# The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia: a Case of Contested Heritage

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**Abstract** *This chapter traces the history of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia before and after the start of the democratic changes in 1989, in the context of two highly politicized, highly polarized, and mutually exclusive narratives of the recent past. Special attention is paid to its artistic and political appropriations, the ritual and commemorative activities around it, as well as the debates about its fate. The aim is to demonstrate how the monument's meanings have been changing for subsequent generations and how the changing geopolitical situation, particularly after the Russian war in Ukraine, has impacted its fate.*

*Dieses Kapitel untersucht die wechselhafte Geschichte des Denkmals für die Sowjetarmee in Sofia (Bulgarien) vor und nach den demokratischen Bewegungen des Jahres 1989 im Kontext von zwei hochgradig politisierten, stark polarisierten und sich gegenseitig ausschließenden Erzählungen der jüngsten Vergangenheit. Die verschiedenen künstlerischen und aktivistischen Aneignungen sowie die öffentlichen Debatten über das weitere Schicksal des Monuments zeigen, wie sich dessen Bedeutung für die nachfolgenden Generationen verändert hat, insbesondere im Zuge des russischen Angriffskriegs auf die Ukraine.*

*Ce chapitre retrace l'histoire du monument à l'armée soviétique à Sofia (Bulgarie) avant et après les mouvements démocratiques de 1989 dans le cadre de deux récits d'un passé récent fort politisés, fort polarisés et mutuellement exclusifs. Une grande attention est portée aux appropriations artistiques et politiques, aux activités rituelles et commémoratives autour du monument, mais aussi aux débats sur son destin. Le but est de démontrer de quelle manière ce monument a changé de signification au fil des générations et comment le changement de la situation géopolitique, en particulier depuis la guerre d'agression russe contre l'Ukraine, a bouleversé son sort.*

If you happen to arrive in Sofia by plane and reach the city center by bus or taxi, you will see a strange construction on your left as you approach the main building of Sofia University. This is the pedestal of the monument to the Soviet Army, *Паметник на Съветската армия*, draped by an already shabby screen with a 'genealogical tree'

of sorts, depicting Bulgaria's European affiliation through personalities and events (Fig. 1). Its branches signify the first, the second and the third Bulgarian kingdom, the National Revival and the accession to the EU. This seems to be the starting point for consensus in Bulgarian society nowadays; the monument itself has been in the center of a debate simmering for over three decades with heated media debates flaring up from time to time. This is why the space around it was fenced off and made inaccessible at the end of 2023, when the sculpture on top, representing a Soviet soldier with a machine gun, a worker and a mother with a child, was taken down by order of the Regional Governor of Sofia, following a 1993 decision by the Sofia City Council. The debate surrounding the monument was exacerbated by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the removal of the sculpture only became feasible after the memorial complex's status was changed from public to private state property in the summer of 2023.

*Fig. 1: The Monument to the Soviet Army, spring 2024*



## 1. Brief History

The wide-spread construction of monuments to the Soviet Army and to the Bulgarian-Soviet friendship started immediately after the Second World War (WWII) and went on till the end of the communist regime in the late 1980s. Predominantly glorifying, rather than mourning, they were meant to convey the message of the eternity of the regime through a "'hegemony of representation,' in which signs and symbols

do not represent their literal meaning, but through their ubiquity rather signify the immutability of the system itself."[1] On a more mundane level, local elites considered such monuments as an opportunity to raise the profile of their town—symbolically, at least. Although monuments were meant to 'speak to eternity,' they in fact had a great deal to say to their contemporaries.[2]

The decision of the Temporal Municipal Government to erect a monument to the Soviet Army in downtown Sofia was taken in September 1946, motivated by the "exceptional contributions of the Red Army and the whole Russian people to Bulgaria."[3] In 1949, the Council of Ministers confirmed the decision and selected *Knyazheskata gradina* (The Prince's Park, which at that time had been re-named *Park na svobodata*, Freedom Park) as the appropriate site for such a memorial. The construction began in 1952. Leading architects and sculptors were involved—evidence of the importance attributed to the monument.[4] In line with the 'double liberator' mythologeme,[5] the inscription read: "To the Soviet Army liberator from the grateful Bulgarian people" (*На Съветската армия освободителка от признателния български народ*). The monument was unveiled on the eve of 9 September 1954 to honor the first decade of 'people's power' in Bulgaria. The date of the unveiling is indicative of the regime's efforts to establish 9 September 1944 (the date of the communist takeover of power) as its central *lieu de mémoire*, rather than 9 May, Victory Day.

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1 Nadkarni, M. (2003). The Death of Socialism and the Afterlife of its Monuments: Making and Marketing the Past in Budapest's Statue Park Museum. In K. Hodgkin & S. Radstone (Eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, (pp. 193–207). Routledge, here p. 195.

2 Cf. A video of Bulgarian communist monuments with comments can be found online: Ditchev, I. K. Terziev (2009): *Istorii s Pamentitsi. A Documentary on the Fate of Monuments in Bulgaria after 1944*. Retrieved April 23, 2025 from https://www.seminar-bg.eu/audio-video/262-2012-04-23-07-33-31.html?showall=1.

3 Vremenna Obshtinska Uprava na Stolichna Goliama Obshtina: *Protokol N 24 ot 17 Septemvri 1946*. Retrieved April 23, 2025 from https://decommunization.wordpress.com/архивите-говорят//ii-p-o-t-o-k-o-l-№-24-софия-вторник-17-септември-1946-г/.

4 Architect Danko Mitov lead the team, architects Ivan Vassiliov, Luben Neykov and Boris Kapitanov participated, as well as sculptors Ivan Funev, Mara Gerogieva, Lubomir Dalchev, Petar Doychinov, Vaska Emanuilova, Vassil Zidarov, Ivan Lazarov and artist Boris Angelushev. Vaska Emanuilova and Mara Georgieva did the central group, depicting a Soviet soldier holding a machine gun aloft, a worker and a mother with a child. The relief on the eastern side represents "October 1917," created by Lubomir Dalchev, on the southern side is "Everything for the front, everything for victory," by Petar Doychinov and colleagues, and on the western side—"The great patriotic war of the USSR" by Vassil Zidarov and colleagues. Ivan Funev and colleagues authored the two sculptural groups in front of the monument, representing how the Bulgarian people greeted the Soviet Army.

5 The 'first liberation' refers to the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877–1878, which put an end to the Ottoman domination and led to the founding of the modern Bulgarian state. Drawing connections between that war, WWII, and the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria served to legitimize the latter.

With its 37-meter pedestal and 8-meter central group atop it, the monument dominated the space, surrounded by five-story buildings. Its location in the center of Sofia defined its ritual multifunctionality. Not only was 9 May celebrated there, but pioneer and Komsomol groups also performed their rituals at the monument. In a manner similar to the Soviet custom, young couples would lay flowers at its pedestal on their wedding day. Thus, the monument was both a site of ritual and a central *topos* of the memory politics of the regime, widely accepted as such by the population.

## 2. Early Contestations

Because of its centrality, the Monument to the Soviet Army became a site of controversy after 1989, or rather, a focus of the wider controversies around Bulgaria's communist past. Two highly politicized, highly polarized, mutually exclusive narratives of the communist past were launched: one seeing it as a totalitarian regime and focusing on its crimes, the other interpreting it as catching-up with modernization and placing the regime within the context of the Europe-wide anti-Nazi and anti-fascist struggle. Both narratives borrowed their legitimacy from international memory cultures, and both were anchored in emblematic memory sites. The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia became such a site. Heated debates arose around these monuments, where anti-communist, anti-fascist, and nationalist arguments overshadowed considerations of aesthetics, heritage, and urbanism. Strong arguments were advanced for the dismantling of the monuments as a step towards a political and moral catharsis and doing away with the past. Equally strong were the opposing arguments—that communist monuments should be preserved—, although they were based on different rationales. While some insisted on the restoration of the monuments' sacrality, others (mostly intellectuals, urbanists and artists) called for their re-contextualization and re-signification. The monuments to the Soviet Army, especially those in Sofia and Plovdiv, as the most imposing, were at the center of the debates. An additional circumstance that exacerbated the controversies was the widely shared feeling that these memorials did not so much honor the war dead as they represented cultural colonialism and political subordination to the Soviet Union.[6] Spilling over into the media, the struggles grew more aggressive with one

6 Cf. Vukov, N. (2006). Emergent Reinscriptions and Dynamics of Self-Representation: Socialist Monumental Discourse in Bulgaria. *Kakanien Revisited*, 30(3), 1–6. http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/emerg/NVukov1.pdf [December 9, 2024], here 3–4.

side accusing the other of hooliganism and barbarism, while the other stigmatized the monuments as shameful evidence of foreign occupation.[7]

In this intense atmosphere, the Sofia City Council voted for the removal of the Monument to the Soviet Army in February 1993. The decision met stormy opposition from the Bulgarian Socialist (former Communist) Party (BSP) and the organizations of war veterans, who claimed that this act would be an obliteration of national memory and a rehabilitation of fascism. The Russian diplomacy intervened in their support, which exacerbated the negative attitudes towards the monument, now clearly seen as a sign of continuing Russian imperial influence.[8] Equally important, the legal status of the monument was unclear, raising questions about the Sofia City Council's authority to decide its fate. The memorial remained in place.

The impossibility to actually remove the monument gave rise to numerous ideas for "exorcizing its historic ghosts."[9] The projects for its resignification often had explicit anti-communist or nationalist intent. For instance, one idea was to turn the Sofia monument into a monument to the national hero Vassil Levski, or to the Christianization of medieval Bulgaria, thus undoing the atheist politics of the communist regime. Other ideas envisaged transforming the space into an artistic environment and thus incorporating the monument into the building of a museum or art center. Still others worked in a humorous and ironic vein, even suggesting incorporating the monument into a socialist Disneyland park.

## 3. Competing Appropriations

In the 2000s, the space around the monument became the arena of various activities and appropriations: artistic, recreational, civic, subcultural, commercial. Skaters, rollerbladers and bikers gathered around; gay prides, popular music events and advertisement campaigns took place in the square in front of the monument, beer drinkers and marijuana smokers sat on its steps. It was used as a point of orientation, a meeting point and a place to 'hang out' with friends. The young people who frequented the place found it "fun" and "cool," because "cool people" gathered

7 Cf. Deyanova, L. (2009). *Ochertania na Malchanieto. Istoricheska Sociologia na Kolektivnata Pamet* [Countours of Silence: Historical Sociology of the Collective Memory]. Критика и хуманизъм. 113–118.

8 For more recent reactions of the Russian Embassy and the BSP related to the monument see Decheva, D. (2022). Inconveniences of Memory. The Monument to the Soviet Army and Georgi Dimitrov's Mausoleum in Sofia after 1989. *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 126, 89–100, here 97–98.

9 Crowley, D., & Reid, S. (2002). Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc. In D. Crowley & S. Reid (Eds.), *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (pp. 1–22). Berg, here p. 17.

there, who were "open" (i.e. positive and tolerant), "colorful" and "fresh."[10] They valued the "alternative," i.e. spontaneous and unconventional socialization going on around the monument, while the latter itself remained unnoticed. It had become, as Robert Musil had predicted, invisible.[11]

In January 2010, a civic initiative for the dismantling of the monument was founded, which later established a Facebook group with around 9,500 followers as well as a YouTube channel.[12] Among its members were recognizable figures from political, intellectual, media and artistic circles. The group began corresponding with the institutions regarding the status of the monument and initiated legal proceedings to pursue the 1993 decision of the Sofia City Council. It also organized several events at the monument in 2011/2012 to promote its cause. Two events entitled "The Wall fell, the Monument still stands" evoked parallels with the Berlin Wall. They also revealed that for those who opposed it, the monument signified the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria in the wake of WWII, the communist past and the Russian influence nowadays, rather than the victory over Nazism. At the same time, in January 2011, the youth movement Che Guevara organized a counteraction in defense of the monument. The BSP and its pro-Russian satellite movements supported this position as well, including by organizing the celebration of 9 May as Victory Day in front of the monument (Fig. 2). In 2013 and 2014, when I was engaged in ethnography of the Victory Day, these celebrations were geared toward the upcoming elections. They gathered some 250–300 attendees, mostly elderly people, BSP members and sympathizers. Unlike youngsters, who considered the monument "harmless" and "convenient" as a meeting place, for these elders it was "history" and "sacred."[13]

10 Dimitrova, K. (2012). *Pametnikyt na Syvetskata Armia v Sofia Kato Miasto na Pamet i Usvoiavania na Gradskoto Prostranstvo* [The Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia as a Site of Memory and Appropriations of the Urban Space]. Unpublished MA thesis. Department of History and Theory of Culture. Sofia University, 99, Appendix 2.

11 "Das Auffallendste an Denkmälern ist nämlich, da[ss] man sie nicht bemerkt. Es gibt nichts auf der Welt, was so unsichtbar wäre wie ein Denkmal." Musil, R. (1962). *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten*. Rowohlt, 62. [The most striking thing about monuments is that you don't notice them. There is nothing in the world that is as invisible as a monument.]

12 Grazhdanska Initsiativa za Demontirane na Pametnika na Savetskata Armia v Sofia: *Demontage PSA*. Retrieved April 23, 2025 from https://www.youtube.com/DemontagePSA.

13 Koleva, D. (2020). Pamiatnik Sovietskoi Armii v Sofii: Pervichnoe i Povtornoe Ispol'zovanie [The monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia: Uses and reuses]. In M. Gabowitsch (Ed.), *Pamiatnik i Prazdnik: Etnografia Dnia Pobedy* (pp. 294–309), Nestor-Istoriia, here p. 303.

*Fig. 2: 9 May 2013*

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More interestingly perhaps, during the 2010s, the monument often became a site of tactical appropriation 'from below,'[14] which developed in parallel with, but independently from, the political polemics. The central location of the monument and its proximity to the traffic node at *Orlov most* [Eagle Bridge], as well as its appeal as a place to 'hang out,' made it a frequent stage for voicing and defending various causes, most often situated at the intersection of the civic and the subcultural, targeting young people, and carrying certain resistance or mobilization potential.

These 'tactical' uses were triggered by a major street art event that brought the monument into the focus of attention once again. The high relief on the western side, showing a Red Army attack during WWII, met the sunrise on 17 June 2011 with its figures painted as American comic book and popular-culture heroes: Superman, Santa Claus, Ronald McDonald, Captain America and others (Fig. 3). Below them, a graffito

14 I refer to Michel de Certeau's dialectics of strategies and tactics, used to express the opposition between the powerful and the dominated. Strategies are coined by those who have a place of their own, a point of enunciation (from where they speak). Thus, the debates described above can be considered strategies as they produce discourses. Tactics, on the other hand, are invented by the powerless, who have the opportunity to seize the right moment to interpret, re-appropriate, modify, distort the discourse and create something else out of it (cf. De Certeau, M. (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press).

read: "In step with the time." The installation was immediately noticed by passers-by and the media, including international media. The reactions ranged from public acclaim (from artistic circles, young people, many intellectuals) as an innovative way to deal with the legacy of communism,[15] to accusations of vandalism and an insult to the memory of Soviet soldiers from the Minister of Culture,[16] pro-Russian organizations, and some professional associations in the cultural sphere. UK media compared the work to that of Banksy,[17] while the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an angry note declaring the installation an "appalling incident" and its creator a hooligan.[18] Social networks and online forums were flooded with comments for and against the installation. They paid less attention to its artistic qualities and ideas and focused mostly on historical and political issues generally reproducing the antagonistic views about the monument. During the four days the installation remained in place, hundreds of Sofia residents and tourists went to see it and to take pictures. On the night of 21 June, the sculptures were washed, thwarting the action in defense of the installation, scheduled for the next day. The artists, Destructive Creation, a group of students aged between 17 and 21, remained anonymous. A couple of months later, without revealing their identities, they gave an interview in which they explained that they had chosen the monument to the Soviet Army because it "had been devalued to a great extent."[19] They felt that the site had lost its meaning as a monument. The idea of the installation, as they explained, was to represent youth culture: Their generation had grown up with American comic book heroes just like their parents had grown up with Russian ones. The deeper idea was to criticize Bulgarian politics, which has always been oriented towards some foreign center—the Soviet Union in the past, the USA now.[20]

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15 Cf. Fileva, L.: *İvaylo Diçev za Izrisuvaniya Pametnik: Komunizm't Nyama da si Otide Pred Namuseni Ideolozi s Buldozeri, a s Kupon i Zabava*. Retrieved December 9, 2024 from http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2011/06/20/1109452_ivailo_dichev_za_izrisuvaniia_pametnik_komunizmut.

16 Cf. Dnevnik: *Veydi Raşidov: Boyadisvaneto na Pametnika e Vandaliz'm*. Retrieved December 9, 2024 from http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2011/06/20/1109184_vejdi_rashidov_boiadisvaneto_na_pametnika_e_vandalizum.

17 Cf. Allen, E. (2011, June 17). Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superman and friends... painted on Soviet war statue by the Banksy of Bulgaria. *Mail Online*. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2004814/Is-bird-Is-plane-No-Superman-friends-painted-Soviet-statue-Banksy-Bulgaria.html#ixzz1vpUNF8Zy [December 9, 2024].

18 Novini.bg (2011, June 21). *Ruskoto Posolstvo Iska Videonablyudenie na Pametnika na Savetskata Armia*. https://novini.bg/article/2025022709063876066 [April 23, 2025].

19 Edno: *Koy e v Krak s Vremeto?*. Retrieved December 9, 2024 from https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/obshtestvo/koj-izrisuva-pametnika-na-armiiata-4118171.

20 Cf. Edno: *Koy e v Krak s Vremeto?*

*Fig. 3: "In Step with the Time," June 2011*




The installation "In step with the time" raised the question of the monument anew. The discussions demonstrated the persisting polarization but also showed that together with the generation of witnesses, torn between pride and shame, a new generation has come to the fore with its own interpretations of the monument and new ideas about its transformation. The approach termed 'urbanist' or 'artistic' tried to imagine the monument in novel ways, unimaginable from an ideological point of view. For its proponents, the monument was an artifact in the urban environment rather than a historical symbol. Their argument was that public space was not only an arena for political concerns, that the two antagonistic narratives were voiced by minorities trying to impose their own views of the past, while for the majority, including themselves, the monument did not have any of these meanings. It was now imagined more as a physical and functional urban space, rather than a symbolic one. Thus, the debate took on a new dimension: one between urbanist visions of reuse and resignification of the monument and its surroundings, and political efforts to preserve a particular memory narrative—or rather, one of its alternative versions. The choice at this stage was whether to opt for a democratization of the space at the expense of its symbolic meaning or strive to preserve the latter keeping the duty to remember.

The discussion simmered away but the tactical uses of the monument went on with tireless creativity supporting an ever-diverse range of causes. In February 2012,

during the first protest against ACTA[21] in Sofia, the figures of the Western relief were seen wearing the paper masks of 'Anonymous,' the symbol of the anti-ACTA protests. In August 2012, the heads of the bronze figures were decorated with colorful hoods as an act of solidarity with the members of the Russian punk group Pussy Riot who had just been sentenced for sacrilege after their 'prayer' against Putin. During the ongoing anti-government protests in the summer of 2013, the monument once again served as a canvas for slogans against the BSP-dominated government, against the monopoly of the Russian giant Gazprom, etc. Its base was draped in Bulgarian and EU flags. On the morning of 21 August, the Memorial Day for the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, passers-by were surprised to see the 'superhero' haut-relief painted this time in pink as a gesture towards David Černý's pink tank installation. The inscription beneath it read "Bulgaria apologizes" in Czech. Starting with the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the sculptures have repeatedly been painted in blue and yellow as an expression of solidarity with Ukraine. On the anniversaries of the Katyn massacre, some of them met the sunrise in the colors of the Polish flag. And more recently, the French-born, Bulgaria-based artist Mitch Brezounek included the Sofia monument in his project "The Ghost is Here" (2022), reconceptualizing several monuments to the Soviet Army through virtual interventions.[22]

## 4. Russian Cultural Diplomacy and Memory Multiculture

Amidst these tactical appropriations of the monument, the Russian institutions in Sofia have dynamized their memory policies in the past few years. Since 2014, the role of the Russian Cultural Centre and the Russian diaspora in the 9-May commemorations has become more visible than before. A powerful tool of Russian cultural diplomacy in this respect has been the Immortal Regiment, a grassroots initiative that started in 2012 to be quickly appropriated by the establishment and spread all over Russia and among the Russian diaspora. To reinvigorate an increasingly worn-out ritual that had been centered around disappearing WWII veterans, the organizers in the provincial city of Tomsk asked participants to carry a poster with the portrait of their ancestors who took part in the war. Appealing to family memory, democratic and bottom-up, the initiative proved to be vulnerable to politicization and

21 Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, a multilateral agreement aiming to establish a legal framework for the protection of intellectual property rights on the Internet. Its signing by the EU in 2012 triggered protests across Europe and caused the European Parliament to withdraw its consent.

22 Cf. Brezounek, Mitch: The Ghost is here. 09–12/09/2022. City Gallery of Fine Arts (2019 Exhibition Hall), Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Retrieved December 9, 2024 from https://ghost.bg/projects/the-ghost-is-here.

open to carry diverse, sometimes aggressive, messages.[23] The war narrative that it offered was easily inscribed into the official Soviet historiographical narrative challenged in the 1990s and reinstated after Putin's rise to power—namely the discursive isolation of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) from the Soviet Union's overall participation in WWII (especially its cooperation with Nazi Germany in 1939–1941). It was this initiative that reinvigorated the 9-May celebrations in Sofia as well:[24] Starting in 2016, Immortal-Regiment marches with both Russian and Bulgarian participants carrying their fathers' and grandfathers' portraits set the stage for the celebrations in front of the Monument to the Soviet Army under the aegis of the Russian ambassador who addressed the participants (Fig. 4).

The 'Russification' of the 9-May celebration in Bulgaria apparently has followed the dynamics of a larger-scale geopolitics of memory. It competes with the celebration of the Day of Europe, articulating wider European memory battles around WWII, especially on the responsibility for triggering the war and the contribution to the Allies' victory. The celebratory 'competition' that juxtaposed the Day of Europe to Victory Day has reinvigorated the latter. To limit myself to one example, the theme of the 'hijacked celebration' has re-appeared in social media for the past few years: some users, either ignoring or unaware of Schuman's declaration of 9 May 1950, have seen in the Day of Europe a deliberate attempt to eclipse Victory Day. Thus, Victory Day is positioned as a counter-celebration to the Day of Europe.[25] The competitive striving for recognition has led to its reinvention through challenging the other narrative: *our* celebration runs counter to *your* celebration.

23 See Arkhipova, A., et al. (2017). Voina kak Prazdnik, Prazdnik kak Voina: Performativnaya Kommemoratsia Dnia Pobedi. [War as Festival, Festival as War: the Performative Commemoration of Victory Day]. *Antropologicheskii Forum*, 33, 84–122; Kurilla, I. (2018). 'Bessmertnii Polk': 'Prazdnik so Slezami na Glazah,' Parad Mertvetsov ili Massovyi Protest? Spori o Smisle i Perspektivah Novogo Prazdnichnogo Rituala [The Immortal Regiment: 'a Celebration with Tears in the Eyes,' a Parade of the Dead or a Mass Protest? Debates on the Meaning and the Prospects of the New Festive Ritual]. *Kontrapunkt* 12, 1–11.

24 On the establishment of the Immortal Regiment and its changing meanings and messages after its import to Bulgaria, see Koleva, D. (2021). The Immortal Regiment and its Glocalisation: Reformatting Victory Day in Bulgaria. *Memory Studies*, 15(1), 216–229.

25 A similar tension has been resolved in the Baltic states by changes in their commemorative calendars: WWII victims are commemorated on 8 May, while 9 May is celebrated as the Day of Europe (cf. Andrejevs, D. (2020). Revisiting the Social Organisation of National Memory: A Look at the Calendars of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. *Memory Studies*, 13(6), 1305–1320).

*Fig. 4: 9 May 2018, the Immortal Regiment in Sofia*


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## 5. The Monument as a Weapon of War

Russia's invasion of Ukraine effectively put an end to this mnemonic heteroglossia. Following a wave of iconoclasm across Eastern Europe, the fate of the monument was decided in 2023. In March, the Sofia City Council demanded from the Regional Governor that the monument be dismantled and the sculptures transferred to the Museum of Socialist Art. This procedure was needed because the monument was state property and the municipality was not authorized to take any action. The motivation was the same as thirty years ago, but this time the situation was aggravated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. More specifically, a couple of weeks earlier, marking the first anniversary of the war, a man had smashed the tiles with the inscription "To the Soviet army liberator" with a hammer. Representatives of the BSP and of the pro-Kremlin nationalist party Vazrazhdane not only voted against it but also organized protests at the municipality building, where the Ukrainian flag was taken down from its façade. Once again, the controversy flared up. Although the Russian aggression in Ukraine diminished popular approval for Putin and Russia, the Immortal Regiment, albeit in reduced numbers, marched again to the monument on 9 May 2023. There, they encountered another group of people with Bulgarian and EU flags who demanded "a Bulgarian monument" to be installed in lieu of the one to

the Soviet Army.[26] Some of them were members of nationalist organizations. A police cordon separated the two groups, and the conflict did not develop beyond verbal aggression. But the stakes around the monument changed once again: Those in favor were led not just by a mission to keep the memory of the fallen soldiers and/or by approval of the communist regime. By defending the monument, they now took Russia's side in its war against Ukraine. On the other side, some of those who opposed the monument were led by nationalist feelings rather than by a pursuit of historical justice.

In this situation, in August 2023, the Regional Governor in Sofia started the legal procedure preparing the dismantling of the monument and its transfer to a museum. Supporters of the monument set up a couple of tents in front of it to protect it. On 12 December 2023, the dismantling of the sculpture that crowned the high pedestal actually began. A few dozen people gathered to protest, while others came to support the action. Members of the BSP and the pro-Kremlin Vazrazhdane filed a complaint in the administrative court, and the Russian embassy shared a comment by Maria Zakharova, speaker of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, which concluded with a threat: "Bulgaria again, as it has happened more than once, chose the wrong side of history. It will have to fully pay for the consequences of this shameful decision."[27] On 8 April 2024, the Administrative Court rejected the claim to stop the dismantling. In the midst of a long political crisis, however, the disassembly did not proceed beyond the already removed central sculptural group. The monument and the space around it were fenced off, and now the fence serves as a board where the debate goes on in the form of sprayed graffiti.

Unlike other post-communist states, the Bulgarian state has dealt with its recent past quite hesitantly. The trials against former communist leaders failed, lustration laws were applied on a very limited scale and the question of secret police files was repeatedly instrumentalized for political purposes. While the archives were declassified and made available for research, the Bulgarian state did not deem it necessary to establish a research institution to study communism. The commemoration of its victims remained largely limited to the sporadic activities of political and civic organizations, and monuments to them were left to the discretion of local authorities in response to civic initiatives. This politics of avoidance[28] has led to the lack of a memory strategy and therefore to the inability of Bulgarian society to reach a consensus

26 BTA (2023, May 9): *Iskame Bulgarski Pametnik—Initsiativa*. Retrieved April 23, 2025 from https://www.bta.bg/bg/galleries/bulgaria/211256.

27 Zakharova, Maria (2023, December 12): *Посольство России в Болгарии*. https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/752642026903713?ref=embed_post [December 9, 2024].

28 Cf. Vukov, N. (2012, December 5). The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia and the Politics of Avoidance. *Cultures of History Forum*. https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/exhibitions/the-museum-of-socialist-art-in-sofia-and-the-politics-of-avoidance [December 9, 2024].

on its recent past. The lack of consensus, in turn, has resulted in the persistence of mutually exclusive narratives of communism, sustained by opposing communities of memory. Consequently, the Monument to the Soviet Army remains a site of contested memory, a 'placeholder' empty of its own meaning and open to the meanings various agents project onto it.

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