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Radical Urban Lab  
Volume 1 // Report 2  
November 2022

Imprints of Czech Post-Communist Nostalgia on  
Urban and Memory Landscapes

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The research for, and writing of this report were supported by the St Andrews Research Internship Scheme (StARIS).

Parts of this report have been drawn from an essay I wrote in December 2021 for GG3227, Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies, a University of St Andrews Geography course convened by Prof Daniel Clayton.

Cover: photo by Julia Lurfová

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## Foreword

Dr. Antonis Vradis

At the time when the so-called “first place” (the home) and the “second place” (the workplace) merge, the future of third places is thrown wide open: anything and anywhere that is not private or corporate is severely questioned and pushed to become at least one of the two. It is in this context that Lurfova’s report has a rare urgency. Her perambulation starting with the Stalin Plaza in Prague and her drawing of lessons on what post-communist nostalgia might signal for the current state affairs in the Czech society (and beyond) is an apt reminder of a cunning ability of third places: the ability not only to preserve public memory and emit nostalgia but to tell us, in the process of so doing, much about the current status quo. And Lurfova’s report has become even more urgent and timely as Russian imperialism is invading Ukraine and as Western imperialism is fanning the flames of the present war while confronting the spectres of its own imperialist past. From the toppling of slave trader statues in Bristol to the struggle against the regeneration of public spaces in Athens, people are fighting for their right to representation in third place present and past. This report is an apt reminder of what is at stake in this struggle.

Julia Lurfova’s report is the final product of her engagement with the St Andrews Research Internship Scheme (StARIS) and her collaboration with all other RUL members, which is ongoing. The StARIS Scheme offers the opportunity for undergraduate students to enhance their learning experience by working on academic research projects. Julia’s report also ties into a broader exploration of Third Place under the auspices of the Radical Urban Lab.

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## Introducing the case of the Stalin plaza

For a brief period of seven years, an imposing granite monument of the Soviet Union's Generalissimo, Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, surrounded by archetypes of Soviet and Czechoslovak citizens, towered over the city of Prague<sup>1</sup>. The statue was the winner of a 1949 competition honouring Stalin's 70th birthday, commissioned by the Czechoslovak communist political party chaired by Klement Gottwald. At the time, Stalin – as Czechoslovakia's "liberator" from Nazi Germany – was becoming a near-sacred and hence frequently monumentalized figure among communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Eventually finished in 1955, the socialist realist monument of Stalin in Prague became the world's largest depiction of the Soviet leader. But it did not loom for long. As a result of Khrushchev's 1956 confidential speech "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" that heavily criticized the Stalinist regime and provoked a gradual wave of de-Stalinization, the monument was toppled in 1962<sup>2</sup>.



Stalin Monument in Letná Park, Prague. Source: Pichova, 2008, p. 618.



Stalin plaza nowadays. Source: U/U Studio and Kevin Loo for Design Disco, 2019.

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In 1991, a giant red Metronome was erected on the pedestal left bare after Stalin's statue was demolished by explosives. The Metronome, as a reminder of time's passage and finiteness, mocks the propagandist narrative of a Soviet-Czech partnership "for all eternity"<sup>3</sup>. Ticking from East to West, the symbol of freedom bridges the two worlds in the newly-independent Czech Republic<sup>4</sup>. Six decades later, in the nation's collective memory, the place once dominated by Stalin's monument continues to be strongly associated with the demolished landmark, kept alive through narrative accounts. Nowadays, among Czechs, the term "Stalin" refers to the plaza around the Metronome, turned into a meeting point popular among young people and an open air cultural hub hosting a variety of DJ and film-screening events, beer gardens, and a pop-up bar during the summer months<sup>5</sup>.

The smooth concrete surfaces of the plaza have also been repurposed by the city's skaters. In 1970s communist Czechoslovakia, skating emerged as an important anti-establishment subculture resisting the totalitarian regime, which recently became the subject of 'King Skate', a 2018 documentary directed by Šimon Šafránek. Skating remains pivotal to both Prague's urban youth culture and to Stalin, "a square with no boundaries and no regulations"<sup>6</sup>. However, the future of skaters at Stalin – and, as a matter of fact, of the public space as a whole – came under threat in September 2019, when the city temporarily closed the plaza in order to structurally refurbish it, while also re-opening a longstanding debate on potential commercial development in the area. Critics of proposals to replace the Metronome with a church or an aquarium have condemned these developments as pathways towards "cultural amnesia", attempting to erase the contentious yet critically important history of the place within the Czech landscape of memory<sup>7</sup>. Skaters and other Prague locals have since protested the closure and the redevelopment discourse by organising a 'Save Stalin Plaza' protest. "[D]on't touch the genealogy, don't touch the heritage of this place", urges urban architect and local skateboarder Martin Hrouda. "Keep it like it is."<sup>8</sup>

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## Czech post-communist nostalgia

Similarly to other countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, the landscape of my home country, the Czech Republic, seems to be permeated by a sort of post-communist nostalgia. This nostalgia is characterised by imprints in and attachments to material landscapes; yet it also influences, and is influenced by, the more abstract landscapes of memory. I conceive this post-communist nostalgia as an imagined “present past”<sup>9</sup> formed by attachments to specific chronotopes, or time-places<sup>10</sup>. The word ‘nostalgia’ derives from the Greek *nostos*, “home,” and *algos*, “pain”<sup>11</sup>. While often equated with an idolizing attachment to a home lost to the past, frequently experienced in colonial and imperial contexts<sup>12</sup>, this ambiguous affect can be more broadly understood as an assemblage of “protective fictions”<sup>13</sup> offering consolation and refuge from drastic changes<sup>14</sup>. Tannock conceptualizes modern nostalgia as a ‘periodizing’ sentiment: a response to a ‘lapse’, that is, a rupture that causes a regime shift from a prelapsarian to a postlapsarian world<sup>15</sup>. Conceptualizations of nostalgia suggest that when the resulting postlapsarian present is experienced as somewhat lacking, or even oppressive, individuals and collectives may resort to dreaming “of another place and another time” (in the case of reflective nostalgia), or even reconstructing “monuments of the past” (in the case of restorative nostalgia)<sup>16</sup>.

Czech post-communist nostalgia, which I understand to be an attachment to chronotopes tied to the landscapes of Czechoslovakian communism, has been triggered by a regime shift consisting of a restructuring from a communist regime to a neo-liberal democratic system<sup>17</sup>. In Czechoslovakia, communism, promoted by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) led by Prime Minister (later president) Klement Gottwald, started gaining significant popularity after WWII<sup>18</sup>. It was not until the late 1960s when the Soviet-style communist regime was formally installed. The 1968 Soviet invasion that repressed the Prague Spring political liberalization and mass protest<sup>19</sup> marked the onset of the so-called ‘normalisation’ period<sup>20</sup>, denoting the more than two-decade-long Soviet occupation. According to Kořakowski, the 1968 invasion was a defining moment in history for it saw communist utopia as an intellectual issue “transformed into a power problem”<sup>21</sup>.

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But the Soviet Union began exercising control over Czech politics already after “liberating” Czechoslovakia from Nazi Germany at the end of WWII, by annexing Carpathian Ruthenia, or bringing Soviet counterintelligence agents, SMĚŘŠ (‘Death to Spies’), to Prague<sup>22,23</sup>. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, USSR formed close ties with the increasingly popular Communist Party<sup>24</sup> and helped orchestrate Soviet-style show trials which put opposition, such as Milada Horáková, in front of a communist jury that ordered their execution<sup>25</sup>. Backed by the Soviet Union, KSČ seized absolute control over the country’s government in a 1948 coup d’état, also known as ‘the February events’<sup>26</sup>. Czechoslovakia was under communist rule until the 1989 Velvet Revolution<sup>27</sup>, but it was not until the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 that Soviet forces left the newly-independent country<sup>28</sup>. The entrenchment of left-wing politics within Czech history and the embedment of communism within Czech collective memory prior to the Soviet invasion<sup>29</sup> thus broadens the pre-lapsarian foundations upon which post-communist nostalgia rests<sup>30</sup>.

It may seem paradoxical to argue that in the Czech Republic, the present system granting many democratic freedoms unthinkable under communism is somehow experienced as oppressive when contrasted with the communist past. Nonetheless, the regime shift from communism (the prelapsarian past) to neoliberal capitalism (the postlapsarian present) has left many Czechs feeling disappointed. The neoliberal restructuring dissolved the perceived class unity, security, sociability, and predictability of communism, under which one could “still afford to buy medicine, ... the refrigerator was absolutely full, ... the streets were safe and clean”<sup>31</sup>. These sentiments are not unique to the Czech Republic: across the lands formerly occupied by Soviet forces, the collapse of the Soviet Union, with all its vigour, immutability, and promises of stability, triggered what Yurchak describes a collective “break of consciousness”<sup>32</sup>. In some, the ‘lapse’ brought about by USSR’s dissolution ignited an ambivalent attachment to the landscapes of the communist past.

To the Czech novelist Ivan Klíma, it seems obvious that “[n]obody is nostalgic for the Stalinist era but many old people are nostalgic for their youth”, in which the communist regime guaranteed them stable prices, flats, jobs, and pensions<sup>33</sup>. But can we shrug off post-communist nostalgia as an affect experienced only by



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the “aging” and “passive” minority? To what extent are wistful evocations of the communist past attempts of self-preservation, especially when they are uttered by generations that lived through communist regimes, who confess they do not want to be remembered as “losers” – “slaves”, even –, and bemoaned by the West?<sup>34</sup> Nostalgia has been historically trivialized – Malinowski criticized its “antiquarian and romantic tendency” as “an evasion of the real issues”<sup>35</sup>, while others have described the sentiment as a reactionary “betrayal of history”<sup>36</sup>. I aim to contest this trivialization by situating post-communist nostalgia – as a potent shaper of urban and memory landscapes and an affect relevant for understanding lived experiences of the past and the present – within broader literature on ‘nostalgias for empire’.

## **A nostalgia for the Soviet empire?**

When I first wrote about post-communist nostalgia in December 2021, the political climate felt markedly different to the one now, in October 2022. Russia had not invaded Ukraine for another three months, and Western Europe’s attention was not as attuned to the Russo-Ukrainian War as it is at the moment. I thus dedicated a significant section of my essay to arguing why it may be relevant to draw from literature on ‘nostalgias for empire’ when thinking about the post-Soviet context. Introducing imperialism into writing about the officially “anti-imperialist” Soviet Union did not seem as straightforward at the time as it does currently, with the War’s escalation. As I am finalizing this report, Vladimir Putin has ordered a “partial mobilisation” of Russian troops and staged referendums in Ukraine’s Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions which warranted their annexation<sup>37</sup>. As Russian politics come to occupy the forefront of the Global North’s political and military agendas, there is no doubt about the threat posed by Russia’s expansionism. Despite the shift in climate – and perhaps precisely because of it – I still think that including a discussion on how Soviet and Russian expansionism can be seen as a continuation of the Russian Tsarist Empire can be a productive path towards understanding the enduring nature of imperial legacies.

This is not to say Soviet socialism can be equated with colonialism or the

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traumas it inflicted – these projects were politically, ethically, and aesthetically radically different<sup>38</sup>. In fact, officially speaking, the USSR was the antithesis to colonial empires: its agenda was anti-imperialist, in support of decolonization, and allowed for national autonomy<sup>39,40</sup>. At the same time, it can be argued that precisely this “language of national liberation and anti-imperialism” enabled the continuation of the imperial legacy of the Russian Tsarist Empire, serving as “a potent discursive cloak under which an empire of subordinated nations was gradually built”<sup>41</sup>. Rather than abandoning past imperial practices, the Soviet Union morphed the historically characteristic traits of Empire – *order, expansion, and hierarchical subjection*<sup>42</sup> – into ‘creole’ forms of exercising control over alien peoples, all the while diligently distancing itself from the publicly compromised early European overseas colonial empires<sup>43,44</sup>.

The Soviet Empire’s reformed ‘civilizing mission’ was to organize workers in an international revolution which would overthrow the bourgeoisie. For that purpose, it installed puppet regimes through which it indirectly ruled and ordered East and Central European states<sup>45</sup>. It operated through physical violence, as it deported and massacred Crimean Tatars, peoples in Belarus, North Caucasus, Ukraine, or intervened into Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan<sup>46,47</sup>; and epistemological violence, as it prescribed an official discourse that silenced alternative voices, rewrote history to its convenience, and enforced a shared collective culture<sup>48,49</sup>. The autocratic Bolshevik Party organized itself around Moscow, from where it acted as an agent supervising the many territories and peoples that it had absorbed under its ‘quasi-colonial’ rule<sup>50,51,52</sup>.

When the USSR collapsed, East and Central European countries which once belonged to the Soviet Empire had to undergo a “restructuring” – not too unlike that endured by the colonized ‘Third World’<sup>53</sup> –, which inspired Kennedy to describe it as the Fourth Wave of Decolonization<sup>54</sup>. The restructuring has been both a material process (e.g., in the form of urban spatial restructuring in Zanzibar or Prague), but also a more diffuse one (changes in social welfare provisions, employment, or local currencies)<sup>55</sup>. The common experience is perhaps one of the reasons why Todorova finds ‘post-Communist nostalgia’<sup>56</sup> marked by “a certain tinge of imperial or colonial nostalgia”. Similarly to colonial and

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imperial nostalgia, post-communist nostalgia longs for an Empire which may be officially dissolved, but whose legacies seep into and saturate the (colonial/ imperial) present<sup>57</sup>. The Russian invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 seems almost tragically convenient for trying to illustrate this imperial persistence. The invasion proves that rather than eliminated, the expansiveness of the Russian Tsarist Empire or the Soviet Union has been tactically repurposed by the Russian Federation, which has once again set out to violently subordinate Ukrainian lands and people.

‘Nostalgias for empire’ tend to be theorized as a general “longing for a period of former imperial and colonial glory”<sup>58</sup>, and are thus explored mainly in postcolonial contexts in which actors experience a loss of a privileged status and power. Lorcin<sup>59</sup> distinguishes between imperial nostalgia, more broadly concerned with the yearning for the national grandeur and the hegemonial status of empire; and colonial nostalgia, connected to the loss of a sociocultural or socioeconomic lifestyle granted by colonial rule. The former, often mobilized in public speeches and ceremonial tributes in postcolonial contexts, emphasizes nostalgia’s algia, “the pain of loss and rueful memory that ensues”<sup>60</sup>, and is thus more reflective in nature<sup>61</sup>. The latter, which I find more similar to post-communist nostalgia, relates itself closer to the nostos by yearning for the home and desiring “to reconstruct aspects of it even if such a goal remains elusive”<sup>62</sup>, and is thus more restorative in nature<sup>63</sup>.

Colonial nostalgia tends to embellish memories of lived experiences of the past “to the level of a serene normalcy”<sup>64</sup> by emphasizing the relative ‘bonhomie’ of the colonial lifestyle<sup>65</sup>. Accounts of colonialism’s “economic bounty, the rule of law, a well-managed state, and a graciously maintained city”<sup>66</sup> uttered by urban Zanzibaris in the mid-1990s, faced with high inflation, unemployment, and a collapse of social services<sup>67</sup>, are evocative of retrospective narratives of life under communism in the Czech Republic. Both evocations are formed at a distance from past events; it is this separation which provides space for the formulation of incongruent affective responses<sup>68,69</sup>. I would argue that neither colonial nor post-communist nostalgia actually wish to revert to colonialism or communism. Nostalgias for empire can be more broadly understood as affects which selectively

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draw from the past to process present struggles, while recognizing that what they long for cannot, and should not, be restored.

As a matter of fact, colonial nostalgia “precisely marks the distance between ‘then’ and ‘now,’ firmly anchoring colonialism in a far-off horizon, a mythic and memorialized frame”<sup>70</sup>. This can also be said for post-communist nostalgia’s relationship to communism in the Czech Republic, which selectively attaches itself to specific aspects of historical places and times to process past and present traumas. Post-communist nostalgia is situated in a recognition that the fall of the Soviet Empire felt expected and inevitable, for it too “rule[d] by a state which does not arise out of the society of the subject population but [was] imposed on it by an alien force”<sup>71</sup>. After all, was the Soviet empire-building project, anxiously attempting to reproduce ‘authentic’ variations of its culture in its respective East and Central European homes, not fragile and bleak all along?<sup>72</sup>

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