

Decolonizing Museums in Ukraine



"Motherland", digital collage, 2008
Pavlenko Mariya

Abstract

The presentation is aimed to provide general overview of state of affairs in Ukraine in dealing with colonial Soviet heritage in museums, public space and cultural institutions. The presentation tends to provide understanding of the controversies of the local processes and acknowledgment of the audience with main actors of the local cultural scene. In case of dealing with colonial heritage in Ukraine, it is rather hard to limit ourselves to museums, as long as public and media space (printed media, radio, television and cinema) were as much important for Soviet propaganda, as actually museums in their classical form. What raises discussion today is mainly solid – it is either monuments, or architecture that through the shape and its decoration still manifests **former Soviet** statements. Social realist paintings almost fall out attention, they are just placed in a context of overall historical narrative.

On November 28, 2006, the Law of Ukraine "On the Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine" was adopted, which officially recognized the Holodomor of 1932-1933 as genocide of Ukrainian people and provided the construction of the Holodomors' victims Memorial in Ukraine. The Memorial was officially commissioned on July 12, 2010.

The basis of the Museum activity includes:

- organization of the research of historical sources about events of that time to reveal documentary evidence about Holodomor and creating conditions to introduce them in scientific circulation;

- composing the unified register of documentary evidence, creating databases and arranging the testimonies of the Holodomor witnesses;
- conducting of scientific conferences, forums, workshops, podium discussions, seminars, round tables etc., informing the public about the crime of genocide, committed by communist authorities against the Ukrainian people, through lectures, lessons, multimedia lectures, film screenings related to the Holodomor;
- organization of events to perpetuate the Holodomor victims' memory;
- development and organization of other museum communication forms through expositions and exhibitions with implementation of information technologies;
- creating of permanent expositions and exhibitions.



Museum of Holodomor in Kyiv, image from the official web-site

Decommunization was launched officially in May 2015, when President Poroshenko signed four laws on the subject. According to the them, communist totalitarian and national-socialist (nazi) totalitarian regimes were defined as criminal in Ukraine due to the policy of state terror, violation of human rights in a form of individual and mass murder, tortures, forced labor, discrimination, based upon ethnic and racial motives, absence of freedom of speech, press and political pluralism. Also in December 2015 communist party was officially banned in Ukraine.

"Territory of Terror" is Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes, created in 2016 on the territory of the former "Transit Prison #25" and the "Lviv Ghetto".

In the XXth century Lviv was always in the center of military and political events. The city repeatedly passed from the hands of one power into the hands of another, the borders were changed, the states disappeared. Totalitarian regimes have left an open wound in the history of the city. Prison "Brygidky", Prison "on Lontskoho Street", Zamarstynivska Prison, the Lviv Ghetto (1941-1943), Transit Prison # 25 (1944-1955) - the places where thousands of people

have been killed. But still they continue to perform the function of sinister prisons or premises, adjusted for educational institutions, hospitals and entertainment facilities.

The mission of the institution is to work, preserve and transmit experience about totalitarian past; to explain the mechanisms of totalitarian ideologies in order to benefit the development of historical consciousness of society.

Prior area of the research is the history of political, social, ethnic and religious repressions of totalitarian regimes against people who lived within the territory of Ukraine in the XX century.



Museum of the terror, image from the official web-site

In 2017 Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance informed that 1320 monuments to Lenin had been removed. Decommunization included also change of names of streets, so more than

51,493 streets, squares and other urban areas had been renamed, according to Ukrainian media "Ukrainska Pravda".

In this year there was a rigor discussion, whether to remove Soviet signs from Motherland-Mother monument, however the initiative was paused probably due to COVID-19 pandemic.



"Motherland", digital collage, 2010
Mariya Pavlenko



On the left: monument to Lenin at Bessarabska square in the center of Kyiv, first days of Euromaidan protests; on the right – the same place after the monument removal on the 8th of December of 2013.

Mariya Pavlenko

Due to **privatization** that took place after Soviet Union breakdown, many buildings that carried ideological meaning in terms of their architectural form and decoration with mosaics, murals and stained glass currently are in private property and owners renovate them according to own taste - Soviet symbols also vanish in capitalistic competition by its own.

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As long as there is no state strategy, how to museificate uncountable pieces of Soviet heritage, **decommunization** is criticized by some of local artists, art-critics, curators and activists that allocate themselves “on the left” and initiate projects, on contrary aimed at preservation of decommunized objects, however many of such projects are reminiscent and nostalgic rather than present objective scientific analysis of **former Soviet** that should be historicized as any other colonial artifact.

As an instance could be taken the 10th edition of the exhibition **Warsawa w Budowie** in 2018, when the group of Ukrainian activists and cultural researchers from **Center of Visual Culture (VCRC)**, dealing among other with the initiative **#savekyivmodernism**, were invited to curate the show, titled “Neighbors” (Сусіди). The Warsaw part of the project took place in Cepelia pavilion in Warsaw on the cross road of the streets Marszałkowska and Aleja Jerozolimskich. As curators stated in their text, Cepelia – “postwar, modernist pavilion that was meant to serve as a place of construction of a new Polish identity. After the termination of Warsaw Pact, the place is being transformed into a gaming room.”



Cepelia Pavilion in Warsaw, photo from Internet

Parallel to **decommunization** in Ukraine, the process of **decentralization** was launched in 2014 by the state - the reform, aimed at extension of the authority and financial autonomy of local governments (сільські, селищні міські ради) that in a way can be compared to institutional **decommunization**. First stage of **decentralization** took place in 2014-2019, second 2020-2021. The reform included crucial changes to the Constitution of Ukraine, also Budget code and tax legislation and is aimed to improve the quality local government, communal services, medicine, education and culture through extending their ability to manage decision and money autonomously.

Ukrainian Cultural Foundation is a state-owned institution created in 2017 in correspondence with the Law of Ukraine with aim to facilitate development of culture and arts in Ukraine, to provide favourable environment for development of intellectual and spiritual potential of individuals and society, wide access for the citizens to national cultural heritage, to support cultural diversity and integration of the Ukrainian culture into the world cultural space. The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation supports projects through a competitive selection process. Activities of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation are guided and coordinated by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine.

The Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Center (**Dovzhenko Center**) is the largest Ukrainian State Film Archive. It preserves more than 6000 titles Ukrainian, Russian, European and American

films from 1910. Dovzhenko Center was founded in 1994 on the basis of the largest time of the USSR of the Ukrainian film-making factory (established in 1948). In 2015 the Center has started the transformation of its industrial buildings into modern open public space. On the basis of the Center, there was founded an art-cluster which unites a number of public initiatives in the field of contemporary art such as theater, music, book publishing, etc. Since then, Dovzhenko Center also works as a popular venue for concerts and performances.



Building of the Dovzhenko Center, image from Internet

Following the process of decentralization, self-organized initiatives also start to emerge. For example, **denede** was launched in 2016 in museums of Donetsk and Lugansk regions and is aimed on support of regional museums. Within several years in 31 museums of Eastern regions of Ukraine had been taking place workshops “Modern methods of work in museums”,

exhibitions and so on. Also the project actively involves artists in work with regional museums, organize exhibitions.

With the support of **Ukrainian Cultural Foundation denede** launched in 2020 the project “The museum is opened for renovation”, this time for the museums from the whole territory of Ukraine. For this purpose activists of **denede** initiative went to so-called expedition to different regional museums of Ukraine, selected upon the open call.

As a conclusion, Ukraine has not developed yet own theoretical basis to be able to deal it's colonial past, however single initiatives represent promising approaches. On the one hand, the young state strives to wash away colonial symbols and replace them with its own. On the other hand, sometimes historical complexity of these symbols also is being neglected; Soviet is so deeply rooted in the history of Ukraine that radical removing of it means staying without any institutional roots for formerly rural country, for significant periods of its history divided between empires and conquerors. The rational compromise could have been in detached and objective preservation in former Soviet artifacts in museum with further unbiased scientific analysis. However the trauma of a Soviet is so “fresh” that currently almost no one is able to remain detached, and the community remains polarized, sometimes taking diametrically opposite positions. Maybe only the time can create certain emotional distance to make it possible to approach the subject of Soviet not personally, but scientifically in Ukraine and find common ground.



Our family house in Makalevychi village, Zhytomyrska region. As I assume, initially it was built by my grand-grand father. At the beginning of collectivization it was forcedly taken away from my grand-grand father, he was stigmatized as “kurkul” (rich farmer that has own land, cattle, property) and turned into communal “banya” (sort of sauna). In some time he managed to collect some money and buy this house back, so his ownership was already recognized in a new, Soviet state. My

grandmother received this house as a heritage and lived in this house with her family for the whole life. My father was born and grew up in this house. I spent a lot of time in this house as a child. The photo was taken on the day of my grandmother's funerals.

Mariya Pavlenko

Decommunization references:

Laws

The decommunization laws are composed of:

Law no. 2558 "On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propagation of their Symbols" — banning Nazi and communist symbols, and public denial of their crimes. That included removal of communist monuments and renaming of public places named after communist-related themes.

Law no. 2540 "On Access to the Archives of Repressive Bodies of the Communist Totalitarian Regime from 1917–1991" — placing the state archives concerning repression during the Soviet period under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance

Law no. 2538-1 "On the Legal Status and Honoring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century" — elevating several historical organizations, including the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, to official status and assures social benefits to their surviving members.

Law no. 2539 "On Remembering the Victory over Nazism in the Second World War"

Decentralization law:

About approval of conception of reformation of local self-government and territorial organization of the power in Ukraine

<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/333-2014-%D1%80#Text>

Institutions

Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (Українському інституті національної пам'яті)

<https://uinp.gov.ua/>

Український інститут

<https://ui.org.ua/en>

National Museum of Holodomor Genocide

<https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/>

Ukrainian Cultural Foundation

<https://ucf.in.ua/en>

"Territory of Terror" museum

<http://www.territoryterror.org.ua/en/museum/mission-statement/>

Visual Culture Research Center

<http://vcrc.org.ua/en/>

Books

Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics

<https://osnovypublishing.com/en/decommunized-ukrainian-soviet-mosaics/>

Soviet Modernism. Brutalism. Post-modernism. Buildings and Projects in Ukraine 1960–1990
– a new history of Ukrainian architectural modernism.

<https://osnovypublishing.com/en/four/>

VUFKU. LOST & FOUND

<http://www.dovzhenkocentre.org/eng/product/58/>

MIKHAIL KAUFMAN: UKRAINIAN DILOGY

<http://www.dovzhenkocentre.org/eng/product/57/>

BOHDAN NEBESIO. THE SILENT FILMS OF OLEKSANDR DOVZHENKO

<http://www.dovzhenkocentre.org/eng/product/51/>

Media

Official web-site of decentralization reform

<https://decentralization.gov.ua/about>

Key moment of the law about decommunization, an article

https://texty.org.ua/articles/59999/Vse_pro_dekomunizaciju_Jak_pracuvatyme_zakon_pro-59999/

Portal to the monumental decorative art of Ukraine of its Soviet period. Research, map, protection, and popularization.

<https://sovietmosaicsinukraine.org/en/>

Warsawa w Budowie 10

<https://wwb10.artmuseum.pl/pl>

Leninopad

<http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad>

Facebook

denede

<https://www.facebook.com/denedenede>

The museum is opened for renovation

<https://www.facebook.com/lugmuseums>

<https://www.facebook.com/zubmamonta2020><https://uacrisis.org/uk/ogolosyly-pro-pochatok-proektu-muzej-vidkryto-na-remont-2020>

Fb group for collecting of images of stained glass in Soviet Ukraine

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/256181932094650/>

Initiative of architects, designers, activists and citizens of Kyiv aimed at protection of architectural objects of modernist style

<https://www.facebook.com/Savekyivmodernism/>