

Ambivalence on Ukraine's 'De-Communistation' Process

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, DEC 14 2023

On 9 December 2023 municipal workers in Kyiv dismantled the Soviet-era figure of Red Army General Mykola Shchors. The Ministry of Culture gave permission to take down the statue, and on-lookers clapped when workers finished. Heorhii Lukianchuk, a Kyiv resident, said he ran to witness this "historical moment" and that it will "be on the pages of history books."

According to my telephone interview on 9 December with Kyiv academic Alex Abakumovl, this process of de-communistation, while generally supported by a majority of Ukrainians, further embitters what is effectively an unspoken 'civil war':

It may be timely for the administration to stomp out symbols of Communism as part of the wider Russian-Ukrainian campaign, but simply destroying statues does not do anything to unite the people of Ukraine. Putin knows all too well where he has his supporters, and his proxies, and these actions of tumbling Red Army monuments at this particular time just opens up old wounds. The Ukraine situation is not as simple as Biden and others would like to make it out. The legacy of the Second World war is still a divisive one. Apart from anything else, many of the older people still live in a cloud cocoon land that the pre-1970s were the best time for Ukraine. They may have numerically a declining influence and little electoral power, but their voice pulls tenderly at the heart-strings of a divided country.

Uri Manok, a Ukrainian colleague working in the capitol, told me in another interview on the same day:

This might seem symbolic to those looking at Ukraine from afar, but we still have a great many old timers who served in the Russian army and others who are equally rose-tinted in their memories about the Soviet past. It is the typical, perplexing cocktail of nostalgia and the sense that the present experience is always worse, than a supposedly happier time of plenty and ample Russian army pensions. Those old army pensioners do not have to turn out for the current barbaric campaign on-going with Russia on multiple fronts. To those who do, and their families who have lost so many in this so-called Russian military operation, any last remnant of the Soviets cannot be stamped out fast enough. Yes, we fought on the Communist side. Yes, we had some years under Moscow. But Putin's behaviour has convinced most reasonable-thinking Ukrainians that we simply demand our independence and every inch of our Ukrainian territory. It would not matter to most Ukrainians if they never saw another Russian soldier again. The tumbling down of Red Army Chief Mykola Shchors is another victory for Ukrainian democracy. Let no-one tell you anything different.

Decommunistation in Ukraine commenced during the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and expanded afterwards. Following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Ukrainian government approved laws that banned communist symbols, as well as those of Nazism, as totalitarian ideologies.

On 15 May 2015, President Petro Poroshenko had authorized a six-month period for the removal of Soviet communist monuments (excluding World War II necrology) and renaming of public-places previously called after Soviets. At the time, this meant that 22 cities and 44 villages would receive new names. Until 21 November 2015, municipal governments had the authority to implement this and if they failed to do so, the oblasts had a 21 May 2016

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deadline. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine could impose new designations, and severe penalties for non-conformity. Predictably, the laws went un-implemented in the strongly Russian-orientated parts of Ukraine.

At the outset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the Ukrainian Security Service accused the Communist Party of Ukraine of aiding pro-Russian separatists and Russian proxy forces. In July 2015, the Ministry of the Interior stripped the Communist Party, the Communist Party of Ukraine (renewed), and the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants, of their right to participate in elections, and banned the registration of communist parties. By December 2015, these parties were outlawed for inciting a violent overthrow of the state, and supporting Russian proxy forces. Ironically, the Communist Party of Ukraine appealed the ban to the European Court of Human Rights. A contact in the fading remnants of that once powerful party, Igor Gusev, told me in an interview on 8 December:

They are determined to re-write the past as if we never existed, as if we had not actually created the modern state that we now have, which is properly Ukraine in friendship with mother Russia. These pretenders who say they are Ukrainians, now stamp on the dead bodies of those who liberated us and fought for our history and our brothers in Moscow. who have supported us all these years....They are now mere international conspirators who want to make Ukraine a puppet of the west...They have a TV star President who is just a mouthpiece and does not really represent the country- he is just a spokesman for the liberal democracy sham of Europe and America.

By 2016, 51,493 streets and 987 cities and villages were renamed (with either the restoration of their historic names or new names) and 1,320 Lenin monuments and 1,069 statues to other communist figures, removed. In fact, Ukraine's first president after the country's 1991 independence from the Soviet Union, Leonid Kravchuk, had issued orders aimed at "de-sovietisation" in the early 1990s. Historical memorials to Soviet leaders were gradually hidden, particularly in the Ukrainian-speaking western regions. It is true that there was a push-back in the industrialised (largely Russian-speaking) eastern regions. Also, to provide some context of the ambivalence about these issues, decommunisation laws, were drafted in the Ukrainian parliament in 2002, 2005, 2009, 2011, and 2013, but they all failed to materialize. It is obvious that there were already numerically significant numbers who thought like Igor Gusev.

Only the post-Euromaidan reforms brought solid change. In March 2014, Lenin Square in Dnipropetrovsk was renamed "Heroes of Maidan Square" honouring those killed during Euromaidan. Two years later, in May 2016, the city was renamed Dnipro. During and after Euromaidan, starting with the fall of the Lenin sculpture in Kyiv on 8 December 2013, several Lenin statues were removed or destroyed by protesters. In April 2014, a year before nationwide decommunization processes in Ukraine, local authorities removed and altered communist symbols and place names, as in Dnipropetrovsk. Again, there was ambivalence and 'push-back'. As Dnipro resident, Tania Yezhiov told me in an interview on 10 December:

It is all very well for the Presidency to press ahead with de-communistation, as in the removal of the Marshall Shchors statue, but it comes at a cost. It both enhances a sense of Ukrainian identity and tortures those who look fondly on those times, or who are openly or secretly pro-Putin. The outside press sits happily thinking this is a straightforward war, but that is far from being the case. It may seem so pro-Ukrainian in Kiev but outside the capitol there are pockets of people who are ambivalent about Putin. I do not just mean those who are fighting against the Ukrainian army in the Donbas- I mean the outside world seems to think this is a national struggle- Ukraine's David versus the Russian Goliath. Actually, we are far more divided than the west would like to admit. They like to perpetuate a simple narrative against Moscow, but what Biden and the west say may well be an over-simplification of Ukraine's internal divisions.

On 15 May 2015, President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko signed the Decommunistation Laws which accelerated the removal of communist statuettes and renaming of public places. On 3 June 2015, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory published a list of 22 cities and 44 villages subject to renaming. Most of these places were in the Donbas region in East Ukraine. On 19 May 2016, the Ukrainian parliament voted to rename Ukraine's fourth-largest city Dnipropetrovsk to "Dnipro". On 27 April 2022 (during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine), the People's Friendship Arch in Kyiv, representing Russian-Ukrainian friendship, was removed by order of Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko.

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On 1 August 2023, the Soviet emblem was removed from the Motherland Monument in Kyiv. On 24 October 2023, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed Law No. 8263 to facilitate "de-Sovietisation". However as early as 18 December 2015, the Venice Commission stated that Ukraine's decommunisation laws did not comply with European legislative standards. It was critical about the banning of communist parties. During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Lenin statues across Ukraine, removed by the Ukrainians in the preceding years, were re-erected in Russian-controlled areas.

Ukraine is more divided than the west seem to appreciate. A November 2016 poll showed that 48% of respondents supported a ban on Communist ideology in Ukraine, 36% were against it and 16% were undecided. It also showed that 41% of respondents supported the initiative to dismantle all statuary to Lenin in the country, whereas 48% were against it and 11% were undecided. In December 2023 another Communist symbol has toppled but Ukraine has inherited a dark history that is less easy to remedy as there remains a certain ambivalence on its 'de-Communistation' process.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.