

Memory, Monuments, and the Nation: Production and Perception of Public Art in an Age of Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Bishkek

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When Lenin issued the “Monumental Propaganda” decree in 1918, he began an explicitly visual project of nationalism through the removal of monuments of czars and the development of new monuments and statues that would represent the Russian Socialist Revolution. Since that time, thousands of statues and monuments were erected in the Soviet Union, each with its own particular subject and connected history; since the collapse of the Soviet Union they have met with a variety of fates. For this research project I will investigate the way in which national regimes negotiate projects of nationalism and the (re)building of a new nationalist symbols through a process keeping, destroying, or moving monuments and statues that may be seen as representations of the previous regime and the erecting of new monuments either in place of the old or in new centers of city life.

While these projects can be seen in each of the fifteen capital cities that have emerged from the Soviet Union, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, offers a unique opportunity to see the interplay of nationalism, memory, and culture at work in the changing statuary of Bishkek since 1991, specifically in the area between Ala Too Square and the State History Museum. Unlike many other post-Soviet countries, a statue to Lenin remained in the main square of the city until 2003, only to move less than five city blocks away to another prominent place in front of government buildings. After Lenin came a statue to Freedom (Erkindik), which was then replaced with a statue of Manas on horseback, all possible representations of different national ideologies and hopes for the future. These statues offer an opportunity not only to investigate how debates regarding the removal and erection of new statues were framed, but how the citizenry of Bishkek currently views and relates to each of these images.

Both Hobsbawm (2014) and Brubaker (2009) argue for varieties of nationalism that are dynamic and which can be found in the intersections of relationships. I find this theoretical approach compelling, for while projects of nationalism such as enforcing a national language, compelling military service, or instituting a nationalized education system are generally considered the purview of the government or the elite in some way, the audience or subjects of these projects are the people who belong to a nation. For this reason, I would like to look at these changes from different perspectives: that of the official reason for change and how it was discussed in formal contexts, and how that change is perceived by those who may not have had any part in it. Thus, the research will take place on two interconnected levels: on-site archival work and interviews. These levels will elucidate the following questions: what do each of these symbols as embodied in statues mean for the history and future of Kyrgyzstan; how do people frame a debate about their appropriacy for a country moving forward; and lastly, do these changes coincide with larger projects of nationalism, and if so, how?

In the last several years there have been numerous debates, both nationally and internationally, about the presence or absence of symbols that are seen as connected to a past people want to either glorify or forget. In the USA we have seen this in the context of debates around the confederate flag. In Poland, a Soviet-era memorial to WWII was

torn down for aesthetic reasons, provoking charges of a “war on monuments” from Russian officials¹. In Ukraine more than one hundred statues relating to Russia or the USSR have been torn down during the current conflict². These events suggest that the materially symbolic realm is very much a site in which conflicting ideas and desires about history and memory are debated. For this reason, I believe that this research is timely in that it can help to shed more light on the ways in which these debates are framed and how connections to differently perceived pasts are negotiated.

References:

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Hobsbawm, E. (1992). *Nations and nationalism since 1780 Programme, myth, and reality*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

¹ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-accuses-poland-of-waging-war-on-monuments/525058.html>

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/09/30/what-toppled-lenin-statues-tell-us-about-ukraines-crisis>