

MAYA NADKARNI

Images of toppled monuments and headless statues of Lenin dominate Western representations of the end of state socialism in the former Soviet bloc. But in Hungary, where the demise of state socialist rule was bloodless and bureaucratic, the country's communist statues and monuments emerged from the political transition mostly unscathed. This lack of revolutionary iconoclasm presented a challenge for Hungary's politicians, local authorities, and art historians in the early years of post-socialism. In the absence of popular rebellion against the statues, what would best represent the will of a newly democratic public: to banish the statues on political grounds or to retain them in a grudging acknowledgment of their artistic or historical value?

In Budapest, municipal authorities ultimately decided to remove these remnants of the past regime to a "statue park museum," which opened in 1993, twenty minutes by car from the center of the city. The park was designed by its young architect, Ákos Eleőd, to serve as an "anti-propaganda" space that would subvert traditional expectations of monumentality. The statues are positioned closely together according to common themes, and many are mounted low to the ground, inviting physical as well as visual engagement. Flowering red stars decorate a path in the shape of figure eights, guiding the visitor on an "infinite" journey alongside communism's heroes, martyrs, and key events that ultimately leads nowhere. Instead, with the redbrick walls of the park silhouetted against a prosaic suburban backdrop of power lines, billboards, and a nearby water tower, both the statues and the totalizing aspirations of the regime that erected them appear merely pathetic or absurd.

Many local and international observers have hailed the Statue Park Museum as a "civilized" solution to the problem of how to handle the ideological remnants of a "barbaric" political past. By celebrating an ethos of historical preservation, the park maintains the peacefulness of the democratic transition, which stands in stark contrast to the violence of the previous political upheavals in Hungary's turbulent twentieth century.

But such efforts to cleanse public space of the historical politics of past regimes have their own afterlives, and it is important to be alert to the stories that they tell—and those they forget—about their own making. At the time of the park's creation, supporters argued that it would provide a solution to both the problem of the statues' discredited ideology and the danger that they might inspire violent protest and vandalism. What this rhetoric concealed, however, was that by the end of state socialism, many Hungarians paid little attention to many of these monuments. Some were unaware of the statues' specific ideological content, and for others such knowledge was overwritten by everyday familiarity. While most people agreed that statues and busts of Lenin had to go, there was less urgency about removing others, such as one commemorating Soviet envoy Ilya Afanasievich Ostapenko, who was killed on December 29, 1944, while delivering



Memento Park. Statues and memorial plaques commemorating, from left to right, Ilya Afanasievich Ostapenko, Captain Nyikolaj Szytepanovics Steinmetz, the Republic of Councils Pioneers, the 1919 Hungarian Republic of Councils, and Róbert Kreutz.

an ultimatum to the German forces that encircled Budapest. Originally standing on one of Budapest's main highways at the city's border, the Ostapenko statue portrays him with one arm upstretched and the other waving a flag, a gesture that appeared to greet or bid farewell to city residents on their trips in and out of the city. Over the years, the statue became a popular hitchhiking stop, and many people viewed it with great affection.

The decision to remove Ostapenko and similar statues enabled politicians and city officials to redefine such domesticated landmarks of everyday urban life into traumatic remainders of Soviet rule—and to transform former socialist subjects into an outraged democratic citizenry who demanded the statues' removal. The Statue Park Museum thus decontextualizes what it preserves in order to re-narrate not only the history of the monuments themselves but the very story of what propelled the park's creation. Perhaps as a result, it has failed to meet either Eleőd's artistic ambitions or its manager's economic projections in the twenty-five years since its opening. Those who grew up with the statues tell me that they already know what each one looks like, whereas the schoolchildren who encounter the park on class field trips regard the monuments as simple remnants of a distant and finished past.

These days, the Statue Park Museum (later renamed "Memento Park") primarily caters to foreign visitors eager to satisfy their curiosity about an era now reduced to oppressive Soviet relics, Trabant automobiles, and Young Pioneer songs. By marketing history as kitsch (such as a gift shop that sells red-star T-shirts and tins containing "The Last Breath of Communism"), the park limits the mnemonic possibilities of Eleőd's open-ended anti-monumental architectural strategy to distanced pity or mocking laughter. This irreverent commodification also enables the park's tourists to fulfill their own fantasies about the triumph of Western capitalism, in which even communist icons can be repurposed to make a profit. If the park was created to disavow Hungarians' ambivalent experience of late socialism, the redemption of its relics as post-Cold War nostalgia thus covers up such institutionalized amnesia through the appearance of remembrance. This unexpected afterlife of the park suggests that the problem of unpalatable monuments (whether in the former Soviet bloc or elsewhere) is not simply a matter of answering the question of "what is to be done." It also demands that we remain attentive to the unanticipated consequences of those decisions.



Memento Park. An East German Trabant 601 is permanently parked just inside the museum's gates, next to the gift shop.

MAYA NADKARNI is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Swarthmore College.