Title

Learning from decommunization: What Eastern Europe can teach us about slavery-related urban fallism in the United Kingdom and United States.

Abstract

This study investigates the spatial effects of the ongoing "decommunization" campaign in Ukraine, a state-led attack on Soviet symbols and ideology in the urban space of the capital, Kyiv. We examine decommunization through the lens of an extensive legacy of architectural, urban design, and monumental art projects erected for the celebration of the 1500th anniversary of the city of Kyiv held in 1982. We focus on four ideological narratives and examine the outcomes of decommunization on four monuments. We find that decommunization's effect is limited; Communist symbolism has been annotated with Ukrainian identity symbols or neglected, not demolished. We conclude that decommunization has focused on the comparatively superficial qualities of toponomy and Lenin symbols, that the legacy of Soviet identity in Kyiv's cityscape is much deeper and has proved surprisingly persistent, and that the historiography of the newly independent nation of Ukraine is still in a process of reformation and revision.

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Brief biographical sketches

Iegor (Yegor) Vlasenko (he/him) is an urban development practitioner and researcher with a Master of Science degree in Urban Studies from Malmö University (2017). Since April 2023, he is a Doctoral Assistant and PhD student in Architecture and City Sciences at the Laboratory of Urbanism, EPFL, working on the dissertation project entitled "Decentralisation as an Agent of Resilience? Comprehending Urbanisation and Wartime Planning in Ukraine".

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During the last eight years Ukraine has experienced one of the most radical toponymic and semiotic transformation of urban space that Europe has ever seen. Provoked by continuing political change in Ukraine following its 1991 independence from the Soviet Union, hundreds of settlements and thousands of streets were renamed with a single stroke, hundreds of public spaces were stripped of their once-socialist decorations, including ageing Soviet red stars, hammers and sickles,All of the ubiquitous monuments to the Communist leader Vladimir Lenin that once crowned central squares of almost every Ukrainian city and village were toppled.

All of these rapid transformations, experienced not only in Ukraine but also in other post-socialist states and collectively tremendous in scale, have come to be known as 'decommunization'. One can understand this term in a broader sense as a social and political movement directed against the legacy of communism in post-socialist states after the fall of the Soviet Union, but it has had a particular, visible impact in public space.

Such a definition of decommunization, though it is specific to the particular region of Eastern Europe once under Soviet occupation, overlaps in its meaning and momentum with another phenomenon. This other is described by Frank and Ristic (2020) as 'urban fallism', and also involves the contestation, transformation and pulling down of monuments and other symbols of a now-discredited power in urban space. Resembling the ancient *damnatio memoriae,* or punishment by revising and eliminating one's memory, urban fallism does not necessarily act on necessarily on behalf of current authorities, but rather stems from "marginalized and/or oppressed civic groups in today's socially, politically and ethnically diverse cities" (Frank & Ristic, 2020, p. 556) who struggle for recognition and inclusion.

While the most recent wave of urban fallism began with the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign of 2015 in Cape Town as a call for racial equality and decolonization that has since become a "new form of global socio-political protest" (Frank & Ristic, 2020., p. 552), decommunization in the contemporary sense began with the 'Euromaidan' events in Kyiv, Ukraine, beginning December 8, 2013. On this day a crowd of 800,000 participants occupied Kyiv's urban core to protest against then-President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (Plokhii). In the aftermath of the main rally, a group of individuals wearing balaclavas (possible representatives of the right-wing part of the protest movement) dismantled from its pedestal and then destroyed a highly visible Lenin monument which had been erected in the city center in 1946. This seemingly spontaneous action catalyzed a chain reaction throughout the country that led to no less than 550 Lenin monuments being demolished within a month. (see Ackermann and Gobert (2017) for an insightful inquiry regarding the diverse fates of these toppled monuments). Ultimately, further protests unfolded, leading to the ousting of pro-Russian Yanukovych and a new era of democracy in Ukraine (Plokhii)

After a change of political regime toward pro-Euromaidan political parties and leaders in the 2014 parliamentary and presidential Ukrainian elections, the bottom-up iconoclastic campaign against Lenin monuments, also called *Leninopad* or Leninfall, shifted to a top-down administrative package of so-called 'decommunization laws'. These were adopted in 2015 and an executive authority (Ukrainian Institute for National Remembrance, UINR) was appointed to oversee the laws' creation and implementation.

The 2015 laws were not the first attempts at decommunization in Ukraine. Previous post-1991 efforts had removed some explicitly Communist Soviet symbols from the public realm to rehabilitate victims of Soviet-time political repressions, to condemn the Soviet-caused 'Holodomor' famine of the 1930s, and to restore pre-Soviet historical place names (Kononenko, 2019; Plekhanov, 2018; also see Subtelny, 2009, pp. 413-416, on the Holodomor famine). The 2015 decommunization laws were distinct, drawing explicit parallels between the Nazi and Soviet regimes as equally totalitarian and unacceptable of commemoration. UINR drafted four decommunization laws (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2015)It further supplemented them with detailed lists of banned Soviet flags, anthems, coats of arms, Communist mottos, institutional and personal names that were henceforth *illegal* to use as toponyms and for public display, including the built environment, as outlined in Article 1 of the law "On conviction of communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and prohibition of the propaganda of their symbols". Decommunization thereby became not only a movement and a policy, but a set of laws, which included, but was not limited to public space.

Execution of decommunization laws was a responsibility of local governments, who decided on how to rename or dismantle the newly banned heritage. UINR performed a supervisory function, collecting reports, intervening in cases where the local authorities were reluctant to execute the law, and promoting new symbols and place names, particularly those linked to Ukrainian independence movements across history. Implementation of decommunization laws led to rapid spatial transformations within Ukraine. Before the end of 2017, just two year since the laws' adoption, all of the approximately 5,500 Lenin monuments in the country were removed, and about 1,000 settlements had been renamed (Borysenko & Vodotyka, 2017).

[Figure 1 goes here]

The top-down decommunization laws obviously greatly accelerated the popular impulse toward decommunization that started during the Euromaidan public protests, making urban fallism a state-led and -financed activity. In this sense, decommunization succeeded. But in other, perhaps equally important aspects, it did not. We discuss briefly below two failures of decommunization revealed in our ongoing research. The first relates to the *scale* selected by decommunization in order to remove undesired objects from public space and the second is a

mismatch between the preconditions and impulses of decommunization and the actual inventory of objects and symbols in urban space upon which the laws focus.

In Ukraine, a place where the majority of the country's urbanization occurred during Soviet rule (c. 1921 to 1991), most of the existing urban realm was planned and designed according to Soviet construction policies and regulations. Everything one sees in a Ukrainian city is therefore to some extent Soviet, and therefore Communist. Defining the appropriate spatial scale of decommunization therefore presents a difficult task. Soviet identity can be clearly recognized in Ukraine's infrastructure, green space, public transport, and urban facilities, what Zarecor calls a "socialist scaffold" (2018, pp. 97-101). All of Ukraine's urban design, defined by Hatherley (2016) as eight typologies, including boulevards, public buildings, and housing, carries this strong identity of socialism and its ideological goals, particularly the promotion of the achievements of the Communist state. Other scholars have also noted that Ukraine's seemingly utilitarian urban infrastructure almost always played an ideological role (Humpfrey, 2005).

Decommunization has not sought to dismantle, occlude or otherwise void the 'ideologized' infrastructure that comprises Ukrainian cities, though the laws have mandated occasional dismantlement of straightforwardly Soviet slogans and semiotics from significant urban infrastructure such as underground public transport. Instead, decommunization has been most effective as an antithesis to the Soviet state's 'monumental propaganda', a Communist-era policy that was responsible for the countless Soviet toponyms and for the most ideologically charged architecture and monumental art that decommunization is addressing. Yet the most visible examples of monumental propaganda in Ukrainian cities are their nearly omnipresent WWII war memorials. These were exempted from decommunization because of the significance of wartime memory in Ukraine, which was under Nazi occupation for four years. For instance, the 108-meter-high Mother Motherland monument in Kyiv, standing atop the WWII museum of Ukraine, still carries the banned Soviet hammer and sickle coat of arms on its shield. These Soviet emblems are now flanked by a giant national flag of Ukraine, recently installed adjacent to the monument in an effort to 'Ukrainize' it (See Figure 2).

[Figure 2 goes here]

With Soviet ideology multiscalar and therefore omnipresent in the planning and design of Ukrainian cities, total decommunization is hardly possible. At the same time, decommunization is impacted by its ideological focus on a particular period of history, and by its limitation to that period. In other words, only explicitly Communist iconography from the 1921-91 period is mandated for removal. Decommunization also begs the question of what iconography, and of what period of history, is to be commemorated in the stead of the removed objects, and therefore begs the question of what historiography- a county's own vision of its own history- is to replace that which is henceforth illegal. This necessary revising of the past was noted by Foote (1997, pp. 322-24) as "difficult" and "problematic",

even as it was "critically important". Apart from addressing the problematic Soviet heritage associated with mass repressions, Ukrainian decommunization, as in other post-socialist states such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, the Baltic republics, etc., also celebrated regained independence (Czepczyński, 2010). In Ukraine, the celebration therefore problematized not only the Communist past, but Ukraine's much longer history as part of the Russian and Austrian Empires (Applebaum, 2017). According to Kuzjo (2002), Ukraine's new national historiography portrays Ukraine as a part of Europe, long under foreign influence, but retaining a political culture that differs from Russia. The goals of the Euromaidan protests – to preserve the possibility of European integration and to prevent a drifting 'back' to Russia – align closely with this revision of Ukraine's past.

Is Ukraine a post-colonial state? If so, what, when, and where constitutes the period of colonization? Is all of this colonial heritage destined for removal or revision? There is currently no universal consensus on whether Ukraine is a post-colonial state, nor whether Russia and the Soviet Union were actual colonizers or just agents of modernization (see Hirsch, 2002; Hrytsak, 2015; Slezkine, 1994; Martin, 2001; Kuzjo, 2002). Decommunization therefore struggles, though unintentionally, with a mismatch between its anti-Communist purpose and the arguable reality of Ukraine having been colonized for a much longer period of time, with an even broader inventory of artifacts to signify this "colonial period". While Lenin is now gone from Khreshchatyk, the central avenue in Kyiv, a number of other Soviet-era projects in Kyiv remain (e.g., the Kyiv Founders monument, Golden Gate.) These Soviet artifacts were constructed to commemorate historical epochs in "Kyivan Rus", a medieval political conglomerate of the East Slavs, now believed to be a predecessor of the states of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus (Subtelny, 2009, pp. 19-21). While the latter narrative aligns well with the new historiography of independent Ukraine, it also provides an historical justification for the coexistence of those nations in one state, a narrative heavily promoted by the Soviet Union (Pritsak, 1981). These "Ukrainian" monuments are popular and are in no danger of fallism; in fact, they have been promoted by the Ukrainian government for the obvious reason that they promote the new historiography.

Overall, it may seem that urban fallism has succeeded in Ukraine, despite some regional differences concerning toponymic renaming and the reluctance of some local authorities towards toppling Soviet monuments (Gnatiuk, 2018). To a great extent this has occurred via decommunization, a movement triggered by the Euromaidan protests and then encoded into national law. But these laws cannot rewrite the entirety of a built environment, nor can they legislate a people's collective understanding of their own history, particularly if there are differing or conflicted understandings of this. Even Communism, a totalitarian movement with near-total control over society, could not accomplish a wholesale revision of the city, nor of the past. Decommunization, a movement that is occurring in Eastern European countries that are to a certain extent remote from Western consciousness, provides a powerful, insightful, but also cautionary tale for the slavery-related urban fallism movement that is now

near the top of the agenda for progressive urbanists in countries like the US, UK, Canada and others.

Firstly, it appears unlikely that urban fallism will ever be legislatively mandated in a manner similar to decommunization. The USA, at least, is averse to national urban policy, and achieving consensus is unlikely in a US legislature that is both politically divided, reflecting an equally divided populace, and that favors decentralized policy. This is consistent with what has been seen so far, where city governments, and occasionally state governments, have removed highly visible Confederate statues and icons (such as the Confederate battle flag) in the absence of a national mandate. The urban fallism movement, much like decommunization, also seems to have left wartime memorials for the most part alone. The Gettysburg battlefield, for example, which is administered by the Federal government, has approximately 330 monuments commemorating Confederate states, military units, or individuals (National Park Service, 2021). As late as 2016, the headquarters site of the Confederate lead military officer was acquired for preservation and commemoration (Wheeler, 2016). Removal of the hundreds, even thousands, of Confederate battlefield memorials does not appear imminent.

Second, it is difficult, even impossible, to fully confront the multiple scales of the city affected by slavery (and associated post-slavery discrimination) that are registered, perhaps forever, in the US built environment. American cities are highly racially segregated, and the US municipal structure, with many small towns that refuse incorporation into the larger city thereby preserving class and race segregation, is part and parcel of the US cityscape. Many municipalities would refuse even to recognize their existence as comprising a larger societal agenda of preserving class and race segregation, and therefore of structural racism. In a similar manner, the Communist history of Ukraine is deeply embedded into the nation's built environment. Removing Communist icons cannot change the face that most of Ukraine's cityscapes are the product of Soviet-era planning. In the US, suburbanization itself could be recognized as an instrument of racial segregation, as it certainly was, and is, in South Africa. The effects of race are deeply inscribed into the US urban and suburban built environment: the entire structure of America's built environment could ultimately be considered as communicating the dominant class's desire to subjugate, and to be separated from, the subaltern classes.

Lastly, as Foote (1997) also noted, the historiography of America, and likely that of the UK, Canada and other ex-colonial or colonial settler nations, is deeply intertwined with the enterprise of subjugation of other groups. Not only is almost every square meter of the US land that was seized from Native Americans, likely by force, but the near entirety of American history is intertwined with this seizure and conquest. Today, Ukraine retains its Golden Gate and Founders' Monument in no small part because these monuments, though constructed by the Soviets for Soviet purposes, also promote Ukraine's preferred understanding of its own history. Similarly, the US retains its Washington Monument, and

thousands of lesser structures, because these structures promote a deeply held and valued narrative of US history. Yet as the ongoing debate over Columbus (hardly the most brutal of the conquistadors) indicates (Tully, 2021), the entire enterprise of European colonization of the Americas, going back over 500 years, is open to contemporary progressive critique. The Americas' entire built environment, in other words, can be seen as the result of immoral and illegal occupation and subjugation of others. What comes next? To the chagrin of some and the relief of others, it is likely that US historiography will evolve to gradually incorporate the existence and values of subjugated groups, even as its built environment remains in large part a commemoration, both conscious and unconscious, of a settler or colonizer European view of the nation, and of the world.

In 1997, geographer Kenneth Foote noted with surprise that Salem, Massachusetts had still not commemorated the site where alleged witches were martyred in 1692, over three hundred years previous (a memorial was eventually dedicated on the site in 2017). Salemites, he noted, still felt a "sense of shame" about the deaths, and the land, as a result, seemed "permanently scarred by shame" (1997, p. 3). Salem wrongfully executed a comparatively small number of people, yet its society, and its cityscape, are still undergoing recovery. The shame and evil of slavery, colonization, discrimination and segregation, each an act that destroyed the lives of millions, are acts from which our societies need to recover. But as we embark on recovery, we also need to recognize that it will take a long, long time to recover fully, and that our cityscape will reflect, and even commemorate, elements of these wrongs for some time to come, perhaps forever. Much like Ukraine has decommunized, yet still lives with the marks of Communism, so should US, UK and other settler nations engage in slavery-related fallism while acknowledging that they will also have to forever live with the reality of their shameful past.

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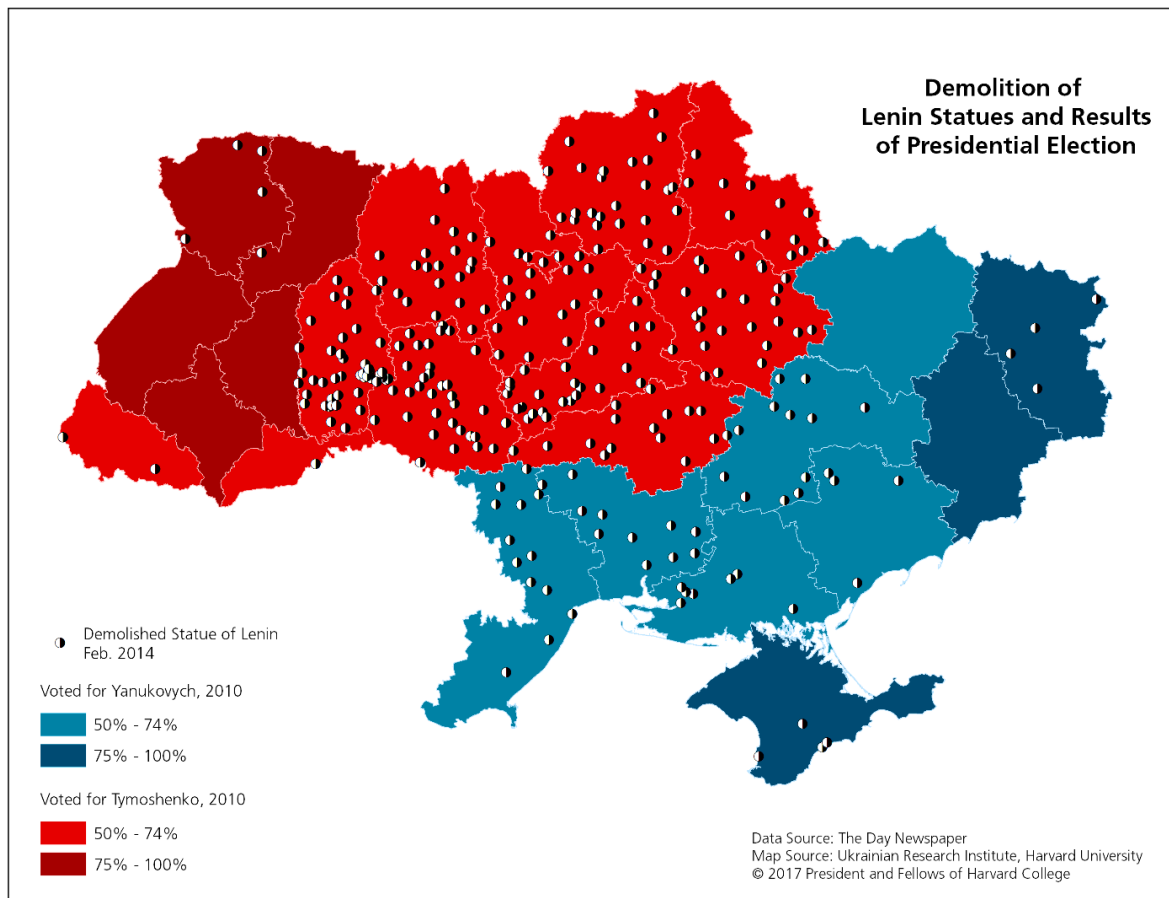
Appendix:

Figure 1. The start of Leninfall in February 2014. Map courtesy: Harvard Ukraine Research Institute.

Figure 2. Mother Motherland monument in WWII park in Kyiv and a flagpole with the national flag of Ukraine, August 2020. Photo courtesy: Yegor Vlasenko.