

Statement for the future:

In the short 'abstract' for this talk I quoted leftist historian Eric Hobsbawm in saying '*historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts*'. With this I understand that Hobsbawm wants to say that nationalists need history very badly, are even addicted to it. But I do not think that we should leave history as the material of nationalists only, for them to co-opt completely. We — leftists and antifascists — also need history. Or counter-histories, herstories... other stories which do not fit the hegemonic national narratives (constructed by the nationalists with the help of fascists.)

And there in deed are glorious leftist histories & herstories to remember and to commemorate. And many labour struggles and liberation struggles to learn from.

But in the past 30 years it has become increasingly difficult to speak of the leftist histories, as they have been so well obscured by the likes of cultural theorist Boris Groys, who have introduced totalitarian discourses especially into art, and through art into politics, and into our perceptions of leftist histories, claiming that the Stalin's regime was just a continuation of the atrocities which were first started by the bolsheviks, and just the same way Socialist realism was continuation of the Russian avant-garde's strategy by other means. These unfoundational claims have luckily not been bought by specialists of Russian avant-garde art. But they have been embraced by anticommunist scholars and art theoreticians across the Western world, first by american slavists, disturbed by the fact that the most progressive avant-garde artistic expression had such a close alliance with the bolsheviks, even they were inseparable part of the same revolution and feeding one another.

What we can learn from the case of Boris Groys is that as much as we need to learn of the past struggles in art and politics by studying our comrades from the past, we also need to have a constant struggle against right wing liberal theoreticians who propagate catchy theories paralleling the left and the right as two extremes alike.

But in fact, my case study today, which I wanted to present is the exhibition which just opened earlier this week in the new Tranzit-Space in Iasi. The exhibition is titled: Iasi X-Ray. It is an exhibition as an outcome of research done in Iasi during 2017-18 together with Alexandru Bounegru and Florin Bobu. It is about three antifascist soviet monuments in the city of Iasi.

In the publication of the exhibition I quote Russian futurist Boris Eikhenbaum. He says (in *Literaturnyi byt*, 1929): "History is a special method of studying the present with the aid of the facts of the past." And in this project as facts of the past I am using various details as described to us (Florin, Alexander and I) when we made interviews with more than 10 mostly elderly people in Iasi, who we thought that might have some knowledge about

these monuments and their destinies because of their previous or current position or interests.

So, all three monuments were erected soon after WW2 to commemorate Soviet soldiers who liberated Romania from the fascist hold in 1944. It is important to remind us here (in addition to what some of us heard at the tour in the morning) that the Romanian engagement in the Nazi atrocities was quite deep:

*“as the Nazis and their allies and collaborators implemented plans to destroy the Jews of Europe, the Romanian state unleashed its own systematic persecution of the Jews, which was heralded by the antisemitic legislation of 1940. The pogroms in Dorohoi and Galanti in June 1940, as well as those in Bucuresti in January 1941, and in Iasi, in June 1941, left thousands dead and marked the beginning of the organised destruction of Romanian Jewry. In October 1941, the regime of Ion Antonescu began deporting the Jews of Basarabia and Bucovina to Transnistria, launching a genocidal campaign to eliminate the country’s Jewish population. Between 1940 and 1944, the Romanian state was responsible for the deaths of at least 280,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews, twenty five thousand people of Roma origin were also deported to Transnistria, where 11,000 died. The occupying Hungarian authorities in the Northwestern regions of Romania deported 135,000 Transylvanian Jews, who were murdered in Auschwitz by the Nazi Germany.”*  
- quote from the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest (as a place of remembrance and as a warning addressed to future generations.)

To this background it is maybe easier for us to understand that the Soviet soldiers fighting against the fascist regimes can be called as anti-fascist.

And another historical fact is good to keep in mind, which is (now I am quoting Enzo Traverzo in his book ‘The new faces of fascism’): “anti-communism was crucial for amalgamating the disparate elements of fascism and for transforming its ideology into a political project and its world view into an active movement. In other words, fascism could not have existed without anti-communism.”

So, to get back to the anti-fascist Soviet soldier statues in Iasi, the first was the one at Copou Hill in 1947. The second was an obelisk in the garden of Vasili Pogor’s house / or Literature Museum, where there were graves of 77 soviet soldiers. And the third was at the Eternitate cemetery where 133 Soviet soldiers were buried.

Each of these statues has disappeared - after 1989. First one was the stone monument at the Eternitate cemetery, which went missing already in 1989. The second was the obelisk from Pogor’s garden, in 1992, when the graves from there were moved to Eternitate. Finally the bronze monument from Copou Hill, which by then had been moved to the Eternitate cemetery to replace the disappeared monument, also vanished in 1998.

We tried to speak with the mayor of Iasi at the time, or the head of the City Cultural Department, who is currently the head of the City Archives. But they were out of our reach, and so was the person who was the head of the Literature Museum at the time, who would know of the obelisk. He also refused to speak to us. So, in our research we had to rely on second hand information and rumours.

According to one such rumour, told to us by someone working in the Literature Museum itself, the obelisk was buried in the garden when the graves were exhumed. Thanks to Alexandru's connections in the field of history studies, we got Andrei, an archaeologist to geo-scan parts of the garden to see if the obelisk was in fact buried there.

Our search did not bear fruit. The obelisk was not found. Nor were the other two monuments during our research. According to a rumour the one at the Copou hill was melted and used for the statue of Michael the Brave, erected in 2002.

But what we know is that the Russian Embassy is putting pressure on Iasi City to replace the missing WW2 monuments (and they are bound by law that protects all WW2 memorials to replace the statue).

Artists are already doing proposals for a new antifascist statue. [KUVA Dan Covatarun pienoismalli]

This research in mind, I agree with Eikhenbaum in that we can learn a lot about the present from studying the past. In our times the old antifascist, communist statues are dismantled, as is the case with Soviet soldiers in Iasi or in Finland, it is the Lenin-memorials. Instead of those, new statues are erected, which commemorate kings from the times long long gone or other mythical, national or religious figures. These contribute to mystifying the national past and are celebrated mostly by the right wing.

The idea of a leftist struggle, people's struggle has been systematically erased from the public space pretty much everywhere. At the same time the gap between the rich and the poor has become wider and is growing faster than ever before. I just read in Guardian that in January this year the world's 26 richest individuals owned as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population. Billionaires increased their combined fortunes by 2.5 billion dollars a day in 2018, while the relative wealth of the world's poorest 3,8 billion people declined by 500 million dollars a day.

What we need today and for our future struggles for a more equal world, is knowledge about past movements and struggles, not to repeat the same mistakes, and to be influenced and inspired. Part of this is the presence of monuments in the public spaces reminding of these struggles that took place and sometimes were also won.

But what should these new antifascist monuments look like that we erect in place of old removed monuments, which cannot be found anymore?

Should we make replicas of the old statues? Is the most suitable way of remembrance to erect bronze or granite statues that represent physical features of a (male) soldier with a

rifle in their hand? Should we rather make a monument that carries on the ideas that their movement propagated? Should the monument be permanent and fixed, or could it follow the practice of the early bolsheviks, who made temporary monuments out of plywood and cardboard and the idea was that they could be moved from one street corner to another and replaced when needed?

*So, what could be a contemporary form of remembering antifascist struggles?*

One example of a different kind of monument - which is not even so new - is from London - There is the Marx Memorial Library, which was founded in 1933 at the Clerkenwell Green. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, for which occasion a delegate meeting was held comprising representatives of trade unionists, leftist parties etc. That year also saw Germany burning books, determined to root out all Marxist and other progressive ideas. In these circumstances the meeting resolved that the most appropriate memorial would be a Library. Thus the Marx Memorial Library and School was established at 37a Clerkenwell Green that year. The Library holds an impressive number and variety of archives and collections and still today continues work of collecting published and archival material about Marxism, trade unionism, and the working class movement and makes them available through lectures and educational courses. For me this is the most beautiful monument imaginable.

But back to Iasi, the monuments have not left completely without leaving a trace. At Copou Hill the tram lines are still making a curve where the statue once was, although there is no statue there anymore, just a clumsy arrangement of flowers on top of the base for the statue. But the curve itself is a monument of a kind. It is an everyday reminder, for those who once saw the statue there, of what has been made invisible and destroyed by the post 1989-administration.