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TOL PROMOTION

Marshal Konev Statue Poised to Retreat?

A recent decision to move a communist-era statue in Prague reveals the perils of reassessing the past.

by Emily Mason

3 October 2019

In a move reminiscent of forcing a military retreat, a Prague district assembly recently voted to relocate a statue of a polarizing Soviet military leader at the epicenter of a debate about Czech geopolitical identity.

The statue of Marshal Ivan Konev, which was erected in 1980, has been repeatedly vandalized over the past decade, both on the anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968 and on International Workers' Day (1 May). This August, vandals again splattered red paint and wrote the words, "No to the Red Marshal! We will not forget!" in contrasting white. The district mayor ordered for the statue to be covered with a tarpaulin to protect it from further harm, yet spoke against removing the paint this time.

"I see no reason why I should spend the money of Prague 6 citizens on something they do not want to be here," the district mayor, Ondrej Kolar, said in a Facebook post, referring to the district in which the statue stands. "Something that bothers them and keeps bringing up controversies."



Marshal Konev. Image by Lachlan Hyatt.

The Konev statue is usually ignored by most neighborhood residents, but the August incident may be a turning point for the soldier's legacy. Hundreds of Czechs convened to defend the statue after the district assembly covered it up. Kolar has been placed under police protection after receiving death threats. Meanwhile, also in August, over 100 residents of another Prague district petitioned to have their Konevova Street – also named for the marshal – renamed.

A Dual Role

In May 1945, the air in Prague would have been heavy with the scent of lilacs as Konev led Red Army troops to secure victory for the Czech resistance against Nazi occupation. To remind Czechs of his role as a liberator, the statue depicts Konev, in full military attire, holding a bouquet of lilacs.

However, given that Konev also played a role in the Soviet-backed invasion of Czechoslovakia two decades later, he is seen by others as an oppressor. The statue conceals this part of the marshal's legacy, says Jakub Janda, who heads a think tank, European Values, engaged in fighting foreign disinformation campaigns.

"It was built as a Soviet propaganda tool in 1980, that's what it symbolizes to me as well," Janda said. "It was a Soviet tool to say that they have liberated this region, but also to suppress the fact that the Red Army brought another occupation."



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A new plaque was added to the statue last year, to make clear Konev's dual roles in Czech history. That stoked a heated response from the Russian Embassy in Prague, which is located minutes away from the statue site. The recent decision to relocate the statue also prompted diplomatic outrage.

"We consider the decision today on the transfer of the monument to Marshal I.S. Konev to be egregious," the [Russian Embassy said in a statement](#). "We hope that despite today's decision of the local authorities the monument of I.S. Konev will remain in its historical place."

Many countries of the former Eastern bloc have attempted to address the issue of communist-era memorials. Poland has faced [similar ire from Russia](#) after taking steps to remove Soviet-era statues, including, [recently](#), a monument to Red Army soldiers in a small town's central square. In 1990, [Albania's early shifts](#) away from a Stalinist past were embodied by the removal of Josef Stalin statues.

With communism only 30 years in the past, Czechs are still coming to terms with their country's new global identity. Now a member of the EU, the Czech Republic's younger and more liberal citizens have adopted Western skepticism toward Russia. Meanwhile, some older citizens [are left to grapple](#) with the Soviet influences of their upbringing.

A young generation of political leaders is bringing the Czech Republic into the new era, according to Janda. "I think the removal of the Konev statue is a natural continuation of dealing with our history," he said. "Here we have a new generation of local politicians who have clear opinions on this, so to some extent, that new, young generation of politicians has moved on with this issue on the local level."

By contrast, during his first term in office, President Milos Zeman courted the support of Czechs wary of the EU and nostalgic for a time before the country became aligned with the West. Following the 2016 vote by the UK to leave the EU, Zeman proposed that the Czech Republic [hold a vote](#) on whether to do the same, and has since [repeated his call](#) for a Czech referendum.



The controversial statue. Image by Lachlan Hyatt.

He went on to leverage Czech skepticism toward Western nations to win his re-election campaign in 2018 on a pro-Russian platform. Polling results showed that Zeman performed the strongest in villages and small cities, while his Western-oriented opponent beat him in bigger cities like Prague.

A 2019 study conducted by [the European Council of Foreign Affairs](#), a pan-European think tank, found that Czechs have one of the lowest approval ratings of the EU, despite being one of the formerly communist countries best integrated with its systems.

Kindred Spirits

A connection exists between those who voted for President Zeman, opposition to the EU, and defense of the Marshal Konev statue, says Jakub Schroder, a 29-year-old who lives near Prague 6, where the Konev statue stands.

"At the demonstration in support of Marshal Konev there were many people who support the Communist Party and other anti-system parts of Czech policy," he said. "This part of the Czech political scene is mainly against the European Union."

Opposed to the statue, Schroder said the defenders were misleading themselves. "This a problem of some weird type of nostalgia – that people remember only what was good when the [country] was a communist state," he said. "[They] don't remember the occupation and totalitarianism, so I think it's selective memory."

Historian Muriel Blaive, of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in Prague, has [described Czech nostalgia](#) about the communist era as a lingering association between communism and a stable standard of living.

Petr Mucha, a dissident during the Velvet Revolution and a professor of Czech culture at New York University in Prague, agrees, saying, "Among the older generation, especially the people that grew up during communism, there is still a significant portion of people that profited from the communist regime."

"Either they were part of the Communist Party or they profited from it and they still don't see Russia as a threat today," said Mucha.

Jana Volfova, 62, is a retired politician and teacher living in Prague who runs the Facebook page [Czech Sovereignty](#), whose mission is defending Czech independence against the EU. "It's true that people who voted for Zeman are in favor of protecting the statue," she said.

Volfova also started the Facebook page [Against the covering of the Statue of Marshal Konev](#) to inspire others to defend the statue's historical significance and to express her own frustration after it was vandalized. Her page organized the [demonstration](#) in defense of the statue, gaining almost 2,000 likes over eight days.

"There is no reason to move it. The statue was there for the past 30 years," Volfova said. "So why do they want to move it now?"

Prague City Hall recently committed to building a [Museum of Memory](#) of the 20th Century to explore totalitarianism, and it has been suggested that this will be the statue's new home. However, Marshal Konev has not yet received his final marching orders.

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