

## THE FALL OF MARSHAL KONEV: SILENCING BEYOND POST-SOCIALIST MONUMENT REMOVAL(S)

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This article<sup>1</sup> traces the developments that led to the 2020 removal of a memorial to Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev from a square in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. In the article, inspired by an archaeological sensitivity to context, we explore the ways in which the monument has become de-contextualised and re-contextualised by means of various material interventions and performances. This investigation allows us to detail the transformations of the monument within a changing context, and show how selective de-contextualization and re-contextualization allow for the amplification and silencing of different voices. In so doing, we interrogate what role(s) socialism, or rather its image – the spectre of socialism – plays in these dynamics of de- and re-contextualization. Through the case of the monument, we assert that, while the spectre of socialism and its invocation are locally specific, they also go beyond the local context because the socialist spectre is present and contingent both locally *and* globally. Consequently, we suggest that by a careful linking of local and global mechanisms of how the notion of socialism is employed in order to legitimize and delegitimize competing views, it is possible to open up a novel and productive re-conceptualisation of “post-socialism” in relation to the (geo)politics of memory, remembering, forgetting and silencing, which goes beyond the confines of post-socialism as a descriptive marker and an already worn out concept.

KEYWORDS: De-commemoration, spectre of socialism, re-conceptualising post-socialism, public monuments

Immediately after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, public spaces in Prague, the capital of the then Czechoslovakia, as well as in other settlements all across the country witnessed

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numerous acts of what Light (2004) calls de-commemoration and new commemoration. Streets and other public spaces were stripped of ideologically charged names, and the most conspicuous monuments of and to the socialist past were removed one by one. Naiman (2003, xiv) argues that “Totalitarianism is distinguished by a kind of epistemological imperialism, the battle for the ‘symbolic occupation’ of space and time.” In the case of socialist Czechoslovakia, symbolic occupation was achieved mainly through imbuing toponymy and public art (including monuments) with particular ideological resonance. In such a light, the iconoclasm and acts of renaming right after the socialist regime’s fall can be understood as attempts by the emerging post-socialist state and society to break a perceived symbolic spell cast by the socialist state and ideology over public space. The need to force socialism out symbolically and to fill in spaces with new symbols, meanings and imaginaries was – at least in some instances – acutely felt. Gibas (2013), for example, notes that metro stations in Prague were renamed, on the basis of public consultations and expert deliberations, even before socialist Czechoslovakia was itself renamed and ceased to formally exist in 1990.

The iconoclasm and renaming that occurred after the fall of state socialism can be seen as a post-socialist phenomenon: a reaction to the fall of the previous socialist regime and a strategy to symbolically reclaim (public) space. In this article, we focus on a seemingly similar act of iconoclasm: the 2020 removal of a statue of the Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev from its pedestal. Ivan Stepanovic Konev was a Soviet general and a Marshal of the Soviet Union, who commanded the Red Army forces that liberated much of Eastern and Central Europe during World War II. As such, he was the first Allied commander to enter Prague in May 1945 and was hailed throughout socialism as a liberator of Prague. The monument to Konev discussed in this article was built on May 9, 1980, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation by the Red Army.

As it took place in Prague, the capital of what has since 1989 become the Czech Republic, and was embellished with proclamations and arguments that might sound reminiscent of those of the 1990s, the 2020 removal of the monument to Konev could easily be dismissed as yet another post-socialist de-commemoration. However, we argue that the removal of Marshal Konev is not only different from that of the many Lenins who were toppled in the 1990s, but that it can for that very reason allow us to critically rethink post-socialism as a concept through its relation to silencing.

Our considerations of what happened to Marshal Konev in Prague are based on an analysis of material interventions and discursive performances concerning the monument. In developing this approach, we have been particularly inspired by archaeological theory: especially its approach to, understanding of and heightened sensitivity for context. By closely inspecting the material interventions made to the monument – and to a lesser extent also the corresponding discursive performances – with a particular attention paid to the role and transformation of the immediate context of the

monument, we illuminate the reasons for and ways in which the past has been invoked as part of a dynamics of silencing. In other words, we interrogate the role of context – both general, socio-political, and immediate, socio-material – and link the processes of re-contextualization and de-contextualization in their material and discursive forms to contemporary issues of de- and re-commemoration. In doing so, we suggest that socialism is but one of many impetuses at play in these events, alongside other factors such as current (post-transformation) economic and local political, as well as geopolitical, issues, and numerous imaginaries inspired by these. This investigation allows us to think through silencing from the perspective of a spatial location associated with post-socialism – that of a CEE capital – but also to move beyond its confines. As a result, a potential for re-conceptualising “post-socialism” in relation not only to memory, remembering, forgetting and silencing opens up.

Before we get to such considerations, we first briefly discuss the theoretical underpinnings of our article, namely the notion of post-socialism and that of context. Then, we tell the story of the memorial to Marshal Konev in Prague and the events which led to its removal, and zoom in on the immediate context of the monument and its transformation. Finally, we return to the question of silencing beyond post-socialism.

#### ON CONTEXT AND POST-SOCIALISM

In an immense array of scholarly literature from the last 30 or so years, Prague, alongside other cities from around the region of Central and Eastern Europe, has frequently been labelled with the attribute of “post-socialist”.<sup>2</sup> Often, however, this would function simply as a spatial or temporal marker, a shortcut for “a city in the post-1989/1991 CEE region” (Tuvikene 2016, 143). At the same time, post-socialism often connotes geographical, epistemological and political stances and imaginaries and in turn obscures rather than illuminates. This leads Müller (2019, 534) to argue for abandoning the concept of post-socialism altogether because it “has both lost its object and comes with problematic conceptual and problematic implications”.

Moreover, with the passing time, both socialism as a lived experience and post-socialism as a (political and scholarly) idea have ceased to be – if they ever were – a unifying and “prime reference point for people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but rather one among many” (Müller 2019, 539). In other words, socialism as a horizon of experience and political practice has become less and less of primary importance, with other more immediate experiences coming to the fore: these include

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<sup>2</sup> The full list of articles using or referring to this term from across anthropology, geography, sociology and other disciplines, including writings by the two authors of the present article, would be practically infinite.

socio-economic inequalities formed not only by the economic transformation after the fall of state socialism, but also stemming from contemporary global capitalism with its internal tensions and predicaments, such as the 2008 economic as well as the ongoing and intensifying ecological crises.

We are no longer post-socialist in the sense of a historical, territorial or political predetermination. At the same time, however, socialism keeps hovering above our heads as a spectre invoked whenever needed for political or economic reasons. This “zombie socialism” as Chelcea and Druta (2016, 522) characterise it, has become an inherent “ingredient of neoliberalism” not only in CEE, but also elsewhere. It haunts political competition, economic policy making and political parties’ infighting in countries as diverse as not just the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, but also the USA and UK.<sup>3</sup> As Szadkowski, Moll and Kuligowski (2019, 9) observe, while “Central European countries are today spearheading the anti-communist paranoia ... the role played by anti-communism in contemporary capitalism is not peripheral or accidental, but rather overwhelming and systemic.” Emboldened by the fall of socialist regimes, the spectre of socialism gains political and emotional, even affective, power; in its post-socialist life, socialism has become both undead and de-territorialised.

Thus, although we might not be post-socialist in the sense imagined right after the fall of the regimes in 1989/1991 (by scholars like Verdery 1996), we might have become post-socialist in a different vein: for we keep being haunted by post-socialist socialism. This condition, however, is not uniform. De-commemoration in relation to the state socialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the more general invocation of the spectre of socialism, happen in different contexts shaped by particular local and localised conditions. For example, the recent removals of monuments in Poland or Hungary, as well as the one explored in this article, are fuelled by imaginaries and respond to, as well as act as catalysts for, political developments that share certain similarities, but also differ in many respects, including those of the historical and urban contexts in which they take place (deTar 2015; Szcześniak and Zaremba 2019). Context then becomes crucial for understanding the ways in which the de-territorialized post-socialist spectre of socialism is intertwined with and underscores a dynamics of silencing.

A situated analysis of the processes of de-commemoration is needed to understand the ways in which silencing is and has been deployed in a particular (geo)political context. Such analyses are part of contemporary explorations of the ambiguous lives of monuments, both in former socialist countries and beyond. For example, Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä (2008) have explored the removal and subsequent relocation of the “Bronze Soldier of Tallinn”, a World War II memorial, in relation to contemporary

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3 As showcases the recent usage of the label of being a “socialist” as derogatory and scaremongering in the cases of, for example, democratic senator Bernie Sanders and former UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Estonian nationalism. In a similar vein, Pušnik (2017) links contemporary experience and the politics of memory by examining the ways in which the remembering and forgetting of both World War II and socialist Yugoslavia enable Slovenian nationalism to appropriate anti-totalitarian and anti-communist discourses. Klymenko (2020) uses the case study of the removal and replacement of a Lenin statue to discuss continuity and change in the political order of post-Maidan Ukraine. The fate of this statue, Klymenko argues, is illustrative of an emergent political ethnonationalism and the ways in which this is connected to religious, gender and other imaginaries in Ukraine today. Likewise, James (1999) shows how the removal of socialist statues in Hungary and their placement in a dedicated museum allows for an ethnonationalist distancing of contemporary Hungary from both its communist past and from Russia. Such explorations, albeit implicitly, acknowledge the post-socialist invocation of the spectre of socialism, situate and contextualize its workings and showcase the materials through which it finds expression, as well as the political impacts that it generates.

While context within such a situated analysis can mean more general socio-political circumstances and historical settings, in our approach we have been inspired by an archaeological understanding of and sensitivity to context. In archaeology, context refers both to the provenance of the artefact – where it came from: which exact place, location, strata or area – and what the artefact is geologically, environmentally and culturally associated with. This earlier archaeological approach to context as primarily referring to an artefact's provenance and associations, has become enriched by increased attention to the “cultural and/or behavioural setting in which an artefact had a role, and expanding the concept to distinguish primary and secondary contexts” (Lyman 2012, 210). Primary context refers to undisturbed (Pompeii-like) settings, while secondary context denotes usually disturbed, mixed, or redeposited settings (for discussions of context in archaeology, see for example Binford 1962, Shiffer 1972, Butzer 1980).<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Konev monument, its original position in the urban setting might be seen as the primary context, while the museum to which the monument was transferred for preservation represents a very different context. Such a move from being a monument to becoming heritage entails a series of de-contextualizations and re-contextualizations, and encompasses a “conflict between continuity and discontinuity, between the contextualized and the decontextualized” (Hodder 1990, 15). While the dynamics of this are specific to the Konev case, heritage-making more broadly, as Laura-Jane Smith points out, “is always fraught and contested. Indeed it is always political, not simply because its interpretation

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4 Within archaeology, depending on the given paradigm, context can indeed have various meanings. Context is “simply [the] material context of discovery - site and stratigraphy - or the notions of systems context of the new archaeology, or the meaning-giving social contexts of post-processual archaeology.” (Shanks, Tilley 1992, xix). For clarity of argument in this article, we do not want to delve into these conceptual differences; suffice it to say, a sensitivity to context on both material and other levels is crucial for archaeology, as well as for us here.

or history may be disputed, but because any assertion of inclusive heritage must also include an implicit assertion of exclusion – ‘this is who I am, and you are different from me’” (Smith 2017, 15; for more on heritage as a process of negotiation see, for example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). It follows that the concept of cultural heritage is understood “as a presentist process”: not a passive preserving, but an active assembling. It draws together “various social and cultural entities, such as material objects, places, values, ideas, emotions, memory and identity” (Lähdesmäki, Thomas, and Zhu 2019, 2).

In the following series of snapshots covering the developments around the monument to Marshal Konev in Prague leading to its removal, we focus on the context along the lines sketched above. We look at both the broader socio-political context, and at context in terms of material settings and the material and cultural associations prevalent within a given setting. We trace the transformations of the monument within its changing contexts and show how selective de-contextualization and re-contextualization serve purposes of amplifying and silencing, and analyse what role(s) the post-socialist spectre of socialism plays in such a dynamics.

#### THE SOVIET MARSHAL IN PRAGUE AND HIS FALL

In the early spring of 2021, we visited the Square of the International Brigades (Náměstí Interbrigády) in Prague, where the monument to Marshal Konev used to stand facing the Street of the Yugoslavian Partisans. Here, at the spot labelled in the popular Czech online map application “mapy.cz” the “Former Marshal Konev Memorial”, only a few traces of the monument’s former presence were still visible: some rectangular, flat sided bushes which grew right behind the memorial, an area with bare soil instead of grass and an elevation marking the raised position from where the statue overlooked the busy street (fig. 1). This, together with the bushes that originally flanked the memorial, an information board about the square, including a couple of sentences on the monument as well as about an adjacent children’s playground, is all that has been left *in situ* as fading traces of the recently disappeared memorial.

The monument to Marshal Ivan Stepanovic Konev was erected more than forty years ago, on May 9, 1980, on the occasion of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation by the Red Army. The unveiling of the monument – consisting of a statue of Ivan Konev on a pedestal towering above a stone paved area, with a commemorative bronze plaque bearing an inscription of the Marshal’s name and the years of his birth and death – was attended by the communist party elite, amongst them the then prime minister and members of the party’s Central Committee, and by members of the Czech as well as Soviet military, including both WWII veterans and commanding officers of the Soviet troops currently stationed in Czechoslovakia. The presence of these dignitaries emphasised the symbolic importance

of the monument. It also expressed and fit with the overall socio-political atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s: the era of state socialism labelled “normalization”, which commenced with the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 to stifle the liberalization of Czechoslovakian socialism of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1. The former location of the monument as photographed in Spring 2021 (source: authors)

On the level of the symbolic occupation of space and time, to return to Naiman’s notion mentioned at the beginning of the article, normalization was characterised by proclaiming, emphasising and offering evidence of the “never-ending friendship of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union”.<sup>6</sup> Projects as diverse as co-operation in space exploration, culminating with a first Czechoslovakian astronaut shot into space, or the construction of the Prague metro were all embellished with the symbolic veil of the good and beneficial Czechoslovakian-Soviet relationship. As the commanding officer of the Red Army which liberated Prague in 1945, Marshal Konev, discursively framed as Prague’s

5 “Normalization” was a period of far-reaching political purges and repressions after the failed attempt to humanise Czechoslovak state socialism during the Prague Spring. It concerned not just top Communist Party leadership but society as such, through a pervasive political vetting aimed at thwarting any attempts at continuing the previous reforms and at resisting the occupation by Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 (for more detailed discussion, see Šimečka 1984).

6 An omnipresent phrase of the times.

liberator, served such a political-symbolic purpose well. The figure of Konev should, according to *Rudé Právo*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, “forever commemorate the historic days of May 1945”.<sup>7</sup> As the inscription on the monument’s plaque suggests, it thus allowed for an effective symbolic rebranding of the Red Army, tarnished by the Soviet military presence after the occupation of 1968: „Ivan Stepanovich Konev, an important Military Marshal of the Soviet Union, double Hero of the Soviet Union and Hero of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front which on May 9, 1945, saved Prague from destruction“.

The monument thus served a particular role – as also did many other monuments, edifices, events and activities – within the local variant of the symbolic occupation of space and time conditioned by the predominant political as well as geopolitical context. One aspect of the geopolitics to which monuments such as the one in question responded was that of Soviet imperialism and its consequences. This is important to note because, as we shall see, imperialism is also a key element underpinning the developments leading to the monument’s removal in 2020.

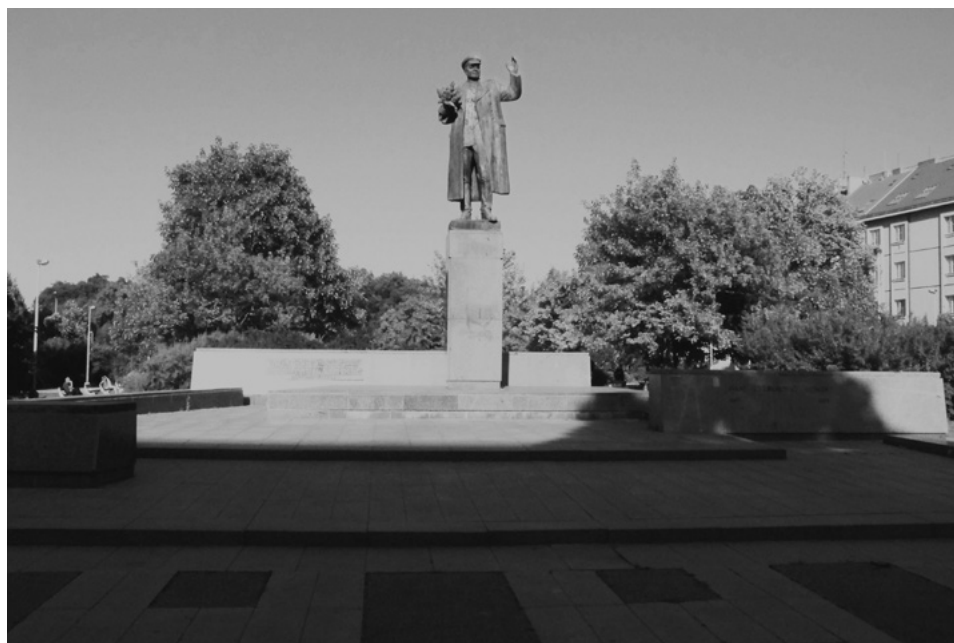


Fig. 2. Konev memorial in 2011  
(source: author: ŠJů, Wikimedia Commons, accessed 26 August 2021)

7 *Rudé Právo (Red Justice)*, 12 May, 1980, p. 2; all translations from Czech by the authors.



Although there were some attempts to remove the memorial after the fall of communism, it mostly simply stood unnoticed (see fig. 2), shrouded in a ghostly invisibility, as is often the fate of monuments as Musil once famously observed (2012, 64). This situation changed suddenly around 2014 when the statue was splashed with pink colour. From that moment on, the monument drew a growing attention, becoming a target for more and more frequent interventions, with a particular escalation in 2019/2020. The graph (fig. 3) illustrates the rise in media coverage of the monument, and clearly shows how the monument quickly shifted from being invisible to becoming a haunting presence.

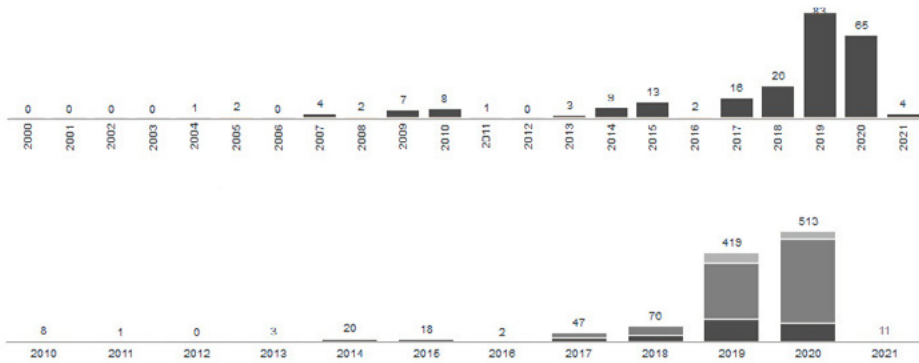


Fig. 3. The upper graph shows the number of articles about Konev memorial in printed media since 2000, the lower one number of articles in (from bottom up) printed media, internet, TV and radio. (source: Anopress news database, export authors, 2021)

Post 2014, a number of material interventions to the monument took place, as well as other performative actions in which the monument functioned as either a background or a central theme. Most prominently, the monument was repeatedly splashed or sprayed over with various inscriptions, often in pink or red colour. The colour red connotes both the colour of the communist party and blood, and as such it is readily semiotically recognisable. The role of the colour pink is more contextual: it references another, earlier, artistic cum political intervention to another socialist monument – a tank which used to stand on Kinsky Square (formerly the Square of Soviet Tank Drivers). The tank, as well as the name of the square, represented another memorial to the liberation of Prague by the Red Army; however, in this case the tank was unveiled as a monument right after the end of the war in 1945.<sup>8</sup> In 1991, it was painted pink by the

<sup>8</sup> The celebration took place on July 29, 1945, and Marshall Ivan S. Konev was among the honorary guests.

artist David Černý and, due to the ensuing controversies stretching well into the late 2000s, became known as the pink tank. Although the tank served in WWII, as a result of Černý's intervention and the political discussions that followed, it became associated with the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 and the presence of Soviet troops in normalization Czechoslovakia. In turn, the pink colour sprayed on the Konev memorial references the pink tank and connotes the 1968 invasion and normalization, as well as the 1990s/2000s controversies around attempts to come to terms with both.

Pink paint appeared a number of times after 2014: for instance, in 2017, as a part of demonstrations against the local authorities' plan to place a new explanatory plaque on the monument. Apart from pink, the monument was also repeatedly stained with red: for instance in drips reminiscent of blood that accompanied inscriptions such as *?Heil Putin?* and *44 SR*<sup>9</sup> in 2015 and the dates *1956*, *1961* and *1968* in 2017, 2018 and 2019, in the latter case also accompanied with the inscription "No to the bloody Marshal! We will not forget."<sup>10</sup> The dates that kept reappearing on the monument reference historical events in which Konev played a more or less important part. In the autumn of 1956, it was Konev who led the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Uprising by the Soviet army: hence also his nickname, "the bloody Marshal". In the years 1961–62, it was he who was the commander of the Group of Soviet troops in Berlin: this was at the height of the Second Berlin Crisis (1958–1961), which culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall. In May 1968, Konev came to visit the newly elected President of Czechoslovakia and a fellow WWII veteran from the Eastern Front, Ludvík Svoboda. According to some sources, during this visit members of his delegation began to map the terrain for a possible invasion of Warsaw Pact troops. His role in the invasion of that year, however, has been questioned and was probably minor if any.

Interestingly, these inscriptions serve primarily to re-contextualize Konev as a person and political figure, and use the memorial as a vehicle to do so. As was the case for his role in socialist discourse, Konev here too serves a specific function: through associating him with hot and cold conflicts, such re-contextualizations attempt to spotlight the geopolitical role of the Soviet Union and the outcomes and consequences of its imperialism. Moreover, through inscriptions like *?Heil Putin?* and *44 SR*, Konev, and the Soviet Union for which he is made to stand, are directly made synonymous with both fascism and contemporary Russia. The differences between the USSR, Russia,

9 *44 SR* stands for a stylised SSSR, which is the Czech abbreviation for the Soviet Union, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

10 For paint interventions to the memorial in 2014 and 2015, see Gallery iDNES.cz: [https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/znovu-pocmarana-socha-marsala-koneva-v-dejvicich.A150624\\_095504\\_praha-zpravy\\_bur/foto](https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/znovu-pocmarana-socha-marsala-koneva-v-dejvicich.A150624_095504_praha-zpravy_bur/foto) (accessed 10.03.2021); and for paint interventions and protests around the memorial in 2017, 2018 and 2019, consult: <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/foto-tak-sel-cas-se-sochou-koneva-od-vztyceni-pres-protesty/r-5679a2a8847911eab115ac1f6b220ee8/> and [https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/socha-marsala-koneva-mestska-police-zakryti.A190831\\_085737\\_praha-zpravy\\_brzy/foto](https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/socha-marsala-koneva-mestska-police-zakryti.A190831_085737_praha-zpravy_brzy/foto) (accessed 10.03.2021).

communism and Nazism fade away, while Russia becomes primarily connoted with its imperial ambitions.

These types of interventions were accompanied or followed by performative actions such as protest meetings and public gatherings, either in support of or against the ideological and political meanings supposedly etched into the monument. Thus, for example, in 2017 people protesting against the plan of the local municipal authority to place an explanatory plaque on the memorial gathered under the Marshal with placards and flags. The flags waved on this occasion were those of the Czech Republic, as well as the flag of today's Russia, but there were also flags of the Soviet Union, as well as those associated with contemporary Russian separatism (in Ukraine). The grand-daughters of Ivan Konev took part, alongside some Czech politicians from the contemporary Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, as well as representatives of other parties. Two days later, the red years of 1956, 1961 and 1968 re-appeared, again sprayed on the pedestal.

An idiosyncratic crowd gathered at the monument two years later on the occasion of the placing of the explanatory plaque on the memorial. It was claimed that this trilingual plaque, in Czech, English and Russian, would ensure that the memorial was put in a proper historical context. It read:

Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev commanded the 1st Ukrainian Front, whose troops were deployed in the final attack on Berlin and liberated northern, central and eastern Bohemia, and were the first to enter Prague on May 9, 1945. In the autumn of 1956, he directed the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising by the Soviet army, and as commander of the Soviet Army Group in Berlin in 1961, he participated in solving the so-called second Berlin crisis by building the Berlin Wall. In 1968, he personally sponsored an intelligence survey before the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Clearly, this inscription responds to the vernacular re-contextualisation of Konev embodied in the years repeatedly sprayed on the monument and their implied attempts at commenting on Marshal Konev as a historical figure. It was hoped – at least this hope was publicly proclaimed – that this historical contextualization would put the controversies around the memorial to rest. However, the unveiling of the plaque took place on August 21, 2019, which was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. The occasion – the date was indeed chosen purposefully, as the municipality of the Prague 6 Borough is overtly anti-communist and anti-Russia – drew both sides into more and more heated conflict. It is worth noting here that during state socialism, the borough became a prominent spot for housing communist cadres, such as police officers and party members. At the same time, dissident circles were also prominent there. This means that today it is a space of the repeated discursive struggles of hardline communists and anti-communists, for whom the Konev monument became one of the key battlegrounds.

Back to the demonstration: on the one hand, Marta Semelová, a communist party member and long-time municipal politician, came with a placard saying “I refuse

the overwriting of history.” On the other, people waved posters saying, for example, “Konev = a communist lie / We don’t want lies here” and “He has blood on his hands / Take him down.” The opportunity to calm the situation, rather than to amplify and/or silence particular voices was wasted. Six days later, the monument was sprayed over again; as a response, the municipality decided to cover the statue with a canvas hoisted on a construction purportedly to “protect the statue” against vandalism. This resulted in repeated attempts to pull the canvas down and to put it back up, protest meetings (involving both politicians associated with communist party and nationalist circles) and some people bringing (red) flowers.

The definitive decision of the authorities to solve the situation with the memorial came in 2020, and on April 3, 2020, the memorial was dismantled. The statue and the explanatory plaques were taken away and are now stored for their future use in the newly established Museum of the Memory of the 20th Century. Around the time of the statue’s removal, the situation got even tenser: the mayor of the borough and the mayor of the city of Prague were both put under police protection, because of death threats in relation to the monument; the Russian Federation protested against a “crime” on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII; and the Czech Embassy in Moscow was attacked by unknown protesters.<sup>11</sup>

For some time, the remnants of the monument were left on the spot and the protests continued. People kept bringing flowers and candles; someone covered the remains of the pedestal with an oriented strand board and put a toilet on top with a sign, “Please do not excrete”, and toilet paper with the inscription “The Constitution of the Czech Republic”. During summer 2020, the board covering became a “discussion panel” with inscriptions like “Konev is a liberator” and “Konev is a murderer and occupier”; the place became more and more derelict and was taken over by skateboarders.<sup>12</sup> In November 2020, the paved area and the remnants of the pedestal were dismantled, and the terrain was flattened. A new memorial to the WWII Liberators of Prague is envisioned, the competition for which should take place by mid-2021.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of 2021, the situation calmed down and all voices grew silent. The statue was placed in a depository and should become part of the Museum of the Memory of the 20th Century, a museum and memory institution founded by the city of Prague. As of 2021,

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11 For photographs of the dismantling of the monument, see for example: <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/regiony/hlavni-mesto-praha/3073948-odstraneni-sochy-koneva-neporusuje-smlouvy-s-ruskem-petrickem-si> (accessed 10.03.2021).

12 For discussions on the board and the skateboarders’ signs, see: <http://www.evropsky-rozhled.eu/okoli-piedestalu-sochy-marsala-koneva-se-stalo-mistem-setkavani-mladych-sportovcu-kreativcu-i-neznamych-vandalu/> (accessed 10.03.2021).

13 The source for this information and also a for a photogallery of the dismantling of the monument is: [https://prazsky.denik.cz/zpravy\\_region/pomnik-konev-demolice-soutez-hluk-park.html](https://prazsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/pomnik-konev-demolice-soutez-hluk-park.html) (accessed 10.03.2021).

the museum is preparing an exhibition to “present this artefact in a wide historical context”. The plan for 2022 is to open a temporary seat of the museum in which the monument would be presented. However, in a long term time perspective, the statue is intended to become part of a permanent exhibition with the aim “to show different views of Marshal Konev, his role in various historical events, as well as the creation of his propagandistic cult in post-war Czechoslovakia” as a part of setting “a content framework for a public debate about these questions”.<sup>14</sup> For now, in the spring of 2021, only the bushes and barren soil serve as *in situ* remainders of a monument gone.

#### RE-CONTEXTUALIZATION, DE-CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE SPECTRE OF SOCIALISM

If we, invoking an above-mentioned archaeological sensitivity to context, look closer at what happened around and to the Konev monument, what we see is an intricate web of re-contextualizations and de-contextualizations. Moreover, these have been happening within a wider socio-political, historical and geopolitical context which has been changing as well. In this perspective, the transfer of the statue to the museum constitutes a particularly profound change, involving the severance of the monument from its primary context. Socialism – or the images, values and emotions embodied in and associated with socialism – played an important role in the processes of both the de- and re-contextualizations of the monument, and in its move from its primary to a museum context.

After around 2014, as described above, a number of material interventions and discursive performances brought to the foreground polarized opinions on the meaning and future fate of the monument. Physical interventions directly altered the materiality of the monument, either temporarily or permanently. Sprayed dates or splashed red or pink colours only turned out to be temporary, because they always got cleaned up. They were loud and visible, spurred media attention, and then were materially silenced by the authorities through the use of detergents. Similarly, flowers put on the pedestal and demonstrations with posters and flags (and speeches) temporarily caught media attention and brought to the fore and amplified certain voices whose opinions thus became more or less successfully and permanently ascribed to the monument. These contrasting interventions made manifest the highly polarised and at the same time highly particular opinions revolving around Konev as an exemplary “socialist” figure through which a web of connections to and within “socialism” could be spun, and thus produced a particular dynamic of re-contextualising the monument over time.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted on: <https://www.muzeum20stoleti.cz/muzeum-pameti-xx-stoleti-a-socha-marsala-koneva/> (accessed 10.03.2021).

The response of the municipality to the vernacular as well as (semi)official re-contextualizations of the monument via material interventions, gatherings and demonstrations was its own attempt to re-contextualize the monument once and for all, in the form of an explanatory plaque. A reaction to the dynamics of de-and re-contextualization already taking place, it too became interwoven in these dynamics. As such, it did not succeed in calming the situation, but quite the opposite. As a result, the monument became literally invisible: hidden behind a protective canvas. The visibility and invisibility of the statue resulting from the repeated attempts to pull the canvas down and its subsequent replacement became a symbolic expression of the changing dominance of one interpretation of the monument over the other.

As a result of these processes, the monument as a historically and politically contingent complex became invisible long before the statue was removed and its pedestal dismantled. It became engulfed in the dichotomous sets of meanings and emotions invoked by the spectre of socialism: it is the opposition between the sets of connotations provoked by the spectre of socialism which simultaneously delimits the space of political imaginaries and haunts it. While the attempts to re-contextualise the monument were seemingly about the past and coming to terms with it in the present, they in fact sought to establish a complete symbolic control over the monument, with the spectre of socialism looming large. Both defenders and opponents of the monument took part in a battle of epistemological imperialism, to refer back to Naiman (2003), which was conditioned by the contemporary complex of ideas and emotions associated with “socialism”, but reaching far beyond to the realms of geopolitics and ethics. In the process, stripped of its primary associations and meanings by means of ignoring its provenance, both spatial and temporal, the monument was effectively de-contextualised: it was no longer primarily a normalization era monument, with a distinct and complex historical, political and symbolic legacy. In such a way, the monument became an empty canvas to be re-contextualized within a battle for the symbolic occupation of both space and time.

The hauntings of the spectre of socialism provided the grounding for the dichotomous positions between which the battle for symbolic occupation took place. In other words, it was the spectre of socialism that made the points of view, and the debates and negotiations through which they were expressed, highly polarized. It also made them ethically and emotionally supercharged. What happened to and around the monument was an example of a historically contextualised statue on a pedestal becoming a vehicle for resolving a contemporary tension between anti-communists and their opponents in an attempt to assert epistemological (and symbolic) domination. The temporal provenance of the monument – from the normalization era – and its location in a politically tense borough helped turn it into a node around which particular associations were made and from where a net of politically as well as emotionally charged meanings were produced that sought to catch us all and force us to choose

a position for or against. To be in favour of the monument was thus linked to being for Konev and in turn for Soviet imperialism: the heinous, criminal and violent regime that the (“bloody”) Marshal stood and fought for. The web of associations around the monument re-contextualised the monument only by means of de-contextualizing Konev, by ignoring the historical and (geo)political context in which he as a military leader operated and in which his statue became a part of the monument to the liberation of Prague. At the same time, the re-contextualization activated new geopolitical associations, and the monument became inseparably linked to Putin’s Russia and its present day imperialism. This was made possible not only by the opponents of the monument, but by its defenders as well: for the statue was linked to contemporary Russia in the media, and in symbolic and political statements by representatives of the Russian Federation, both at home and in the Czech Republic – like the presence of Konev’s grand-daughters at the memorial in 2017. Likewise, the involvement of the contemporary Communist Party, which consorts with both Czech and Russian nationalists, helped create, maintain and exploit such associations. For its opponents, these associations made it possible to re-contextualise the monument as a morally corrupt attempt to rewrite history: to obscure and support heinous anti-democratic regime(s) of the past and present. The monument needed to be removed in order to allow for the proper interpretation of history to materialize. For the monument’s defenders, pushing for re-interpretations of Konev and in the end for his removal signalled precisely a rewriting of history by silencing the past; it thus constituted an embodiment of the hypocrisy of contemporary democracy, which accuses others of suppressing freedom while doing exactly the same.

The amplifying and silencing of voices and perspectives provided a particular dynamics to the developments in and of the context in which the monument was embedded, which finally led to its removal: starting from indifference and rising up to politically polarised and toxic. With the removal of the statue from its primary context, two changes happened: one spatial and the other temporal (for a discussion of continuity and discontinuity, see Hodder 1990, 15; for the issue of an asynchrony of temporalities, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 75). Moving the statue from a public space in a wider urban setting to a museum will necessarily lead to a process through which the statue becomes a part of a curated past, a part of heritage. The museum and the exhibition within it will open up a new space for debate; but this debate will now be framed by the views of specialists: it will be a rational debate under the curation of experts. Hand-in-hand with this comes also a temporal shift: removing the statue from a public urban setting effectively moved it from the registry of the present to that of the recent past. By becoming heritage, the statue will be placed in a context in which it is to be evaluated and interpreted as part of history. The new context to which the statue was transposed as a part of a future exhibition about the memory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century predisposes the temporal plane on which the statue will continue to exist: a plane very

different from the temporality of first indifference and later material interventions, protest events and heated performances in its primary context. In essence, the new context, with its temporal and spatial specificities – the museum in which the statue finds itself – will allow for a novel process of re-contextualization. Interestingly, this was enabled in the first place by de-contextualizing the monument: by wrestling it out of its primary context through the above-described battle for its symbolic occupation which overlooked the complexities in fact inherent to the monument.

### CONCLUSION

Taking place in Prague, a CEE capital, the removal of the Konev monument might be seen as yet another, albeit somewhat belated, post-socialist act of de-commemoration. In this article, we have looked closely at what preceded this removal. Inspired by an archaeological sensitivity to context, we have exposed the specific dynamics of the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of the monument which took place in the particular primary context in which the monument was located until its removal. We argued that what had been happening to and around the monument was a battle over its symbolic occupation in which the spectre of socialism played a formative role. It allowed for the de-contextualizing of the monument, for brushing over its complex historical, political and geopolitical spatial and temporal provenance. Likewise, the spectre of socialism was also invoked throughout the re-contextualization of the monument, not because of socialism (or communism) as a historical reality or political imaginary, but rather as a reaction to imperialism, both historical and contemporary. The spectre of socialism thus always served a particular purpose, even if these could be wildly different or even starkly opposed.

Drawing on the case of the Konev monument, we would like to suggest some conclusions. The removal of the monument does not represent a post-socialist de-commemoration simply because it takes place in a city which in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century used to be a capital of a socialist state. The only justification for even considering post-socialism as a prism through which to perceive the case of the Konev monument is because the spectre of socialism was indeed invoked and played its part in this process. And while that spectre and its invocation are locally specific, they also go way beyond the local context, and local municipal and state politics, because the socialist spectre is present and contingent both locally and globally. It features in, fuels, legitimises and discredits geopolitics and their locally specific impacts. It is invoked among others by present day Russia, even in the case of the removal of a monument in one Prague borough, as a way to consolidate support for and legitimise the nation's contemporary geopolitical involvements: in this case, as in many others, the spectre is invoked just as energetically by proponents and defenders as by opponents and rivals.



The spectre of socialism can be used as a tool to both legitimise and delegitimise locally as well globally. This apparently paradoxical situation was made possible by the fall of state socialism in a part of Europe in 1989/91, which allowed for socialism to become both undead and deterritorialized.

To explore the locally situated impacts of such invocations, it is necessary to look closely at the context(s) in which they happen and explore the contextual changes they bring about. Only then is it possible to link local and global workings – hauntings – of the spectre of socialism and, in so doing, maybe even reclaim post-socialism as a concept. But similarly to the spectre of socialism, in order to make post-socialism a productive concept, one which would allow us to unmask the spectre of socialism and its effects and power, post-socialism needs to become deterritorialized. It needs to cease be a spatial and/or temporal marker, but instead become a critical tool to highlight contemporary practices of the invocation of the socialist spectre, and their geopolitical underpinnings and local effects. In such a way, we believe, it is possible to productively re-conceptualise “post-socialism” in relation to the (geo)politics of memory, remembering, forgetting and silencing. In this sense, interventions and performances like those which kept happening around and to the Konev memorial in Prague can be seen as post-socialist: just not in the sense unreflectively associated with the term.

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