

The Ideological Past and Present of Bratislava's Slavín

ALEXANDRA LETKOVÁ¹

The article presents an object of public area and also a national cultural monument and a cemetery – the Slavín monument. The author primarily analyses period documents and thus presents the historical-artistic and ideological (propagandist) side of the monument. Subsequently, the author works with the monument from the point of view of historical memory, forgetting and bending of history, while identifies the most significant shortcomings of the monument. In the last part of the article, the author analyses the legal regulation of the monument and offers options that would anchor Slavín as an urban dominant in the 21st century, both ideologically and artistically.

Keywords: memorial, monument, Slavín, Bratislava, propaganda, ideology

Introduction

Bratislava's Slavín is in the register of immovable national cultural monuments maintained by the Monuments Office of the Slovak Republic, catalogued under the unified name as the Monument with a cemetery, or under the established name as the monument Slavín, under the number ÚZPF: 204/1-11, in the cadastral territory of the Old Town. Eleven monuments are registered within the memorial. Bratislava's official internet booklet is more charitable to Slavín, describing it as "the largest war memorial in Central Europe, which, thanks to its location and height of 52 metres, is one of the landmarks of the city. 6845 soldiers of the Soviet army who died during the liberation of Bratislava in the Second World War are buried here."² In the short text, the author bends terms such as gigantic, imposing and impressive in relation to the memorial, but at the same time he mentions its contradictory nature in passing. Paradoxically, the author of the text probably did not realise that he believed the historically inaccurate yet ideologically desirable impression of the memorial. After all, it is not only the fallen soldiers who liberated Bratislava who lie on Slavín, there were officially 742 of them. The other remains

¹ PhD, Faculty of Law, Palacký University in Olomouc.

² See: <https://www.visitbratislava.com/sk/miesta/slavin>

were literally collected within a radius of about a hundred kilometres from Bratislava (Považie, Ponitrie, Kopanice – the regions in the west of Slovakia), even fallen soldiers from the Tatra Mountains were brought in. Although Bratislava was not the capital, it was definitely the metropolis of Slovakia and it was obvious that the largest memorial or monument had to be its dominant feature, even in the context of building a socialist society. The aforementioned gigantism is typical of all memorial sites bearing the weight of ideology, and this had to be ensured firstly by number of those buried (in mass and marked graves) on the highest hill in the centre of the city and, of course, in the second phase by the memorial itself, which, thanks to its location, is not to be overlooked.

The memorial itself also brings several stories engraved in the historical memory of Slovaks. In addition to the ideologically constructed (better to say fabricated) story of the liberation of Bratislava by the Red army, the size of which rivals that of the uprising itself and the fighting at Dukla, it also tells the story of its role in consolidating the communist regime, as it served as the place where all political foreign visitors headed and where allegiance to totalitarian values was sworn (oaths of allegiance by socialist youth or members of the State Security Service). To this day, it has been honoured with an annual visit by the head of state on the anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava (2023 was the first time an exception was made), it had been the site of various protests, commemorative meetings and marches by extremist groups, and it has also been the target of civil disobedience, especially in relation to the current war conflict in Ukraine.

All of the above is just a taste of the contradictory nature of Slavín. The hypothesis we will work with throughout the text is based on the so-called banality of evil, which was defined by Hannah Arendt at the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Arendt did not trivialise evil, as many accuse her of doing, quite the contrary. Her theory points to the primordial ordinariness, or mundanity, of the average official: “How was it possible that utterly mediocre people could commit or participate in acts beyond all human imagination and out of sheer thoughtlessness...”³ Eichmann himself defended himself at the trial by saying that he was merely a clerk, an order bureaucrat. In short, we could say that the mundane bureaucracy mentioned above was the origin and proof of the banality of evil. We will look at Slavín through the same lens – at its core, Slavín is merely an artistic expression made of concrete and stone, while this coldness and taciturnity hides the story of the totalitarian regime’s ideology, still functioning today.

The article is divided into three parts and in each of them we will examine a different aspect of the monument. The first part consists of an analysis of the construction in the context of ideology, from the location, through Ján Svetlík’s winning design, with an emphasis on the changes he had to incorporate into the final work. The second part interprets and applies various theories to Slavín to examine the memorial through philosophy and historical or collective memory. We attempt to answer the question of whether Slavín “deserves” to be a real landmark of the capital, or whether it can be considered an ideological weapon of contemporary pro-Russian propaganda built on

³ ARENDTOVÁ 1998: 1.

disinformation. In the third part we will reflect on possible solutions with memorials abroad. Finally, we will offer, in our opinion, an optimal solution that would ensure the dignity of the memorial, which could free Slavín from the grip of an ideologically unbalanced place that arouses too much passion.

We are building Slavín!

The memorial site in the heart of Bratislava started to be considered as the official end of the Second World War in Europe was approaching. The surviving documentation on the memorial is very detailed and extensive, the most we can rely on are the accompanying reports.

On 17 January 1946, at a joint meeting of representatives of the Soviet army and members of the ÚNV in Bratislava, it was decided on the final location for the common cemetery of the fallen soldiers of the Soviet army. An outcropping of the Little Carpathians, called Hummelspitzeln, in the heart of Bratislava was chosen because of its excellent visibility and location, moreover, a field cemetery had already been established there at the end of the war. Originally, two large mass graves were considered, but between 1946 and 1947, up to six such graves were established on Slavín, as the estimated number of those buried there increased from 2,000 to over 6,500. The graves were relatively shallow and the ground was subsiding, which necessitated immediate landscaping. In 1948, the Committee of Ministers decided to announce for the first time a competition for the architectural completion of the Slavín. The result was only disappointment for the Ideological Council: "the great idea of Slavín did not find a commensurate artistic expression, and the works submitted did not correspond in artistic value to the need of the Slovak people to express to the monument their gratitude for the thousands of lives of Soviet soldiers sacrificed for their freedom."⁴ However, in the period 1948–1950, initial landscaping was carried out based on the location of mass graves and marked graves of officers.⁵ The architectural design of the graves between 1950 and 1951 was supervised by Lubor Lacin. During this period, the second competition for the construction of the memorial was announced. The first prize for the sculptural design was won by Jozef Kostka, but the implementation did not proceed. This was due to fundamental comments and necessary changes in the design, as a result of which a third national competition was announced to complete the existing condition of the memorial in 1953. However, even this competition did not produce a winning design, Ján Svetlík joined the competition with Ladislav Snopek and Rudolf Pribiš. Following this a more restricted competition was announced for the six highest ranked author's collectives.

⁴ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Závěrečná správa odborní komise o posouzení úvodního projektu výstavby památníku Padlých hrdinů Sovětské armády na Slavíně v Bratislavě, p. 3.

⁵ SNA, f. Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov – Spisy odborov 1956, c. 373, Správa o výstavbe cintorína padlých príslušníkov Sovietskej armády na Slavíně v Bratislave, p. 1.

The result from the shortlist was still unsatisfactory and did not meet the expectations of the jury and the Idea Board. A shortlist was again held (from January to March 1955), this time for the three highest ranked teams, from which the winning design was by Ján Svetlík, which according to the Idea Board carried traditional elements to Slovak architecture but contained several ideological shortcomings – e.g. the pendant of the graves of Slovak national public figures. We cannot forget that Svetlík's project was not the winner of this competition either, the highest ranked was the design of the author's collective led by Emil Belluš, but the commission did not determine the exact order of the first three places. It was only the incorporation of comments and the elimination of "defects" that brought Svetlík's design to the winner's stage. On 4 April 1955, Svetlík was commissioned by the Board of Commissioners to develop a design and a model of the memorial in accordance with his winning proposal and the recommendations of the jury and the Ideological Council.

Competition, project implementation and conceptual design

The final project of Ján Svetlík, dated 16 August 1955, had to meet not only the architectural and artistic but above all the ideological ideas of the government before it could be implemented. The announcement of the competition included a binding directive from the Ideological Council: "the guiding mission of the artistic highlight of the Slavín should be the deep gratitude of our peoples to the Soviet Union for the liberation and for the joyful fact that since the first Soviet soldier entered the territory of our homeland, it has been possible for our people to free themselves forever from the shackles of capitalism and to step joyfully and firmly onto the path of the building socialism and communism."⁶ This was not surprising, the binding directive copied the doctrine of gratitude to the Soviets in many documents before, such as the preamble to the Constitution of May 9.

However, Slavín as we know it today is not identical to the original winning design.⁷ After incorporating the comments, Slavín was given a more subtle appearance, and the sculptural works were corrected in accordance within the artistic values of socialist realism. For example, the proposal for the construction of a fountain by Alexander Trizuljak, which was to be part of the park behind the memorial, was completely rejected.

The Communist Party of Slovakia and Board of Commissioners (Slovak executive body) submitted a modified form of the project, which was approved by the Commissioner for local government and Central national committee in Bratislava, to the government

⁶ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957, c. 55, no. 117, Závěrečná správa státního výboru pro výstavbu a posouzení posouzení úvodního projektu výstavby památníku Padlých hrdinů Sovětské armády na Slavíně v Bratislavě, p. 7.

⁷ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957, c. 55, no. 117, Závěrečná správa odborní komise o posouzení úvodního projektu výstavby památníku Padlých hrdinů Sovětské armády na Slavíně v Bratislavě, p. 3.

committee in Prague for approval. The project was approved by the Ministry of local economy of the Czechoslovak Republic with minor comments, and nothing legally prevented its final approval by the government committee in December 1955. In the meantime, a new mock-up of the memorial was built in Bratislava, whose construction, artistic and ideological potential were regularly checked. Just to briefly mention that the construction and urban planning works were controlled throughout the whole construction, experts from many technical fields collaborated on them. We can definitely say that it was a well thought out construction, whose prerequisites were durability and precise technical security.⁸ The budget of the building and the individual works of art that were to be part of it were also precisely controlled. The reservations of the national authorities were ultimately directed precisely at the budget, since the total amount, including the investment up to 1950 (35 million Kčs), did not exceed 80 million Kčs, to which the subsequent adjustments of the project were subordinated.⁹ However, the technical and budgetary aspects will not be discussed further.¹⁰

From the point of view of our interest, the ideological component of the memorial and its reflection in the overall appearance, but also in the treatment of the individual sculptural works, is the most important. In accordance with the conclusions of the Ideological Council, the memorial was supposed to

“attract the attention of everyone who comes, goes and lives in Bratislava. Up close, the whole area is reverent, yet optimistic and in human terms. In its conception, it commemorates the comradeship of Slovak partisans and soldiers with the Soviet army and the gratitude of the Slovak people to the over 6000 heroes of the Soviet army and its people for our liberation. It further highlights the determination to consolidate the Czechoslovak-Soviet comradeship, forged in battle and redeemed by blood. To consolidate this solidarity for the sake of the construction of socialism in our homeland and lasting peace throughout the world. The memorial wants to be a masterpiece of architecture which will portray these ideas and thoughts truthfully and artistically. More than anywhere else, the intention of achieving a synthesis and unity between architecture and sculpture is applied here.”¹¹

We mention this ideological intention not only because of the construction and the final form of the memorial itself, but also because it affects the overall perception of the memorial today. First of all, it was supposed to be a landmark of the city with a reference

⁸ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957, c. 55, no. 117, Správa o priebehu schvaľovacieho pokračovania pamätníka Sovietskej armády na Slavíne v Bratislave, p. 1.

⁹ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Slavín – sprievodná správa, p. 2.

¹⁰ For the budget of the memorial see: SNA, f. Slovenský fond výtvarných umení, sochárska tvorba no. 50/56, c. 80, Pamätník Slavín.

¹¹ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Slavín – sprievodná správa, p. 3.

to Czechoslovak-Soviet cooperation, and only secondarily (from a close distance) it was supposed to be a place of remembrance. Here we are only drawing attention to the above, we will deal with this issue separately in the second and third parts.

The memorial on Slavín was built with a predetermined purpose and its usefulness was obvious in advance. Just over a year after the ceremonial completion of the construction work, it was declared a national cultural monument, which it is to this day. Immediately after its completion, it began to be used for political purposes, its grandeur and the dominance of its location only underlining the totalitarian domination of the communist garrison. Slavín welcomed all foreign visitors, was present at every pioneer oath-taking, as well as at the oaths of allegiance to the Republic of new members of ŠtB (state security), and even welcomed honeymoon processions. With its place in political and social life, the memorial was already being built. Its grounds corresponded to the ideas of the Ideological Council, to whose decisions the artistic works of the individual authors were also subordinated. However, this does not automatically mean that all the works, or the memorial as such, have no artistic value. We will analyse the individual sculptural works and their necessary modifications for the sake of ideological conviction separately and then in relation to each other. In the following essay, we will analyse the monument as a whole and the intercommunication between its individual components in more detail.

The impression of the urban dominant of Bratislava was enhanced by the architectural arrangement of the monument. Thus, from a distance, Slavín attracts the visitor with its magnificence and from close up it tells a big and easy to read story that can be grasped even by a person unfamiliar with the domestic conditions after the Second World War.

The architectural and artistic design of the memorial, according to Svetlík's proposal, will be described from the bottom up, i.e. from the staircase. The staircase was already part of the memorial when Svetlík and his team created the design of the memorial and due to the budget, they could not intervene much (e.g. they could not change the orientation of the staircase), so they focused only on its decoration, which was supposed to draw the attention of visitors to the solemnity of the place. The front wall contains a conveniently placed inscription in Slovak and Russian. The solemnity and piety of the place is indicated by two sculptures at the entrance on either side of the stairs. The staircase is 8 metres wide and is terminated on both sides by massive blocks into which bronze light poles have been set. The semicircular platform in the passage to the grave spaces is terminated by two wreath-laying sculptures. The space of the graves is without sculptures, at the end of the transverse axis on the left side there is an artistically designed finishing motif. The building of the monument itself is elevated 3.60 metres above the graves, it is intended to highlight optimism, the joy of victory, security and safety as well as the decisive role of the Soviet Union in the liberation of Czechoslovakia. Behind the memorial building, a secondary staircase, loosely designed with garden landscaping, continues on the axis. In front of the architecture of the monument, two sculptures are situated on the axis of the upper graves in the main staircase to the monument. In their artistic and ideological approach, they are to be in proportion to the statue, of the soldier standing on the pylon and to the architecture of the monument. The statue

of the soldier was to have a maximum size of 5 metres and was to be made of bronze (in reality, however, a taller statue was created). According to Svetlík, the other parts of the architecture were to be supplemented with sculptural additions. He planned to highlight the entrance to the ceremonial hall with bronze doors, which were to be ideologically related to the external reliefs on the outer sides. The conceptual and artistic culmination of the memorial was to be the inner space of the ceremonial hall, 6 × 6 metres in size and 9 metres high. The impression was to be enhanced by overhead lighting and a sarcophagus of white marble. According to Svetlík, this was to be the place for the laying of wreaths of foreign and domestic delegations.¹² At this stage of the preparations for the construction of the memorial, a competition was held for individual sculptural works. Alexander Trizuljak, Ladislav Snopek, Tibor Bártfay, Ján Kulich, Jozef Kostka and others became the definitive members of the author's collective.¹³

As mentioned above, Svetlík's initial idea had to be assessed. In 1955, Ladislav Danay prepared an assessment of the project, which he found satisfactory and acceptable. Interestingly, he derived the importance of the memorial not only from its character as a place of remembrance or gratitude for liberation, but also from the will of the Slovak nation, represented by the CPSU and the Committee of Perpetrators. The legitimacy of the construction of the memorial was thus set in a broader political and national framework. Danay's assessment also referred to the opinion of the Soviets on the construction of Slavín in 1952. Andrejev¹⁴ as a Soviet architect and supervisor came to the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic to assess the condition of memorial sites and cemeteries for fallen members of the Soviet army. From an ideological (rather ideological) point of view, he stressed that the adaptation of Slavín should not be based on the superiority of the cemetery, the emphasis should be on a memorial that refers to the victory of the Soviet army – the intention of the Soviets was thus not based on a commemoration or gratitude for the liberation, nor on respect for the fallen, it was based on a victorious campaign, which in the historical context was at the same time a campaign of conquest. He recommended, like some members of the domestic commission, that the dominance of Slavín should be emphasised in such a way that it should compete with Bratislava Castle in the city's silhouette.¹⁵ The conclusions of the Soviets, represented by Andrejev, were fully accepted and ideologically they were also used as a basis for the following competitions, or rather the author's collective under Svetlík's leadership was also based on these requirements. This was also pointed out by Danay, who identified the dominance of optimism over the expression of the cemetery as a positive aspect of the project:

¹² SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Slavín – sprievodná správa, p. 5–6.

¹³ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957, c. 55, no. 117, Slavín – accompanying report, p. 1–2.

¹⁴ The first name is not given and we cannot unambiguously identify the surname with a specific person.

¹⁵ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Správa k úvodnému projektu Pamätníka Sovietskej armády na Slavíne v Bratislave, p. 1–2.

“The interplay of the ideological impact, the decisive victory of the Soviet army is correctly balanced and well expressed to highlight the heroism, sacrifice and piety of the fallen members of the Soviet army. This is achieved mainly by the strict ordinality (wasplishness) of the basic composition, culminating in a slender vertical. This motif of the slender vertical is well applied in the silhouette of the city and, precisely because of its slenderness, it is not a competing, but a complementary element of the massive mass of the castle to this silhouette. The overall Memorial, becoming in this way a distinctive and balanced part of the image of the city from both near and distant views, would correctly express the given Idea theme and would thus fulfil its ideological mission.”¹⁶

However, the appearance of Slavín continued to be modified. Compared to the original design, the central architecture of the memorial with the ceremonial hall is taller, the overall effect is more subtle and, regardless of the ideological background of the modifications, the final version of the memorial is, in our opinion, more striking, more balanced to its surroundings and definitely more representative. The Idea Board and the Commission commented on the final edit not as a change to the design, but as a gradation and addition to the design.¹⁷

In addition to its appearance, the name of the memorial has also adapted over time. Alexandra Kusá pointed out that until now it has had six official names – the Red Army Memorial, the Memorial to the Fallen Soviet Soldiers, the Memorial to Soviet Heroes on Slavín, the Memorial to Soviet Heroes, the Memorial to the Fallen Heroes of the Second World War and the Slavín National Cultural Monument.¹⁸ Fluctuations in the name were already visible in individual architectural and artistic competitions, where the extended name Memorial to Soviet Heroes on Slavín in Bratislava was also used.

The narrative of the monument

As far as the artistic representation is concerned, the individual statues or reliefs were not part of Svetlík's design and therefore neither the commission nor the Idea Board commented on them. The works and their placement, or the definition of their general theme, existed in the design under consideration, but their authors and final form were decided only afterwards in competitions. This, in effect, brought together members of previously competing author teams. Their works, like the overall design of the memorial, were subject to strict scrutiny by representatives of the city, the KSS, and the ideological committee. We know from archival materials that regular visits were made to the

¹⁶ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957 c. 55, no. 117, Správa k úvodnému projektu Pamätníka Sovietskej armády na Slavíne v Bratislave, p. 3.

¹⁷ SNA, f. Zbor povereníkov – Úrad predsedníctva Zboru povereníkov, sign. Sekretariát, 1957, c. 55, no. 117, Zpráva o schválení úvodného projektu na Pamätník Sovietskej armády na Slavíne v Bratislave, p. 2.

¹⁸ Kusá 2018: 71.

individual artists' studios, their creative activities were interfered with, and they had to inform the artists in advance of their every move.

As we have already mentioned above, a monument can very clearly communicate the story it carries to perceptive visitors. At the main entrance to the memorial grounds, the visitor is greeted by a figural granite relief on the front wall of the main staircase by Ladislav Snopek, *Oath on the Battle Flag*, with the text Eternal Glory to the Heroes Who Fell in the Struggle for the Freedom and Independence of Our *Fatherland* on the right side and the same text in Cyrillic on the left side. The grand narrative that Slavín carries thus begins with a reminder of the (romanticised) courage of the Soviets to join an army which, by subsequent development, would become a victorious and (domestically) celebrated army. Snopek's relief depicts two pairs of hulking, somewhat stocky, figures of soldiers in measuring stances, framing the main motif of the oath on the battle flag.¹⁹ Martin Krno likens this entry to the Athenian Propylaea.²⁰ In our opinion, it is indeed a kind of a triumphal gate, but the manner of treatment is definitely based on socialist realism and not on the ancient model, even though it may remotely resemble it. Along the way, first by a two-armed, later by a single-armed staircase, the visitor can see the military bunkers from the First World War on the sides.

The staircase leads the visitor to a platform, at the beginning of which two bronze statues (two pairs of girls or young women) with a lilac and a ribbon called the *Thanksgiving Sculpture* by Jozef Kostka are placed. The right pair holds out their hands with a ribbon announcing that they have wreathed the heroes with wreaths. The left pair greets the hero-liberators with a lilac wreath.²¹ The statues of the girls interact with the viewer and their gaze and attitude lead to the centre of the grounds and thus to the ceremonial hall.²²

The graves of Soviet soldiers are placed on the sides of the platform. The graves follow the main story of the memorial, which begins with a relief and thus after the oath, or after joining the army, the soldiers fought and died heroically in battles, in this case, for the liberation of Bratislava. Above the graves towers rises the dominant feature of the entire memorial, which is the ceremonial or ceremonial hall terminated by a high 39,5 metre pylon, on top of which stands a dominant bronze statue. The original plan

¹⁹ According to Ivan Gerát, the left pair "catches the eye with strange blouses, protruding from the body. The curious who peers under them will find that the master has taken a sculptural delight in hard breasts of appropriate size, covered with a tight drapery. The visitor, lost in gloomy thoughts, is subtly reminded by the master that there are other sides to life." GERÁT 2002: 17.

²⁰ KRNO 2021.

²¹ GERÁT 2002: 17.

²² These sculptures are the only sculptural representation of the female gender on the memorial. No adult women are featured and their role in the overall narrative of the memorial is merely incidental. They "only" thank the soldiers for their heroism, sacrifice, or liberation. However, they did not actively contribute to anything memorable, as emphasised by the lilac with which they welcomed the Soviets in the spring of 1945, as it was in bloom at that time and is overall a popular motif placed on statues of this type. In the context of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which promoted equality between men and women not only in the social but also in the legal sphere, the memorial is deficient in this respect. Women soldiers were also killed in the fighting, and within the tombstones some of them are found with their photograph, name and surname and the year (or full date) of their death.

for the memorial did not envisage such a high pylon and the overall design was more robust than the final version. The conceptual committee insisted on raising the pylon, mainly because of the urban or visual dominance of the memorial. Ivan Gerát adds that it was not just about optics. “In the history of European culture, the vertical has acquired a quite obvious symbolic meaning, given by its pointing towards the sky. The pylon on Slavín also symbolises the overcoming of death, and its meaning is specified by the sculpture on top of it.”²³

As we have already indicated, the pylon is topped by the bronze statue of the *Victorious Soldier* (in archive documents it was called Victory) by Alexander Trizuljak. It was Trizuljak who was under the greatest scrutiny of the CPSU judges, or the Ideological Council. His studio was regularly visited, and the model of the statue was modified several times, especially various details (e.g. the drapery of the cloak or the flag). The victorious soldier stands on a broken swastika, which, although clearly symbolising the victory over Nazism, is invisible to the observer and negligible in the context of the heroic story conveyed. What is clearly visible, however, is the oversized fluttering flag being raised by a Soviet soldier in a very tense body position. His gaze is directed upwards “towards a brighter tomorrow”. It is not entirely clear from the position of the soldier’s body whether the sculpture depicts the act of driving the shaft into the ground or just the subsequent pose of the victor with his arm outstretched, which seems to call out for the visitors’ gaze. The soldier certainly presents optimism from the Soviet point of view, because he is raising a flag on a territory that, at the time of the monument’s construction, was already under Soviet patronage. Also considering the historical context of the period of communist totalitarianism, the time in which the monument was erected, we believe that the soldier, from the perspective of Czechoslovak history, represents the occupier rather than the liberator. In this context, the dominance of the monument does not look very optimistic.²⁴

The entrance gate (door), composed of eight reliefs, to the ceremonial hall is the work of Rudolf Pribiš, which was intended to commemorate the cruelty of the Nazis and the struggle against it waged by the Soviet army. At first glance, the relief’s massive doors look spectacular, but on closer examination, the viewer is literally taken aback by some of the scenes – such as the soldier on the phone. The individual reliefs do not communicate with each other, each of them, although reminiscent of the violence and hardships of war, do not form a single story. The door frame is filled with a short (hardly legible) verse by Štefan Žáry: “Thou who dost come in here / take away sorrow and pity,

²³ GERÁT 2002: 17.

²⁴ Trizuljak spoke about the inspiration provided by the statue of an angel in the Castle of the Angels in Rome in connection with the statue of the soldier. As Gerát writes, “Trizuljak’s sculpture is unquestionably a great artistic and technical feat. However, the master was limited by the commission. That is why the ‘angel’, which still dominates the optical space above Bratislava, far surpasses its Roman predecessor in its modern armament. For without it, he could not have prevailed in his earthly struggle.” GERÁT 2002: 17. Of course, the Angel itself would have been at odds with the atheism promoted as part of the Sovietisation of Czechoslovak society, and it certainly could not have spread its protective wings over thousands of dead Red Army soldiers.

let not the beads of thy tears / ring and the mounds for the pride of man / for the life of mankind, for thy bright face we have suffered death.”²⁵ The inscription thus exhorts the visitor as to how he should behave in the ceremonial hall, and at the same time the last verse refers to the suffering depicted by the various reliefs.

The interior of the hall is the work of two artists – *the walls with marble inlay* are the work of Juraj Krén and the *ceiling* was created by Dezider Castiglione. On the ceiling there is a stained-glass window with a red star in the middle on a white and blue background.

The entrance to the ceremonial hall is surrounded by a colonnade. On the sides of the staircase leading to the hall are the bronze sculptures *Above the Grave of Comrades* by Tibor Bártfay and *After the Fight* by Ján Kulich. Both sculptures carry pathos and sentiment,²⁶ the difficult life experience of the fighters is accompanied by young boys who seem to balance the omnipresent death with youthful vitality. At the centre of Kulich's sculpture is a wounded (dying) soldier, supported on one side by a fellow soldier, on the other by a young boy. The figures of the sculpture communicate with each other in a strange way – the face of the dying soldier is looking up to the sky (deathly ecstasy), the young boy is looking at him with interest, but as if without adequate emotion (neither sadness nor fear is present), the healthy soldier is looking into the celestial distance. Bártfay, on the other hand, portrayed sadness over the grave. Again, it is a three-figure sculpture, two soldiers and a young boy, weeping while standing on the chest of the condoling soldier over the grave. The emotion of both the boy and the condoling soldier is well read, and one can feel the sadness from both figures. The helmeted soldier, though standing close to both figures, seems distant in his mind in his visions of a beautiful socialist future in peace. However, it should be stressed here that Bártfay's sculpture was a pendant of Kulich's, and he had to adapt the expression of the faces and the attitude of the figures to Kulich's sculpture in the course of his work.²⁷ These two sculptures end the second part of the supporting story, i.e. the cruelty of the battles, while the ceremonial hall with the Victorious Soldier already carries the above-mentioned (and required by the Ideological Council) optimism, or rather the joy of victory.

Slavín was officially handed over to the public on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava on 4 April 1960. Its creators were awarded the title of laureate of the Klement Gottwald State Prize. A year later Slavín became a national cultural monument, which it still is today.

The main idea of liberation in grace and in the present

The culture and maturity of any nation is dependent on the degree of knowledge of its own history, or the ability to look critically at past events and thus avoid in the future

²⁵ HAJDIN et al. 1975, unnumbered page with detail of the relief.

²⁶ GERÁT 2002: 17.

²⁷ SNA, f. Slovenský fond výtvarných umení, II. 2.1.1 Akcie sochárska tvorba č. 50/56. Zápisnica č. 52, p. 1.

not the repetition of history, but primarily cultural and ideological struggles that can lead to situations that are fundamentally reminiscent of the past.

The period of the Second World War and the subsequent communist putsch in February 1948 are two reference points in (Czech)Slovak history that directly influence the position of Slavín in the historical memory of contemporary Slovakia. Just briefly, we would like to mention that the post-war period did not only bring issues related to liberation and the rejection of the Nazi regime; the domestic People's regime, which was definitely not rejected by the entire Slovak society, was also at the forefront. Opposite to it stood the Slovak National Council, as the holder, initially, of all legislative, executive and governmental power in Slovakia with original authority.²⁸ Society was also divided in its views on retributive trials, especially with the leading representatives of the wartime Slovak state, dominated by the trial of Jozef Tiso. During the war years Bratislava lived in the imagination of the population a peaceful life in abundance²⁹ and this peace was disturbed only by the battles for the liberation of Bratislava in the spring of 1945, which Slavín is supposed to commemorate. Bratislava did not live through the uprising, like the central or eastern Slovak cities, but it was the Slovak capital and therefore, for ideological reasons, it simply had to carry the main idea of the heroic liberation of the city by the Soviet army. Ideologically, therefore, it had to become the epicentre of the resistance, even though historically it was hundreds of kilometres away from the uprising. The size and location of the memorial were meant to somehow "make up" for the hardships of the historical events, and in its essence Slavín was to at least catch up with, if not surpass, the memorials to Soviet heroes in the epicentres of the uprising. In the final analysis, from the point of view of historical memory, this is no transgression.³⁰ For historical memory, it is the simplistic illusion of the victory of good over evil that is most appealing, and this is the illusion that Slavín unreservedly and magnificently carries to this day. Of course, all of this took place in the context of current events; as Émile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs and Peter Burke point out, both memory and history are still subject to the influence of social groups.³¹ In these, there is a parallel world in which decisions are made about what is important and memorable, and what is preferable to be printed and forgotten. As we noted in the first section, Slavín was constructed as a site of memory, with a strong ideological legacy, whose narrative continues to have its direct followers in the present day. Of course, the totalitarian regime cannot be faulted for a building that serves the values of totalitarianism, but it is worth considering whether an identical and unchanged building can serve the values of democracy and the rule of law.

²⁸ According to the Regulation of the National Council of the Slovak Republic No. 1/1944 Coll. n. SNC.

²⁹ The above is of course a one-sided view, not taking into account Jews, anti-fascists, communists. It is definitely a distorted image, but it is also largely adopted by history textbooks, i.e. it is part of the Historic memory of Slovakia. See KOVÁČ 2017: 6.

³⁰ Its role is not primarily to reflect reality. Historical memory has a social, socialising (in the sense of identity to the nation), cultural, symbolic and psychological function VAŠÍČEK–MAYER 2008: 148.

³¹ See HALBWACHS 2010: 50–92.

Bending history

From an ideological point of view, Slavín is very much an interpretive game, better said a trap. If its visitor today cannot read all its nuances, does not know all the historical events and the ideological-philosophical background, it is easy to fall into this trap. While we agree that historical memory and even its bearers do not have to tell the real story of history, we feel that there is a difference between generalisation and generalisation, where for example Slavín commemorates only the sacrifices and victories of the Soviet army in the struggle for liberation with a strong value message, and between fabrications and hyperbolisation, which are especially visible in the number of the fallen and the overall message of the memorial. We are aware that the value framework and view of past events is usually determined by the Revolution. Slavín served the communist garrison unconditionally well from its inception until the Velvet Revolution, but after that its role should have been reassessed and, in our opinion, its appearance and position in law, culture and society should have been adjusted accordingly – in simple terms, what suited and slavishly served a totalitarian regime cannot and must not suit a democracy in terms of values.

As we mentioned in the introduction, the author of the official booklet on Bratislava also fell into the interpretive trap of Slavín, where he mentions that 6,845 soldiers of the Soviet army who died in the battles for the liberation of Bratislava are buried on the memorial. Nowadays, of course, we have the information that “only” 742 soldiers of the Soviet army actually died in this battle, but this was not commonly mentioned in publications from before 1989,³² although we also find publications that mention in the notes that these were the fallen from Bratislava and from western Slovakia.³³ It is therefore quite clear that the Slavín was and is meant to hyperbolise the liberation of Bratislava, and the number of those buried was meant to demonstrate the magnificence of the event. However, we learn from archival documents that it was not only exhumed remains from the wider Bratislava area that were taken to Slavín, but also the burial of Slovak communists who had not fallen in the struggle for liberation was considered. However, we only find reports requesting their burial, but we do not know the outcome.³⁴ We have already suggested that we see the connection mainly in the ideological “alignment” of the influence and role of the Soviet army between Bratislava and central and eastern Slovakia.

According to Michaela Ferancová, monuments or memorials are material carriers and disseminators of public or political representation.³⁵ Although she does not work with Slavín herself, the idea of manipulating the national narrative is also key in the issue we are examining. The national narrative of Slavín is closely linked to collective forgetting, which is equivalent to historical memory – it can purge it of unnecessary details that

³² For instance see HAJDÍN et al. 1975: 11.

³³ For instance see HOZÁK et al. 1975.

³⁴ SNA, f. Povereníctva vnútra. Vojnové hroby. Sign. Kraj: Bratislava. Úpravy cintorínov a pomníkov, k. 23.

³⁵ FERANCOVÁ 2009: 336–337.

impair the clarity of the supporting idea or event (forgetting from below), but at the same time it can be deliberately used by a regime (totalitarian, but also democratic) as a tool of manipulation (forgetting from above). As far as the liberation of the territory of Slovakia is concerned, forgetting has been indoctrinated from above in the past. After 1948, the uprising was “cleansed” of its civic initiative or the role of the government in exile in London, and only its communist component, closely linked to the Soviets, played a role. However, Slavín is not only a monument to forgetting in the sense that it does not refer to the civic or non-communist part of the resistance (e.g. the Bulgarian antifascists from among the university students in Bratislava), but also works with the falsification of history. It was not possible to apply the heroic story of the insurgent battles in Bratislava, but it was possible to invent a story of national gratitude for the liberation, which was to equal the insurgency and the partisan battles in historical memory (at least for the people of Bratislava) with its material carrier – the monument. Nowadays, in our opinion, at least the professional public should be concerned that the ideology of the past regime should not dominate the city and, on the contrary, should insist on an objectively told story from history. Possible solutions will be discussed in the last section.

The banality of evil

According to Hannah Arendt, the banality of the evil lay mainly in Eichmann’s role in the whole Nazi death machine, where, in his own words, he acted as a rank and file official who merely followed orders from above. The Holocaust thus marginalised unsuspecting officials who returned daily from work to their families for bureaucratic work. They harmed no one, took no one’s life. Eichmann’s defence was also quite believable, thanks to his ordinary appearance, enhanced by the great distance in time from the events of the indictment and also by his post-war, quite ordinary, life in Argentina.³⁶ In the context of the memorial, the banality of evil is anchored in its ideological baggage, or rather in the propaganda of which it is (still) the vehicle. Slavín is a mirror of its time. Also in relation to the aforementioned ideological conception of the memorial, it must be emphasised that the memorial is an artistic representation of the legal and political relationship between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. We have already mentioned the preamble to the Constitution of 9 May, but the preamble (Declaration) in the 1960 Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic certainly cannot be omitted 1960.³⁷

³⁶ See ARENDTOVÁ 2016.

³⁷ “Socialism has won in our homeland! We have entered a new period in our history and we are determined to move on to new, even higher goals. Completing socialist construction, we are moving on to building an advanced socialist society and gathering strength for the transition to communism. On this road we shall go forward hand in hand with our great ally, the fraternal Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and with all the other friendly countries of the world socialist system, of which our Republic is a firm link.”

In our opinion, it is the banality of evil that is the correct theory to apply to Slavín. We can clearly and distinctly identify its propaganda role before 1989. Thus, since its construction and inauguration, Slavín has not lived the life of a place of remembrance, quite the opposite. Maria Orišková speaks of the organisation of such events as building a work against the backdrop of “socialist reality” (which contradicts everyday reality); the discourse of power had to be inscribed in every work³⁸ and at the same time (fictionally) embedded in the reality of life under the totalitarian state. After 1989, the memorial remained in a kind of intermezzo. It remained a national cultural monument and continued to welcome guests as a landmark of Bratislava, and wreaths continued to be laid on it by domestic and foreign political representation. The only changes that occurred were those brought about automatically by the regime change. Although the period of oaths ended, on the other hand, the right to assemble brought various demonstrations, meetings of controversial or political groups to Slavín. The fact that Slavín is first and foremost a large cemetery and only secondarily a memorial continues to be forgotten.

At the moment, Slavín is polarising society, but not only because of the controversy it carries from the past. Leading figures from the ranks of architects, art historians and conservationists are trying to preserve it in its current form (both factual and legal), but in the context of the military aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, they fought for the “shutdown” of Slavín, because, for example, according to Maja Štefančíková, it was a cheaper solution than to have it lit up in Ukrainian colours.³⁹ Bratislava Mayor Matúš Vallo, on the other hand, advocated, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine (on 24 February 2023), to illuminate the city's landmarks in blue-yellow colours.⁴⁰ In addition to the propaganda background of Slavín, Štefančíková argued, for example, that the renovation of the lighting of Slavín was financed in 2014 by the Russian Federation, through its embassy in the Slovak Republic. The public appeal to the mayor was also signed by many others from the ranks of art historians, academics, and preservationists.⁴¹ This appeal, where the initiators described Trizuljak's *Victory Soldier* as a “schizophrenic beacon of the fight for freedom”, was opposed, for example, by the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters or the Club of Artists, Writers and Historians. The negative opinions of both associations are based on the claim that Slavín is primarily a cemetery and a national cultural monument, and that shutting it down, even for just one night, would dehumanise the buried soldiers as well as the artists who created it. The mayor finally decided to dress the Slavín in blue and yellow on the anniversary.⁴²

Our role is not to decide which solution we think is the best. We consider the public debates in the context of the war in Ukraine to be a very appropriate and very timely case study that can give us a picture of the Slavín as an object that trivialises evil. In the context of this, we have identified two fundamental problems:

³⁸ ORIŠKOVÁ 2002: 115.

³⁹ KRČMÁRIK 2023.

⁴⁰ TASR 2023.

⁴¹ KRČMÁRIK 2023.

⁴² KRNO 2023.

1. *Propaganda crypt* – The Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters and many other disinformation media channels feed idealised information in connection with Slavín, which is generally intended to give the impression that the memorial as such has nothing to do with the military aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine. They reject the thesis that the Russian Federation, through its embassies, is paying for the reconstruction of war memorials dedicated to the heroes of the former Soviet Union for the sake of spreading and stabilising the so-called Russian worldview. In opinion, they draw a rough line between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union, or between the soldiers of the Soviet army and the soldiers currently fighting for the Russian or Ukrainian side in the war conflict. On the one hand, they call for peace, on the other hand, they talk about the fact that military aid to Ukraine delays peace, and they do not comment at all on the aggressor – Russia.⁴³

Despite the fact that the Russian Federation, like other states, is only a successor state of the USSR, i.e. *de jure* it is not an identical state, *de facto* it visibly identifies itself with the Soviet Union. This is evidenced, among other things, by the amendment to the Russian Criminal Code in April 2020 – Article 353(1) defines the offence of desecration of symbols of Russia's military glory, which makes it possible to prosecute offenders who damage war memorials of Russia or the Soviet Union, not only at home but also abroad (sic!). The introduction of this criminal offence was a direct reaction of the Russian Federation to the debate on the removal of the monument to Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev in Prague to the city's depository.⁴⁴ Apart from the fact that the current Russian political establishment clearly identifies itself with the Soviet Union, the passive-aggressiveness on the part of Russia is very clear. The jurisdiction of each state extends only to its own borders, while the sovereignty of foreign states cannot be interfered with in its own right. The Russians have so willingly, outside the framework of legal principles, unleashed a diplomatic conflict over a statue of a Soviet general, using a very expansive interpretation, because it is very difficult to equate the placing of a statue in a depository with the notion of 'desecration' or "defacement". However, if the debate were to be conducted in terms of the defamation of propaganda, there would probably be a conflict even with the removal of the statue to the city's depository. The statue of Marshal Konev is not a national cultural monument in the Czech Republic and was certainly not a landmark in Prague, yet it managed to provoke a change in the Criminal Code in Russia. It is therefore quite clear that contemporary Russia is very concerned about maintaining the "propaganda shelters" of the Soviet Union, because they directly identify with them and regard them as their own. The memorials in which the Russian Federation invests financial resources clearly cannot be separated from its official policy, not excluding the war. This is confirmed by the meetings of various pro-Russian groups on Slavín today (see below).

⁴³ See: Status [online] *Vyhlasenie SZPB k výročiu vojny na Ukrajine*. [cit. 2024-1-4]. Available at: <https://bojovnik.info/2022/02/25/vyhlasenie-szpb-k-aktualnej-situacii-na-ukrajine/>; *Zem & vek*, 2023.

⁴⁴ On this topic see ČT 24 2020a; ČT 24 2020b.

2. *The monument still cries out for attention* – Another often bent argument is the status of Slavín as both a national cultural monument and a cemetery. Thus, once again, we seem to be arriving at a decoupling of distinctive features, with this deconstruction leading to their marginalisation. Slavín cannot be seen as a magnificent architectural and artistic work of a few artists or as a huge cemetery where the fallen heroes deserve a quiet final resting place. The separation of the layers of Slavín took place in particular in connection with its painting in blue and yellow by an unknown activist (perpetrator) on 3 March 2022,⁴⁵ i.e. just a few days after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Regardless of the legal qualification of the act, it is clearly a form of civil disobedience with which we may or may not identify. Equally inconsistent were the statements made by the representatives of Bratislava and the state. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic reacted in a conciliatory manner,⁴⁶ Matúš Vallo took a more critical stance and described the painting of Slavín as a dishonouring of a place of remembrance and a national cultural monument, stressing that the fallen soldiers were not to blame for the current Russian aggression.⁴⁷ The mayor of Bratislava thus found himself on the same side of the argument with pro-Russian activists and disinformationists. Slavín was primarily a place of remembrance for at most a year after the first fallen soldiers were buried. Each of the competitions announced for the memorial was aimed not at showing respect for the buried, but at the glory of the Soviet Union. The memorial that eventually bears that glory did not change its narrative just because of the regime change after the Velvet Revolution. The victorious soldier still raises the Soviet flag in the heart of Bratislava, and nothing will change that, not even rhetoric that will divert attention to the graves or to the monument's status as a national cultural monument. Civil disobedience is a phenomenon that is not directly regulated or defined by law, but it is an adequate tool for expressing dissatisfaction with current social events.⁴⁸ In our opinion, the war in Ukraine and Russia's aggression is an adequate reason for the expression of civil disobedience, and there is no better place in Bratislava

⁴⁵ Pravda–TASR 2022.

⁴⁶ “The colours of the Ukrainian flag on Slavín are a call from the citizens of the Slovak Republic for Russia to put an end to this senseless war. At the same time, we ask the Slovak public to continue to honour and be friendly to Russian citizens committed to democracy and peace.” Pravda–TASR 2022.

⁴⁷ “We have enough other opportunities to give ourselves, Ukrainians and the world images of our support without having to dishonour a place of remembrance and a national cultural monument. None of those who lie on the Slavín are to blame for this war.” Pravda–TASR 2022.

⁴⁸ According to Ronald Dworkin, civil disobedience is a phenomenon that is related to the operation of law and to the so-called law in action (living law). In significant cases of dissent, living law is reflected in legal theory and is seen as an important tool that challenges the law on moral grounds, thereby helping to preserve the principles of liberty, justice and decency. DWORKIN 2001: 261–273. According to John Rawls, civil disobedience is an appeal by an individual to the sense of the majority for the commonly shared principles of social cooperation among free and equal (citizens), which the actor of disobedience considers violated, but the act of civil disobedience itself is also an unlawful act. RAWLS 1995: 202–210. Apart from Dworkin and Rawls, Hannah Arendt and Joseph Raz also consider civil disobedience as a legitimate instrument of expressing disagreement with the events in society; their opinions differ only in the legality of the act, in the punishment or non-punishment of the perpetrator, or in the subject of the perpetrator.

than Slavín. As Alexandra Kusá pointed out, the activist or group of activists did not paint the graves with paint, so respect for the dead was preserved.⁴⁹ She thus very cleverly and cynically used the narrative of separating the layers of the memorial against those who regularly argue against it. The actual staining of the memorial is also not perceived as a desecration of the cemetery, as by such an expansive reading, political protests or Night Wolves rallies could also be seen as such. In practice, however, the aforementioned rallies are certainly not perceived as dishonouring the memory of the fallen. Moreover, the intention of the unknown perpetrator was certainly not to dishonour buried soldiers.

Where are you heading, Slavín?

Slavín is an integral part of Bratislava's image and will remain so as long as the monument remains in place. We do not consider it necessary to think about its demolition or the removal of any of its artistic components, quite the contrary. Slavín is a part of (Czech) Slovak national history, it tells a magnificent story not only of liberation, but especially of the totalitarianism of the Communist Party, which gradually, for over 40 years, permeated the whole of civil society. At a time when fake news, hoaxes and conspiracies set the trends, a place like Slavín, embodying the imprint of history in the urbanism of the city, offers its space to various groups, politicians and disruptors to convey their own worldviews. In the last part of the article, we will reflect on the possibilities that Slavín offers, taking into account the full colour of its "character" features.

Untouchable Slavín – lack of possibility or lack of will?

We have mentioned above that to separate and judge the features of Slavín separately may lead us to a wrong conclusion. In this section, we will consider the legal regulation of the monument and what is happening at the monument. We will look at Slavín on three levels: 1. cemetery, 2. national cultural monument, and 3. public space.

1. Cemetery – Slavín is covered by Act No. 130/2005 Coll. on War Graves. According to paragraph 3, the responsibility for the care of war graves lies with the municipality, in this case the City of Bratislava (which is also the owner), namely the Department of Culture. Marianum, the City's Funeral Home is responsible for the management. Act No. 131/2010 Coll. on Burial according to paragraph 18 requires the operating regulations of the burial ground, which are approved by a generally binding regulation – however, Slavín does not have any operating regulations. From our point of view, point d) of the quoted provision is the most important, because the operating regulations are to define, among other things, the obligations of visitors to the burial ground and preserving the

⁴⁹ GETTING 2022.

dignity of the place, as well as the manner and rules for the use of the burial ground facilities and ceremonial halls, if such regulation is necessary. The Burial Act states that the burial ground itself should be of a commemorative character and also sets out the visitors' obligations in Section 25. This is a general formulation – the visitor is obliged to observe the operating rules of the burial ground or to preserve its dignity. In case of violation, he commits an offence under Section 32 (1) h), i). The War Graves Act does not specifically regulate the obligations of the visitor, but rather vaguely regulates the municipality's duty of care. Under Section 3 (2), a), the municipality is to ensure that no object or device incompatible with respect for the place is placed in the immediate vicinity of a war grave.

2. *National cultural monument* – Slavín was built for the purpose of magnificence, it was destined to become a national cultural monument and literally to be “concreted” for eternity not only in the urban planning of the city, but also in the historical memory of Slovaks, virtually the inhabitants of Bratislava. It became a National Cultural Monument in 1961, a year after its ceremonial handover to the public, as Ivan Gerát aptly remarked: “the work thus ranked among the most important documents of the past even before it reached the age of a kindergartener.”⁵⁰ Slavín as a cultural monument thus falls under the protection of Act No. 49/2002 Coll. on the Protection of the Monument Fund. We will not go into the complex processes of the possibility of revoking the declaration of a cultural monument, as we consider this utopian in relation to Slavín, and also the processes of repair and renovation. We are primarily interested in the established system of monument protection in relation not to the material, but to the value it carries. According to the above-mentioned law, heritage value is legally defined in Section 2 (2) as “the totality of significant historical, social, landscape, urban, architectural, scientific, technical, artistic or artistic-craft values for which things may be subject to individual or territorial protection.”⁵¹ However, Slavín was classified as a national cultural monument under Act No. 22/1958 Coll. on Cultural Monuments. This Act defined a monument in Article 2(1) as “a cultural asset which is evidence of the historical development of society, its art, technology, science and other branches of human work and life, or is a preserved historical environment of housing estates and architectural ensembles, or a thing which has a relationship to significant persons and events of history and culture”, and national cultural monuments in Article 3 as “monuments which form the most significant part of the cultural wealth of the nation”. The legal continuity of the management of Slavín as a national cultural monument is, of course, ensured by the final provisions of the more recent legislation. However, legal status does not automatically imply continuity in value perception. An idea of the perception of culture and monuments is offered, for example, by the transcripts of the Slovak National Council meeting, where it was stated, for example, “in the field of culture, education and promotion, the educational activity has been deepened by increasing the ideological effectiveness. Political education was appropriately

⁵⁰ GERÁT 2002: 17.

⁵¹ Section 2 (2) of Act No. 49/2002 Coll. on the Protection of the Monument Fund.

combined with economic propaganda. [...] The Slovak National Council's Commission for Education and Culture will, in cooperation with the national authorities and national committees, help to create favourable conditions for the completion of the cultural revolution."⁵² or "the monuments and material documents in our museums bear witness to the revolutionary traditions of our country and its millennial culture, they bear witness to the union that links the past with the present and indicate the lawful path of history into the future towards communism."⁵³ Slavín's prominence as a national cultural monument is almost exclusively linked to its ideological legacy carrying the ideas of socialist revolution and the rebuilding of society in the spirit of fraternal coexistence with the Soviets. Since the character and appearance of the monument has not changed in any significant way to this day, we cannot assume that its value character has changed simply because of a change in legislation or because of a change in regime. The communists, at the time of its declaration as a national cultural monument, obviously did not consider that it would become a crypt of communist ideology and propaganda in the 21st century, in a period when the Slovak Republic subscribes to the values of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and is part of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. The fact remains, however, that it has become one.

The current Act on the Protection of the Monument Fund in Section 27 (1) defines the basic protection of a cultural monument, where it explicitly imposes the obligation to maintain the monument in a manner of use that corresponds to its monumental value. In the current situation, politicians, as well as civil society, should reflect on which of the heritage values that Slavín represents is still memorable and which is harmful to society. For the first time in the era of the independence of the Slovak Republic, on the anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava, on 4 April 2023, the Mayor of Bratislava and the President of the Slovak Republic did not lay wreaths at Slavín, but at the *Victory Monument*, by Jozef Kostka, on Hviezdoslav Square, which indicates that (some) political leaders are not ignoring the ideological burden of this cultural monument and are also listening to the citizens.

3. *Public space* – Public space is legally defined in Act No. 582/2004 Coll. on Local Taxes and Local Fee for Municipal Waste and Minor Construction Waste as "publicly accessible land owned by the municipality".⁵⁴ Act No. 369/1990 Coll. on Municipal Government is more specific and defines a public space in Article 2b (1) as "a street, square, park, market place and other space accessible to the public without restriction, which, irrespective of ownership relations, is used for general use".⁵⁵ The law does not explicitly include cemeteries among publicly accessible places, even when enumerating the obligations of the municipal government in Section 4 (3), f), (municipal) cemetery, cultural monument and public open spaces are listed separately. However, Slavín is not a municipal cemetery but a war cemetery, so we can only rely on the analogy here, which is

⁵² See: <https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1960snr/stenprot/008schuz/s008010.htm>

⁵³ See: <https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1960snr/stenprot/006schuz/s006008.htm>

⁵⁴ Section 30 (2) of Act No. 582/2004 Coll.

⁵⁵ Section 2b (1) of Act No. 369/1990 Coll. on Municipal Establishment.

not necessary given its status as a national cultural monument. For us, the important fact is that the legislator distinguishes between a public space and e.g. a cemetery or a cultural monument – this does not exclude the fact that we can also speak of publicly accessible places, but with a special status, which may, for example, imply for the administrator/owner an increased attention to the protection of the rights of a particular place if it comes into conflict with the exercise of other rights, e.g. the right of assembly under Act No. 84/1990 Coll. The right to hold an assembly in a public place is subject to notification and the municipality, according to Article 10, may only cancel an assembly in specific and very specific cases. Slavín has seen several assemblies over the years that (arguably) complied with the wording of the Right of Assembly Act, but the question is whether they were all in keeping with the nature of the memorial as a place of remembrance. In the absence of the Slavín's operating regulations, the regulation of the duties of visitors to the Slavín, or participants in the assembly, is subject only to the general wording of the laws referred to above. However, it is naive to assume that police officers or representatives of the municipality, who may control the conduct of the assembly, would pay special attention to the interpretation of terms such as “preserving the dignity of the place of remembrance” or monitor the use of “things and devices that are incompatible with respect for the place”. In our opinion, any gathering that has a political background or is political in nature (and it does not matter from which spectrum of opinion the participants are) is incompatible with respect for a place of remembrance, and its accompanying phenomena (noise, litter, drinking alcohol, disruption) certainly cannot be understood as maintaining the dignity and respect for the cemetery. The Right of Assembly Act itself, in Section 10 (1), a), directs a municipality to prohibit an assembly which serves to stir up hatred and intolerance for political or other reasons. Slavín has for years suffered from the stigma of glorification or damnation and has indeed polarised society since the war in Ukraine. An example of a rally that was decidedly contrary to the above was the commemoration of the end of the Second World War on 9 May 2023. Among other politicians, the rally was addressed by Ľuboš Blaha, who, to boisterous gesticulation, declared: “always in our history, war and fascism have come from the West, and freedom and peace from the East! Let us thank all the peoples of the Soviet Union, but above all the Russian people, for bringing us peace, for bringing us freedom. Spasiba, Russia!”⁵⁶ He concluded by saying that the Russian people suffered the most in World War II. Of course, he deliberately omitted the fact that, for example, Bratislava was liberated by the 2nd Ukrainian Front of the Red Army, headed by Marshal Rodion J. Malinovsky, or he also omitted the more than 40-year period of Czechoslovak non-freedom under the Soviet Union. It is also impossible not to point out that the anniversary was commemorated not on a public holiday in the Slovak Republic (8 May – Victory over Fascism Day), but on a day that was celebrated before the Velvet Revolution, or still is today, for example in Russia. In connection with the above, we are of the opinion that commemorative rallies in connection with the laying of wreaths on the anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava, or the victory over fascism,

⁵⁶ Speech by Ľuboš Blaha starting at 50:27 minutes. Zrtv 2023.

are also not appropriate under the current conditions. They undermine the dignity of the burial site and the respect for the buried, and they certainly do not bring peace to the public debate on the war in Ukraine and on Slavín. However, we generally consider gatherings that are intended to pay tribute to the buried to be unproblematic in relation to Slavín; it is more of a temporary indisposition.

Based on the above, we believe that the administrator perceives Slavín in the first place as a public space accessible to all without restrictions, in the matter of protection it is considered a national cultural monument. The fact that Slavín is also a huge burial ground is declared and reminded by the city representatives (e.g. the aforementioned statement of Matúš Vallo), but it is not legally protected for this purpose. Thus, the official line from before 1989 continues, when Slavín also had the status of a “showcase” of communists and Soviets, accessible to the public, celebrating the victory of the Soviets without any historical context. We only briefly mention that the operating regulations of Slavín could, for example, regulate what kind of (political) gatherings undermine the commemorative character of the site, or could regulate the behaviour of visitors, which would of course also apply to situations where other kinds of gatherings are also held on Slavín.

The place of Slavín in contemporary Bratislava

According to Siegfried Giedion, “every age has an incentive to create symbols in the form of monuments, which, according to the Latin meaning, are objects that commemorate something, objects to be passed on to the next generation. This need for monumentality cannot be suppressed in the long run. It will find a place at any price.”⁵⁷ For this reason, Slavín was, is and should remain one of the landmarks of the Slovak capital in the future. Time will remove the ideological overlay of the monument, and ultimately this may be helped by a change in the quality of the monument.

If we wanted to draw a parallel through another dominant landmark of the city, we could reach for Bratislava Castle. The foundations of the building date back to the period of Great Moravia, it has undergone many reconstructions, the last significant one was the Theresian one. The castle is a symbol of noble settlement, feudalism and legal particularism. None of this belongs to the value framework of democracy and the rule of law, yet we do not consider the castle or other monuments from the monarchy to be controversial, ideologically inappropriate, or divisive of society, and they certainly do not evoke negative connotations in us (quite the contrary, in fact). We perceive them neutrally, as a part of history, as architectural pride from times past. However, the transition from monarchy to democratic republic after 1918 was different from the transition from totalitarianism to democracy after 1989. The newly established Czechoslovak state gradually removed all legal relics of feudalism and monarchy, and part of the rebirth of

⁵⁷ YOUNG 2004: 277.

society was the removal of symbols and monuments commemorating past times. The Velvet Revolution was indeed more gentle than revolutionary in the legal sense of the word. Totalitarianism was indeed removed from the constitutional system, but there was no punitive coming to terms with the past.⁵⁸ No representative of the political establishment was held legally responsible for the crimes of communism. At the same time, the revolution brought about the return of the People's Party's descendants, who until then had been insignificantly active either abroad or in the Catholic silent dissent in Slovakia. The economic problems, the inability to grasp capitalism and democracy in the 1990s, contributed to the fact that the theme of a quietly surviving totalitarian ideology, and thus the theme of the memorialists as its main carriers and narrators, went into the background. There are opinions that say that if the monument was not destroyed by the revolutionary crowd, or if it survived the revolution, there is no reason why an established democratic society should demolish or move it. In our view, it does not matter at all that "revolutionary acts" can be exculpated after the fact, precisely because of their revolutionary nature, even though they were illegal. We are of the opinion that the Republic as a public matter, best expressed by the slogan "vox populi, vox dei", can decide on the basis of the voice of the people to change or remove anything, even a monument, even if it officially has the status of a national cultural monument. Public space, by its very name, is for everyone, and who, if not the people, as the sovereign of power in the state, should decide what is and what is not appropriate to be placed in public space, or what should be removed from it.

In our opinion, it would be most appropriate to start from the original ideological conception of the memorial and build on it in the sense that the memorial would continue to acknowledge the official ideological doctrine from the times of people's democracy or socialism, but at the same time the ability of the memorial to offer its space to disinformers and propagandists would be "strangled" by the renewed form. The Capital City Depository has art and sculpture works that are suitable for exterior placement. An excellent example is the statue of Stalin, which was removed from what is now SNP Square in Bratislava in the 1950s and was temporarily placed in front of the entrance to the Slovak National Gallery in 2012, on the occasion of the exhibition *Interrupted Song*. On this occasion, the statue of Stalin was painted red. This act of civil disobedience was roundly condemned by the gallery management as vandalism. The gallery reminded that the 1950s are also part of Slovak history and we must deal with them in our historical memory.⁵⁹ We agree with this view, but at the same time we are aware that it is not possible to build a house from the roof up. Here we would again recall the words of Giedion from the introduction and add that memorials need not only be places that remind us of something, but it can also be a vehicle for purposeful forgetting (in the Czech language there is an apt term "zapomník"). Slovak society has never come

⁵⁸ There have been attempts, of course, for example in the Slovak Republic in the case of Vasil Bilak. The only one convicted for crimes of communism, or for involvement in the judicial murder of Milada Horáková, was Ludmila Polednová-Brožová.

⁵⁹ Ta3 2012.

to terms with the forty-year history of communist totalitarianism, and therefore a statue of Stalin in a public space cannot be expected not to arouse a wave of emotion in activists that translates into a concrete act. Of course, we cannot say for certain that the statue of Stalin would not be doused in red paint again (in fact, we are not even sure that this is a barrier) if it were permanently placed on the Slavín in the future, but we believe that it is definitely worth attempting such a grab for the Slavín. Thus, in addition to its basic and supporting ideological character, it would also commemorate the significance of the revolution, or the sharpening of the class struggle, which, on a global scale, cost millions of human lives. We are of the opinion that commemorating the crimes of the communist regime with statues of exposed domestic or foreign political leaders of the Soviet bloc, with adequate descriptions on the accompanying information boards, would neutralise the current controversial character of the Slavín. At the same time, Slavín would become a more legible place for both domestic and foreign visitors; the original idea of optimism would be transformed into a kind of sobering up from history, leading to a coming to terms with the past. According to James Young, it is the mythicism, the uncritical adoption of ideals or heroism, that is most disturbing. In this context, the words of Martin Broszat, according to whom monuments in relation to history cannot commemorate events, but rather bury them under layers of myths and interpretations, resonate significantly.⁶⁰ Young, admittedly in the context of Nazi art, asks how else can totalitarian regimes commemorate themselves if not through totalitarian art, which is also a monument, or how better to celebrate the fall of totalitarianism than by celebrating the fall of their monuments. The solution is offered precisely by the creation of a narrative in which the monument would actually go against itself, its didactic function replacing the past it was meant to ideologically commemorate and also going against the authoritarian tendency of monumental spaces that reduce visitors to passive spectators.⁶¹ A memorial that also commemorates the crimes of the Soviet liberators could thus contribute to preventing the organisation of rallies by admirers of the communist regime, or of contemporary Russia, which in its ideology is *de facto* identified with the Soviet Union. At the same time, we believe that statues of Stalin or Gottwald (perhaps even of the Czech Konev) would in no way dishonour the memory of the deceased. They would only point to the other side of communist ideology, the face of which the politicians named were also. Surely it would also have been appropriate to at least briefly describe on the information board the atrocities committed by members of the Soviet army, which the historical memory of totalitarianism has forgiven by forgetting, because the heroic narrative could not be distorted by looting, murder or rape by the liberators to whom the nation was supposed to thank unreservedly for its freedom. Ultimately, according to Halbwachs, the memorial is a materialised form of remembrance that is part of a socialising system through which a society acquires a shared history, thanks to the mediated memories

⁶⁰ YOUNG 2004: 279.

⁶¹ YOUNG 2004: 283.

of ancestors.⁶² Thus, if the state is truly interested in the creation and formation of the historical or collective memory of the nation, the form of the Slavín should definitely undergo a modification, both architecturally and legally, so that it can achieve a form that would satisfy art critics, the political establishment, and historical memory alike.

Conclusion

After 1989, Czechoslovakia, as well as the other countries of the Soviet bloc, entered a new era of life – the new geopolitical world order affected all spheres of life of individuals and groups, not excluding art. Many of the works of art, bearing the legacy of communist totalitarianism, disappeared from public spaces. They were either destroyed or moved to depositories or museums. In the Czech Republic, perhaps the most famous case of dealing with a totalitarian monument is the story of tank No. 23 – the Monument to the Liberation of Prague by the Red Army, which was painted pink by David Černý in 1991 and, after it was cleaned up, was repainted the same colour by a group of MPs. The monument was stripped of its monument protection and is now on display in the Military Technical Museum in Lesany. We mention this event mainly in connection with the fact that Slavín also received its colouring, but not in connection with the fall of the regime, but with the war. Of course, the tank on display cannot be compared artistically with a memorial like Slavín, but in terms of values both memorials were in the same line and thus commemorated the liberation of the town by the Soviets. Civil disobedience, in the case of the tank in the form of artistic execution (in the case of Slavín, one does not know), created a strong enough pressure for its removal from the public space. In the case of Slavín, its painting provoked contradictory opinions of both citizens and political leaders. Even the artists' initiative to shut it down once and for all did not penetrate the public discourse. Slavín thus retains a certain *status quo* in spite of everything. We welcome the fact that the anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava was commemorated by the Mayor of Bratislava and the President of the Slovak Republic in 2023 and 2024 at another appropriate location in the city centre, but they have not explained why this day was not commemorated on Slavín, as in previous years. Thus, the tension over the Slavín is visibly present but not communicated to the public.

Nowadays, we can no longer speak of a clash between totalitarianism and democracy; neither the totalitarian past nor a paradigm shift is being rethought. We are faced with the question of what to do with a monument that is a protected monument, but one that has aroused much controversy. Slavín carries the story of the smallness of man and the greatness of socialist history in the centre of the capital. As Young pointed out, nothing looks more absurd than a humiliated monument, stripped of its function, time and place.⁶³ According to Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, it is precisely the manner of

⁶² HALBWACHS 2010: 50–60. See YOUNG 2004: 278.

⁶³ YOUNG 2004: 287.

a certain humiliation, or parody, that is the only way to neutralise monuments burdened with totalitarian ideology and make them places of instruction.⁶⁴

We share the view that memorials need people much more than people need memorials. As we stated in Part Three, the inviolability of Slavín is ephemeral and depends on the society's relationship to it – it is only by the will of society that it is protected, repaired, maintained, powerfully and ideologically abused or destroyed. Time is not merciful in relation to totalitarian monuments. The values and ideals carried by them may, in the present late postmodern era, seem at least ridiculous, wrong, or outdated. This is also true of the architectural and artistic quality of the work – all the more so if it is art beholden to a totalitarian regime in which ideology and propaganda have been elevated above the artistic attributes of the work. Slavín is specific as a monument. We do not consider it ideal to parody the landmark of the capital, but to preserve it in its original form is probably an even worse solution. What Slavín definitely needs to gain is its own memory. A monument of Slavín's proportions cannot be perceived only as a work of art, it must be embedded in the social discourse, it must clearly communicate and adapt its life to the current times and the city in which it lives.

Eastern European art, or rather the legal history and culture of the former Eastern bloc states, bears certain specificities that differ from the Western world. According to Ondriskova, here more than elsewhere in the world, emphasis is placed on clear agreements about historical events that are immutable. She sees such a burden of history, or the trauma of the past, as part of the works of artists as well as historians. History, culture and politics have always been very close to each other in Central Europe⁶⁵ and this relationship has only been reinforced by the two totalitarian regimes. Although the period after the Velvet Revolution brought about a reassessment of history and the removal of totalitarian accretions from historical events or personalities, memorials from the time of socialism were somehow bypassed in this respect. However, the current era has brought new approaches and has not bypassed the world of the former Soviet bloc. The emphasis is on memory and remembering. Myths and grand stories go into the background and are replaced by the stories of (unknown or lesser known) individuals or groups, and facts that totalitarianism has left forgotten are recalled. In this spirit we should also look at Slavín. It can tell the story of great historical events through the lens of the individuals, be they the servicemen and women buried there, the artists who created it, or the politicians who used it as an effective ideological weapon. If Slavín could be anchored in such a form, it could become a modern and dignified place of memory in a neutral form in the heart of the Slovak capital.

⁶⁴ YOUNG 2004: 287–288.

⁶⁵ ORIŠKOVÁ 2002: 175–176.

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