Lithuanian independence in 1918. Crowds

of Lithuanians braved the wet snow and the cold, walking several kilometres after the mass held in the Great Cathedral to accompany Marcinkevičius' body to its final resting place in the Antakalnis cemetery.^[18]

Today, however, the glorification of the armed resistance against the Soviets and the hard emphasis placed on the crimes of totalitarianism in public discourse are coupled with the fading of the memory of the popular movement and the challenges and nuances of life under late socialism. As a result, yesterday's heroes like Marcinkevičius are now being portrayed – by some – as villains.

Lithuania's Postcolonial Iconoclasm

Ann Rigney once argued that iconoclasm can play a progressive role insofar as the confrontation with "the intolerable presence of the old" offers a "tangible focus for marking out differences and demanding change in the politics of visibility." But if pushed too far, "iconoclasm may end up becoming an end in itself," distracting from the issues "that drove the demand for mnemonic change in the first place."^[19]

It is too soon to say how far this wave of iconoclasm will go, or what character it will ultimately assume. The impulse to reject all monuments to figures associated with the Soviet regime as a kind of contamination of public space feels different from earlier waves of memory activism that sought to work through the participation of the local community in the Soviet and German occupations, including their role as beneficiaries or collaborators in acts of domination over others. Also, as noted above, the relicts of collaboration with the German occupation does not seem to inspire the same zeal.

The 2023 law has given a powerful impetus to memory activists to engage in a "politics of visibility," but the end goal of these politics is not yet clear. While the ostensible aim of the legislation – to prevent the public promotion of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies – is commendable, the means chosen to advance this goal will not necessarily be successful. Indeed, the danger is that the cleansing of public spaces of all reminders of the complicated past of collaboration will not stimulate, but rather foreclose debate and recollection. The erasure of collaboration from collective memory portends the loss of the valuable lessons that are inherent to this difficult legacy.

Footnotes

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3. Dovile Budrytė, A Decolonizing Moment of Sorts: The Baltic States' Vicarious Identification with Ukraine and Related Domestic and Foreign Policy Developments. Paper presented at the Fifteenth Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe, 15-17 June 2023.
4. See Mārtiņš Kaprāns, [Toppling Monuments: How Russia's War against Ukraine has Changed Latvia's Memory Politics](#), Cultures of History Forum (29.11.2022), DOI: 10.25626/0142.
5. Romualdas J. Misiūnas and Rein Taagepera, The Baltic States, Years of Dependence, 1940-1990, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 142.
6. See Violeta Davoliūtė, [Heroes, Villains and Matters of State: The Partisan and Popular Memory in Lithuania Today](#), Cultures of History Forum (17.11.2017), DOI: 10.25626/0078.
7. For more on these memory laws, see Eva-Clarita Pettai, Protecting Memory of Criminalizing Dissent: Memory Laws in Lithuania and Latvia, in Memory Laws and Historical Justice. The politics of Criminalizing the Past, edited by Elazar Barkan and Ariella Lang, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, p. 173. According to Pettai, the laws in Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Latvia also mention communist crimes in their implementation of the Framework Decision.
8. The composition Mokslo jaunimas (Academic Youth) was created by sculptors Juozas Mikėnas and Juozas Kėdainis; Pramonė ir statyba (Industry and construction) was created by Napoleonas Petrulis and Bronius Vyšniauskas; Taikos sargyboje (Guarding Peace) by Bronius Pundzius; Žemės ūkis (Agriculture) by Bernardas Bučas and Petras Vaivada. See Rasa Baločkaitė, [The New Culture Wars in Lithuania: Trouble with Soviet Heritage](#), Cultures of History Forum (12.04.2015), DOI: 10.25626/0034.
9. Arkadijus Vinokuras, [Lietuvai reikalingas atskiras istorijos denacifikacijos įstatymas](#), LRT.lt (5 September 2023), accessed 22 September 2023.
10. Both cited in Marius Eidukonis, ['I hope we don't make a mistake': Lithuania looks to rename its Russian Drama Theatre](#), LRT.lt English (10 September 2022), retrieved 22 September 2023.
11. Natalija Zverko, [Sąjūdyje dalyvavęs rusų poetas: kas visą tautą kaltina kraugerišku, tiesiog yra rasistas](#), LRT.lt (7. October 2022), retrieved 22 September 2023.
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14. Roberta Salynė, [Salomėjos Nėries gimnazija svarsto atsisakyti poetės vardo: tarp kūrybos nuopelnų ir kolaboravimo šleifo](#), 15min.lt (no date), retrieved 22 September 2023.
15. Michael Casper, [World War II Revisionism at the Jewish Museum](#), Jewish Currents (12 April 2022), retrieved 22 September 2023.
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17. Anatol Lieven, The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Path to Independence, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 109.
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Antanas Sniečkus, longtime leader of the Lithuanian Communist Party during the Soviet period.
Photo: KGB Documents Online | <https://www.kgbdocuments.eu>



Monuments from Soviet times get a final rest at the Grutas Park, here some Lenin statues.
Photo: Adriaio, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons



Statue of socialist workers at the Green Bridge in Vilnius.
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