



the modified statue, now with the Ukrainian trident on the shield

Photo: Kateryna Medovnyk

## **A Trident on the Shield: Ukraine's Decommunization Strategy and the Case of the "Mother Ukraine" Statue**

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While there have been recurring debates about how to deal with the Soviet legacy since the country's independence, in 2015 decommunisation became a systemic imperative of Ukrainian state policy. Particularly in the case of monuments that are an essential part of the public space, redefinition became a strategy of decommunisation. The article examines the debates surrounding and the alteration of such a monument, the Motherland statue in Kyiv.

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## A Trident on the Shield: Ukraine's Decommunization Strategy and the Case of the "Mother Ukraine" Statue

"Early on the morning of 6 August, alpinists in the Park of Glory in Kyiv affixed the trident to the shield of the Motherland monument. [...] After affixing the trident, the Ukrainian flag was raised over the shield."<sup>[1]</sup> In the ninth year of the war with Russia (and the second of the full-scale invasion), this snippet in the media outlet Suspilne was beyond a doubt not the most historic and dramatic news. Yet, it heralded certain changes in the self-representation of the city. Living on the left bank of the Dnipro several years ago, I saw this statue towering over the green slopes and deep calm waters of the river twice a day from afar: Depending on the weather and the time of the day, it reflected the sun differently, but it was impossible not to catch sight of it. It remains somewhat of a mystery how one of the most recognizable tourist magnets in independent Ukraine froze history in the particular form of Soviet symbolism. But after several years of long-winded decommunization debates, the impetus for transformation has now reached one of the country's most important landmarks.

### Reckoning with Communism in Ukraine

In Ukraine, communism officially ended in 1991 with the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine; any reconsideration of the country's Soviet heritage or acknowledgment of the crimes of the Communist regime, however, occurred much more gradually, even sluggishly. As far as we know, the question whether to maintain Soviet memorials after the fall of the Soviet Union in public spaces was first raised in 1990, when local activists demolished a Lenin monument in Chervonohrad (recently renamed Sheptytskyi) in the Lviv region, deeming him to be a Soviet idol.<sup>[2]</sup> School and university curricula were gradually decommunized, as were other spheres to a certain extent.<sup>[3]</sup> The first decade of Ukraine's independence, for instance, was marked by steps to establish (or revive) independent archival studies in Ukraine, create handbooks and other materials with an emphasis on Ukrainian institutions, and train archive specialists to step out of the shadow of Soviet and Russian superiority.<sup>[4]</sup> In a similar manner, class struggle as the main mode of writing history was abandoned and replaced with a nationalist paradigm. Multivolume projects such as *History of Ukraine: A New Vision* or *Ukraine Through the Centuries* were launched and carried out – albeit, according to G. Kasianov, by historians who were former lecturers of the History of the Communist Party who had adjusted the arc of their careers to the winds of change.<sup>[5]</sup> Only in 2015 did decommunization become a systemic imperative of state policies, aimed at the "liberation from the influence and consequences of communist ideology not only in public life, but in all spheres of the life of the country and society",<sup>[6]</sup> when the parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, passed four decommunization laws. One, entitled "On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of Propaganda of their Symbols," forbids the public usage of symbols of both aforementioned regimes, including memorials dedicated to events connected to the establishment of Soviet rule in Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup>

The implementation of decommunization policies was and is obviously more complicated than simply putting laws on the books. This is in part because various forces came into play, including nostalgic voices, such as the Communist Party of Ukraine, that strove to conserve the past in opposition to the proactive forces that want to get rid of it: Although removed from parliament in 2015, the Communist Party continued its activities until it was outlawed by the Sixth Administrative Court of Appeal in May 2022.<sup>[8]</sup> Although communist sympathizers no longer have a legal lobby, they remain active, albeit scattered in other parties. Oleksandr Buzhanskyi, a member of the presidential party "Sluha Narodu",

opposed the adoption of the 2023 “decolonization law” by saying that it would allow the state to “rip Soviet symbols off of mass graves, that is rip them off the dead” – a misleading statement since Second World War memorials are not covered by the law, which was devised to remove Russian imperial markers from public spaces.<sup>[9]</sup>

By far the most zealous politician striving to purify memory politics of its Russian and Soviet remnants is Volodymyr Viatrovykh. Before joining the right-centrist “European Solidarity” party in 2019, he worked as a historian and director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, the main executive body responsible for the development of history policies.<sup>[10]</sup> In addition, some of the most ardent proponents of decommunization can be found in the grassroots project “Decolonization. Ukraine” (formerly “Decommunization. Ukraine”), which has served as a decommunization watchdog since 2015.<sup>[11]</sup>

Further complexities lie in the fact that not every Soviet era monument evokes exclusively negative memories. Public opinion concerning specific monuments is thus often split, leading to the retention of certain elements of the Soviet era in the public sphere – including the redefinition of the Motherland statue in Kyiv, the subject of this article.

Redefinition has become a decommunization strategy in cases when a certain place or monument retains its artistic or symbolic value or is a crucial part of the public space, especially if – owing to its size or for other reasons – the object cannot be moved to a museum to be used in exhibitions about the totalitarian character of the Soviet Union. Redefinition is not a new concept in the politics of decommunization, first appearing in 2015 during discussions about the renaming of cities. Ukrainian culturologist Oleksandr Hrytsenko has noted that so-called “sovoks” (people nostalgic for the Soviet Union) suggest changing the meaning of city names instead of renaming them. Illichivsk (named after Lenin’s patronymic), for example, could instead honour the prophet Illia (Ukrainian for “Elijah”).<sup>[12]</sup> Florian Peters points to a similar situation in Kharkiv, where the Dzerzhinsky district, named after the founder of the Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinsky, could instead refer to his brother Volodymyr, a doctor.<sup>[13]</sup> Resulting in such comic situations, the “redefinition” of city names is more often a matter of a lack of political will or civic initiative; redefining buildings and monuments through the replacement of certain elements seems to be a more realistic strategy. One of the most prominent cases involves the former People’s Friendship Arch in Kyiv, which symbolized the longstanding relationship between Ukraine and Russia. In November 2018, activists painted a crack on the Arch to symbolize the end of good neighbourly relations after Russia’s invasion.<sup>[14]</sup> In May 2022, the arch was renamed the Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People and the sculpture of a Ukrainian and a Russian proletarian removed from beneath it.<sup>[15]</sup> Despite such radical changes, the most recent redefinition to hit the headlines, the Motherland monument in Kyiv, made waves like no other case before.

## Creation of the Kyiv Colossus

Part of a memorial complex dedicated to the history of the Second World War, the Motherland monument is a large sculpture of a woman holding a sword and a shield. According to estimates, it is the largest sculpture in Europe – 102 metres tall (including the pedestal), with two observation decks overlooking Kyiv from a height of 36.6 and 91 metres and two elevators. The history of the sculpture began in the 1970s, with the construction of a memorial complex to honour the liberation of Ukraine from the Nazis. The progenitor of the project, architect Yevhen Vuchetych, had created “The Motherland Calls” sculpture in Volgograd some time earlier, and planned to cover the Kyiv monument with gold leaf and bas-reliefs that glorified the history of the Communist Party. Two thirty-metre-high soldier figures

and an artificial waterfall that would flow into the Dnipro were to round out the complex. After Vuchetych died in 1974, Ukrainian sculptor and monument-builder Vasyl Borodai took over, simplifying the original design by making the monument look more natural and feminine, and removing the waterfall, the bas-reliefs, and the soldier figures. The shield and the sword were maintained. That being said, despite the changes, the figure of the woman was (still) designed in the social realist idiom prevalent in the Soviet Union, which worshiped strength and physically developed bodies.<sup>[16]</sup>

After Ukraine achieved independence, the monument remained in its original form. Only in response to the “decommunization laws” did the memorial complex remove the words “Great Patriotic War” from its title in 2015, shifting to “The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War.”<sup>[17]</sup> Nothing was done to eliminate the Soviet symbols from the statue, whether due to the inaction of the responsible authorities or because the 2015 laws made an exception for memorials to the Second World War. In 2021, the director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, Anton Drobovych, announced that donor funds were available to remove the Soviet symbols, but no decision was made about how the sculpture was to be changed.<sup>[18]</sup>

During special occasions, the monument was illuminated in blue and yellow or the Ukrainian flag was raised onto the sword with the help of drones. When a light show with Ukrainian folk costumes was projected onto the monument during the Eurovision Song Contest in Kyiv in 2017, the Soviet coat of arms was covered with a Ukrainian trident, likely demonstrating the desire of organisers not to evoke any associations with the Soviet Union and to highlight the symbols of independence.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Public Debates over Alterations to the Monument

With Russia’s full-scale invasion, the demand for decommunization returned with greater vigour. In particular, attention was drawn to the Motherland monument. Obviously, the presence of the Soviet coat of arms on the shield was now deeply out of place, yet opinions concerning the fate of the monument as a whole remained divided. There were no calls to “leave it as it is,” which can be attributed to the fact that communist sympathizers (however few or many there might be) no longer have any official representation. A belief that their opinions would not be taken into consideration or worries that careless public statements could draw the attention of the Security Service (which scrutinizes those who could pose a danger to Ukrainian statehood in the ongoing war with Russia) might also explain the silence of some.

A certain segment completely rejected the monument as a remnant of the Soviet era, even calling for its complete removal. Activist Vitalii Haidukevych, for example, posits that the monument and the memorial complex as a whole are imbued with Soviet symbolism; the wisest decision would therefore be to demolish the sculpture.<sup>[20]</sup> Similarly, renowned Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko has said that the construction of the Motherland statue was the final act of torture of Kyiv’s architectural harmony during the Shcherbytsky era.<sup>[21]</sup> Art historian Kateryna Lypa has described the Motherland monument as “a bad example of Soviet art,” and not worth the money allocated to replace the Soviet elements with Ukrainian symbols. Historian Oleksandr Kucheruk has compared the redefinition of the monument with the transformation of the Lenin Museum into the Ukrainian House, which has long been known among the public as the “Ukrainian House of Lenin.” The historian added, “I would knock it down and sow flowers in its place.”<sup>[22]</sup>

Philologist Yurii Shevchuk, in favour of the complete removal of the statue, has argued that “ersatz-

decolonization [as he calls the redefinition] condemns us to the eternal return of the empire". He has condemned Ukrainian society for its inability to recognize the "spiritually poor and dehumanized imperial imagination" behind the monument.<sup>[23]</sup> Historian Tetiana Shvydchenko has expressed a similar view, stating that this and all similar "motherland statues" scattered across the former Soviet Union are "Muscovy portraits in disguise," the antithesis of the Statue of Freedom. Their presence in public space is thus a matter of national security.<sup>[24]</sup> Approaching the matter from a more practical point of view, Vadym Pozdniakov, director of the initiative "Decolonization. Ukraine", maintains that "pseudo-decommunization" will simply protract the process of real decommunization for a decade or more.<sup>[25]</sup>

In contrast, more moderate voices have favoured a "Ukrainization" of the monument in response to its recognisability and significance for Kyiv. Art historian Diana Klochko has compared the Motherland monument to the ancient image of Athena, the protectress of Athens. In contrast to "The Motherland Calls" in Volgograd, the pose of the Ukrainian statue is more peaceful, thereby calling not for war but for self-defence.<sup>[26]</sup> Rostyslav Khotyn, in the article "Motherland monument: A Russian or Ukrainian woman?," points to the ethnic Ukrainian origins of the project leader and the two female artists who inspired the image of the statue, as well as at their interest in Ukrainian culture.<sup>[27]</sup> Finally, art historian Milena Chorna has remarked on the "peacefulness" of the monument, comparing it to a more pompous earlier design by Vuchetych that ostensibly glorified "pobedobesie".<sup>[28]</sup> "Pobedobesie" is a derogative term for the outsized hysteria surrounding Russia's victory in the Second World War and is characterized by a militarization of public consciousness through mass culture. It developed as a social phenomenon during Putin's presidency and reached its peak after the annexation of Crimea and during the war with Ukraine.<sup>[29]</sup> It becomes clear that the debates surrounding the statue remain deeply rooted in the ongoing reinterpretation of the Second World War in Ukrainian society, while the established Soviet interpretation is being weaponized against Ukraine.

From a different perspective, Harvard Historian Serhii Plokhii has noted that several Kyiv landmarks that matter a great deal to Ukrainian selfhood (such as the monument to St. Volodymyr, who baptized the Kyivan Rus) were first conceptualized as Russian imperial monuments, but subsequently lost their original meaning and became part of the Ukrainian national landscape. Logically, a similar shift in the meaning of the Motherland monument was plausible.<sup>[30]</sup> Ivan Kozlenko, on the contrary, has stated that the statue "from the very beginning symbolized not victory but Brezhnev stagnation [...]. It was a symbol of what the ideologists did not put into it. A simulacrum." Nonetheless, he is supportive of a redefinition: "Every new generation rethinks artworks by giving them new meanings. The more often the artwork changes its connotations [...], the longer it lives in time."<sup>[31]</sup>

This debate does not neatly reproduce existing political cleavages, especially since only a few of its participants are politically active. In his Telegram channel, the former leader of the Odesa branch of "Pravyi Sektor" (a radical right-wing civic, military and political movement) Serhii Sternenko argued that the removal of Soviet symbols from the monument was not a matter of discussion, since existing laws oblige authorities to remove them. Nonetheless, he did not express any indignation that the monument itself remains in place.<sup>[32]</sup> For Volodymyr Viatrovych, member of a more moderate party, dismantling the monument would be the best choice, as "sticking a trident on this monument does not mean its Ukrainization at all."<sup>[33]</sup> Yet, when asked in 2016 about the fate of the monument, he matter-of-factly stated that "the Motherland Statue is not subject to dismantling", which hints at a likely radicalisation of opinion since the beginning of the full-scale war.<sup>[34]</sup> In a 2016 opinion poll of Ukrainian parliamentarians, two-thirds from the parliamentary fraction "Narodnyi front" ("People's Front") were against the preservation of the monument in any form, whereas one third saw the need to preserve it as a historical landmark.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Decision in Favour of Alteration, Perceptions

It seems likely that the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy never seriously considered the demolition of the monument, deciding instead to opt for redefinition and preservation from the outset and leaving the fate of the Soviet symbols to a wider societal discussion. On 21 July 2022, a nationwide opinion poll was conducted via the Dija app, in which approximately 780,000 Ukrainian citizens took part. 85 percent opted for the replacement of the Soviet symbols with the trident, whereas options to “leave it as it is” or “demolish the Soviet coat of arms” received only a marginal number of votes.<sup>[36]</sup> The Ministry of Culture had either anticipated this high level of support for the replacement of the Soviet symbols or considered the survey to be an insignificant formality, because a week earlier, on 13 July, Minister of Culture Oleksandr Tkachenko had announced that donors had pledged almost the entire sum needed for the replacement (28 mln hryvnias).<sup>[37]</sup> The implementation of the project “Trident of the Motherland” began the following year. The necessary steel was purchased in Belgium since the steel produced by domestic manufacturer “Zaporizhstal” was deemed to be of insufficient quality (a claim denied by the company).<sup>[38]</sup> The trident itself was forged in Ukraine; according to the sculptor Oleksii Perhamenshchuk, a small model of the trident was designed by the third president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko.<sup>[39]</sup> On 1 August 2023, the Soviet coat of arms was removed from the shield, and several days later, the Ukrainian trident installed in its place.<sup>[40]</sup> On 25 August 2023, the project was declared to be successfully completed, even though a Soviet star (which is less visible) was left on the hilt of the sword. Similarly, there was no progress in the renaming of the monument to “Mother Ukraine”, since the Ministry was slow to make decisions in response to delays in the various bureaucratic processes. The authorities nevertheless recommend using the new name in order to move away from Soviet clichés and meanings.<sup>[41]</sup> The Soviet coat of arms is currently on display in the War Museum in an exhibition entitled “Redefinition”, which consists of the demolished coat of arms as well as various artistic interpretations of the statue.<sup>[42]</sup> The museum’s website also offers an online exhibition of creative open source pictures and photos of the “Mother Ukraine” monument collected between 24 February and 24 August 2022.<sup>[43]</sup>

From 9 to 15 August 2023, the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the Razumkov Centre conducted an opinion poll on state-building processes in Ukraine and attitudes towards the Soviet Union, using the face-to-face method in the capital Kyiv and twenty-two regions of Ukraine, divided into four macro-regions (Western, Central, Southern, Eastern). The opinion poll was not conducted in the territories occupied by Russia, namely Donetsk and Luhansk and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The poll revealed that 67.3 percent of Ukrainians approve of the replacement of the symbols. As Kyiv was included in the Central macro-region, it is impossible to determine whether the opinion of Kyivites differs from national opinion or from other cities in the Central region. The highest number of positive responses came from the West (83.4 percent), known for its stronger nationalist ethos and long tradition of anti-Communist resistance continuing until well into the 1950s, while the East and the South expressed more moderate support (56.5 and 41.8 percent respectively). By contrast, the Southern region had the largest percentage of negative attitudes toward the redefinition of the monument (34.1 percent). Attitudes across different age groups did not differ significantly: Respondents aged 18 to 59 all expressed support for the decommunization of the monument (72.6 percent of those 18-29; 67.9 percent of people aged 50-59). The weakest support was observed among the oldest participants of the survey (aged 60 or higher), with only 58.2 percent approving the changes. But even in this group, support outweighed any negative feelings at 23.3 percent.

70.3 percent of respondents considered the replacement of the Soviet coat of arms with the trident “a significant event that symbolizes Ukraine’s struggle”. The strongest association between the removal of

Soviet symbols with the current struggle in Ukraine was observed in the West (87.8 percent of respondents) and in the Centre (68.4 percent); in the South (56.3 percent) and in the East (58.7 percent), the majority also held the opinion that the redefinition of the Motherland statue was a step forward in liberating Ukraine from communist influences.<sup>[44]</sup> It must be noted that the South and East remain a puzzling factor when it comes to understanding attitudes towards decommunization: although these regions are disproportionately affected by the war, their population is the most hesitant to evaluate decommunization positively. As another general survey on attitudes towards decommunization reveals, only 25% of Southerners strongly condemn the USSR, with the remainder opposed, indifferent to or unable to give an answer about decommunization. This can partly be attributed to Russian settler-colonialism in these areas of Ukraine, reinforced by the Soviet Union's extensive Russification practices in the region. As sociological surveys show, only 52 percent of Russian-speaking Ukrainians see the dissolution of the USSR in a positive light, whereas this figure is considerably higher among the Ukrainian-speaking population (74 percent).<sup>[45]</sup>

Simultaneously, the funds (raised by non-governmental contributors) allocated to the "Motherland" statue seem inappropriate to many Ukrainians, with 68.9 percent stating that the decommunization of the monument could have waited until after the war. The Centre and the South expressed the most support for postponing the issue until after the war (71.6 percent and 75.6 percent). The percentage of people who considered the expense appropriate despite the war was higher in the West and the East (22.9 and 28.1 percent), despite the fact that these two regions are often at odds with each other about issues concerning the past.<sup>[46]</sup>

If one considers the renewed monument after its decommunization, once can speak of the success of what Sabine Stach has called "Symbolkonsum" (symbolic consumption).<sup>[47]</sup> The redefinition of one of Kyiv's biggest tourist attractions was followed by a wave of commercialization that drew even more attention to the positive interpretation of the redefinition. As such, "Mother Ukraine" was chosen as one of three Ukrainian landmarks for a limited production of #LEGOwithUkraine. The five copies of the landmark were not available for purchase, and could only be won on the UNITED24 platform in exchange for donations for the reconstruction of Ukraine.<sup>[48]</sup> Similarly, the renewed image of Mother Ukraine did not bypass the fashion industry: Designers drew inspiration from it to create an evening gown for the Ukrainian contestant of the "Miss World" beauty pageant, conveying the indomitable spirit of Ukraine.<sup>[49]</sup> The Ukrainian state postal service also joined the frenzy, producing 600.000 stamps with the "Mother Ukraine" monument dressed in a traditional necklace and holding the shield with the trident.<sup>[50]</sup> Other smaller enterprises followed its example, devising and selling patriotic merchandise in the form of postcards, cups and even Tarot cards.<sup>[51]</sup>

The symbolic consumption of the redefined Kyiv landmark was taken to another level by the music industry when the two well-known Ukrainian singers, Jerry Heil and alyona alyona, chose it as the venue to announce the successful completion of a fundraising campaign (10 mln hryvnias) for the reconstruction of the Velykokostroma Gymnasium destroyed by Russian rockets and to introduce their new song "Podolyanochka".<sup>[52]</sup> Similarly, the rock performer «Після Дощу» (Pislia Doshchu) used a stylized picture of "Mother Ukraine" as a cover image for his song "ВДОМА" (At Home), conveying the statue as part of the collective image of things he associates with Ukraine.<sup>[53]</sup>

## Conclusion

It seems that discussions concerning the Motherland statue have exhausted themselves for now – a

society that finds itself at war has more pressing issues, although questions of identity and history are inextricably intertwined with current events. Nevertheless, a few observations are warranted. First, though limited in scope, the public discussion surrounding the monument revealed a plurality of opinions that were not dominated or suppressed by an official discourse. In addition, governmental bodies did not claim the most radical position, assessing the importance of certain symbolic monuments and attempting to fill them with new meaning (where possible) rather than acting in accordance with its own clear-cut directives. The wave of commercialization that followed shows that different companies calculated the gain they would receive from this political decision. It can be argued that the mass production of merchandise with images of the monument and its usage by celebrities also reinforces positive attitudes towards its redefinition.

Although the more patriotic members of the community expressed their indignation, it was not possible to fully dismantle the monument – unlike smaller Soviet sculptures in the countryside, which are rather easy to remove with nothing but a tractor and a rope. Conversely, current history politics are undergoing constant change, in particular under the strain of the war with Russia. The question whether the monument can be freed from its original meaning or whether the past will always hang over it like a sword of Damocles, makes it vulnerable to further changes and a possible radicalization of existing decommunization policies. Vadym Pozdniakov's invocation about the unavoidability of the monument's complete demolition thus has a slight chance of eventually becoming reality. Nevertheless, the positive artistic engagement with its new meaning, as well as the perceived defensive position of the statue (facing Moscow) may indicate that a second major revision is unlikely to happen.



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high-angle-shot of the statue towering over Kyiv

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before the modification: the Soviet symbols formerly affixed to the shield

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Symbolkonsum (symbolic consumption): a cup with the image of "Mother Ukraine" as an example of the wave of commercialization following the alterations of the statue

Photo: Viktoriia Nechyporuk