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Monuments and Landmarks in Decolonisation and Decommunization Processes: A Comparison of Romania and Bulgaria with Trinidad & Tobago

Abstract: *In the light of the presence of ongoing debates and discussions on the legacies of colonisation and/or communism, this article presents a comparative desk-based qualitative overview of approaches regarding relevant monuments and landmarks in three selected countries – the Caribbean nation of Trinidad & Tobago, and the two southeastern European nations of Romania and Bulgaria. After giving a succinct summary of the historical aspects and sociocultural composition of the three countries, the study then presents nascent steps which have recently been taken in Trinidad & Tobago to address this aspect of the colonial legacy, including the creation of an officially-designated Cabinet Appointed Committee to Review the Placement of Statues, Monuments, and Signage in the country, as well as an initial public consultation on the matter in August 2024. With the situation in Trinidad & Tobago still at an early stage, the article then uses a range of recently scholarly literature to consider the state of affairs in Bulgaria and Romania. The focus is primarily on the fate of several domestic Communist-era monuments in the years after 1989, thereby providing perspectives on some of the relevant political and societal discussions and debates. Reiterating that this process is still ongoing in Trinidad & Tobago, the article concludes by proffering some brief considerations for further analysis and research on the topic.*

Keywords: *Bulgaria; postcolonial; post-communist; Romania; Trinidad & Tobago.*

Introduction

Recent international debates on the lasting effects of slavery and colonialism have impacted public and political discourses in several Caribbean nations, including the small dual-island republic of Trinidad & Tobago. More than 60 years after its independence from the United Kingdom, discussions on the colonial legacy have consequently received renewed interest, leading the Trinidad & Tobago Government to recently establish an official Cabinet Appointed Committee to Review the Placement of Statues, Monuments, and Signage. With British colo-

nial influence forming a long-standing component of the nation's visual, sociocultural, and linguistic topography, the Committee's task will be considerable. Yet Trinidad & Tobago is not alone in this regard. The majority of countries in Central and Eastern Europe have also undergone similar processes, seeking to evaluate – or remove – the past imprints of imperial and communist ideologies on their nations (e.g., see Jõekalda, 2024). Focusing particularly on the experiences of Bulgaria and Romania as post-imperial and post-communist spaces, this article presents some details relating to the retention or removal of certain statues and monuments. By contrasting them with the present reality in Trinidad & Tobago, it is aimed to provide key comparative insights.

Trinidad & Tobago, Romania, and Bulgaria: Brief remarks on history and monuments

Though the choice of case studies may seem odd, there are indeed – as advanced in the author's recent study (Hoyte-West, 2024) – many similarities between the Caribbean and Central & Eastern Europe. In addition to the mixing of cultures, religions, languages, and societies, both areas have also been heavily impacted by imperial annexation, domination, and – noting that the use of the word remains somewhat contested in the Central & Eastern European context – colonisation (e.g., see Petersen, 2024).

In the case of Trinidad & Tobago, the modern dual-island nation bears witness to the vicissitudes of the pasts few centuries, including its distinctive – and highly diverse – ethnic and religious composition. Previously the home of indigenous Arawak and Carib peoples, after becoming known to Europeans following Columbus's third voyage to the Americas in 1498, Trinidad was a colony initially of Spain (to 1797) followed by Great Britain (1797-1962), receiving *inter alia* European settlers, (including French planters), slaves from Africa and elsewhere in the Caribbean, and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, indentured labourers from India. The much smaller island of Tobago was a possession of various European empires before Britain retained it at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The two islands were unified by the British into a single colony during the latter years of the nineteenth century, and Trinidad & Tobago finally gained its independence in 1962, becoming a full presidential republic in 1976 though remaining a member of the Commonwealth (Watts, Robinson, & Brereton, 2024).

For Romania, from the medieval era onwards the two historic principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were long under Ottoman suzerainty, with Transylvania forming part of Habsburg-ruled Hungary. The unification of the two principalities after 1860 formed the first Romanian unitary state, the borders of which were expanded significantly after World War One with the inclusion of Transylvania, former Habsburg-ruled Bukovina, and former Russian-ruled Bessarabia. Following interwar authoritarianism and alignment with the Axis powers at the beginning of World War Two, Bessarabia and the northern portion of Bukovina were subsequently annexed by the USSR, and the advent of state Communism saw Romania fall under the Soviet realm of influence, albeit not as strongly as some other Warsaw Pact countries. This culminated in the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu from 1965 onwards, which lasted until the fall of the regime and the subsequent execution of him and his wife in December 1989 (Latham et al., 2024).

Previously under Ottoman rule, modern Bulgaria was established in 1878 after a war of independence which was supported by imperial Russian forces. The territory of the nation expanded significantly following the two Balkan Wars in the early twentieth century, with some border changes also occurring after World War Two, where Bulgaria was also aligned to the Axis grouping. Subsequently, as in Romania, the Communists also came to power in Bulgaria, and the nation was also subject to Soviet-inspired ideology for five decades until the official end of the regime in 1990 (Danforth et al., 2024).

Though of course varying widely in geographical location, land area, and population size, the three nations nonetheless share a diversity of languages, ethnicities, and religions. In Trinidad & Tobago, the single official language is English, although Trinidad English Creole is widely spoken on an informal basis, and at one time the islands were once heavily multilingual; in addition, no ethnic group comprises a majority and there are four official religions (Hoyte-West, 2021, p. 237). In both Romania and Bulgaria, though the national ethnicities and languages (Romanian and Bulgarian) and Orthodox Christianity are dominant, there are also significant minority populations speaking other languages (such as Hungarian in Romania and Turkish in Bulgaria) and adhering to other religions or denominations (such as Catholicism or Islam) (see Latham et al., 2024; Danforth et al., 2024, etc.). It should be noted, however, that in terms of the nations analysed in this article, all three countries can be considered as relatively recent establishments,

with the modern Romanian and Bulgarian states dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, and Trinidad & Tobago a product of the Caribbean independence movements of the mid-twentieth century.

Although the length of colonial rule in Trinidad & Tobago and communist rule in Romania and Bulgaria differed significantly in temporal terms (in the latter two countries, it lasted for approximately four-and-a-half decades, whereas the Caribbean nation was colonised for just over four-and-a-half centuries), the far-ranging impact of both ideologies has deeply influenced the societies to the present day. Accordingly, following Anderson (2006 [1983]), issues of national identity – and in the instances of Romania and Bulgaria, the promotion of ethnocultural aspects – remain of relevance and importance. This is particularly true given that all three share post-imperial aspects, and in the case of the two southeastern European nations, it can be argued that the decades-long period of communist rule still retains an impact on politics and society (e.g., see Agarin, 2020), even though more than three decades has elapsed since the end of the respective regimes in Romania and Bulgaria.

As a physical demonstration of power and belief, the role of monuments – and by extension, of museums and similar sites (Jarosz, 2021a; 2021b) – can be seen as significant in articulating discussions on identity and ideology, in addition to acting as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989). In advancing a particular narrative of what or who is to be commemorated, celebrated, or memorialised, debates surrounding these constructions may often become extremely important – and even volatile – in times of political or societal transition (e.g., see Rigney, 2022; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022), such as from colonial rule to independence, the shift from totalitarianism to democracy, or from communism towards free-market economies. Such discussions regarding names, monuments, and commemorations can be controversial, especially with regard to public opinion and political debates, as well as having potential diplomatic ramifications (e.g., see Gabowitsch, 2024). Indeed, as demonstrated by the renaming of several topographical and placenames in Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion (Schenk, 2023), questions regarding the retention or revision of names and monuments memorialising historical figures or events from previous times, as well as the use of different languages and terminology, remain highly pertinent not only in Europe, but also elsewhere.

As mentioned in the opening section to this article, the focus here will be on presenting aspects relating to the current post-imperial context of monuments in Trinidad & Tobago, before briefly contrasting this present reality through outlining the post-imperial – and especially post-communist – experiences of both Romania and Bulgaria. The chosen methodology will be qualitative in approach; given the timeliness of the topic in the Trinidad & Tobago context, appropriate media and social media sources will be used to supplement the existing academic literature. In the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, taking into account the fact that the issues of monuments and post-communist identity and heritage has been extensively studied, the selected resources will be based on appropriate scholarly sources primarily written in English. Owing to space limitations and to its desk-based approach (Bassot, 2022), the present article does not have any pretensions to represent a comprehensive or exhaustive overview of the subject; rather, as suggested by its title, the study aims to present some brief pointers and suggestions for further research, evaluation, and discussion of the topic under consideration.

Moves in Trinidad & Tobago

As David V. Trotman's comprehensive article from the turn of the present century outlines, on independence Trinidad "inherited an inventory of public memorials, which included statues of Columbus and Lord Harris, a monument in Woodford Square, a memorial commemorating the 1918 Armistice, and a number of named public squares" (Trotman, 2006, p. 42), observing that the "symbolic or iconic decolonisation in Trinidad has been slow and halting" (Trotman, 2006, p. 39). Elsewhere, he highlights a number of instances where this has taken place (such as the renaming of highways and public spaces) though, noting Trinidad & Tobago's diversity, Trotman is cognisant of the potential for politically-linked ethnic disagreements that renaming procedures could pose for its multicultural society (see Trotman, 2012, p. 39).

As mentioned previously, the past few years have seen an increase in academic interest in the topic. Indeed, several chapters in a newly-released edited volume entitled *Independence, Colonial Relics, and Monuments in the Caribbean* (Ramsay & Teelucksingh, 2024a) also centre on the Trinidad & Tobago context. Particularly relevant to current discussions are the contributions on the historical, cultural, and religious aspects pertaining to the replacement of the Trinity Cross, formerly awarded as the country's highest national honour (Brereton, 2024), the memorialisation of historical and religious aspects relating

to Trinidad & Tobago's East Indian population (Morris, 2024; Albert, 2024), as well with regard to the country's general lack of monuments which commemorate women (Jahgoo, 2024). Other recent studies have sought to draw attention to the issue of decolonising the country's monuments and landmarks, including a case study involving the renaming of a student residence hall at the University of the West Indies St Augustine (Matthews, 2021), and the importance of public history and cultural heritage with specific regard to Tobago has also been analysed (Joseph, 2022).

Of additional note in these discussions is the lasting impact of monuments to Trinidad's infamous colonial governor during the very first years of British rule, the Welsh-born army officer Sir Thomas Picton, who was eventually killed in action leading a charge against Napoleon's forces at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. However, Picton's well-attested cruelty during his brutal overlordship of Trinidad (1797-1803) was to see him put on trial in London (see Hoyte-West, 2023, pp. 89-94). Consequently, the issue of commemorating Picton's legacy in public spaces remains complex and contested even to this day, as detailed by Hoskins and James's (2024) analysis of the present situation in Trinidad and in Picton's native Wales.

As detailed in local media reports, the Trinidad & Tobago government launched the initiative to review the country's monuments at the end of 2022, and a committee was created (Trinidad & Tobago Guardian, 2022). In 2024, the Cabinet Appointed Committee to Review the Placement of Statues, Monuments, and Signage in Trinidad and Tobago began its public-facing activities, which were to commence with a consultation where the populace could share their views and opinions on the matter (Ramsey & Teelucksingh, 2024b, p. 2). According to the Committee's official social media presence, submissions (which could be submitted online or by post) were requested on the three following aspects: "1. The removal or retention of specific statues or monuments in public spaces, particularly the Columbus statues; 2. The actions that should be taken with statues or monuments to be removed from their current locations; and 3. Suggestions for new statues, monuments, and signage in public spaces" (Statues, Monuments, and Signage in Trinidad and Tobago, 2024a).

In addition to receiving domestic attention, the Committee's activities also attracted media coverage in the United Kingdom, as it was mentioned in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper about Trinidad &

Tobago Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley's move to change the country's coat of arms (by removing Columbus's three ships and replacing them with a depiction of Trinidad & Tobago's national instrument, the steelpan) (Duncan, 2024).

The Committee's public consultation took place in Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago's capital, on 28 August 2024. The meeting was televised and recorded for posterity (see TTT Live Online, 2024). Contributions by various parties were presented and discussed, sometimes vigorously. Perhaps mindful of Trotman's conclusions regarding the interlinkage between nomenclature and decolonisation – i.e., that "the inhabitants of the twin-island nation have invested so much energy in creating community identities linked to those names that they have subverted the original intention of the colonial inscribers and divested colonial names of their previous associations" (Trotman, 2012, p. 39) – the *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian* newspaper reported of the "drama" caused by the lively exchange of conflicting opinions (Lee, 2024). As summarised in the newspaper account, a variety of topics were discussed relating to placenames, monuments, as well as to the descendants of the First Nations indigenous inhabitants of the islands.

Further posts on the Committee's official social media presence have enumerated three "terms of reference" to move forward with, and also inviting further input from the public on these matters. According to a post dated 9 September 2024, these terms comprise: "1. To develop a policy for the placement and removal of statues, monuments, and signage in Trinidad and Tobago; 2. develop a policy with respect to the treatment of statues and monuments that are to be removed and how the spaces they occupy should be utilised; 3. and, within the context of (1) and (2) above, make recommendations to the Government on how to treat with statues, monuments and signage that are referenced through the consultations" (Statues, Monuments, and Signage in Trinidad and Tobago, 2024b). Accordingly, with the present article being written in autumn 2024, it remains to be seen how things will proceed over the coming months and years.

Moves in Romania and Bulgaria

Turning to the two southeastern Europe context, it is important to mention that the well-studied literature on monuments, statues, and landmarks in Romania and Bulgaria also includes several comparative studies which contrast the two nations (e.g., see Dobre, 2015; Preda, 2023),. For example, Claudia-Florentina Dobre articulates the "solid

grounds for studying the Bulgarian and Romanian postcommunist transitions in conjunction with each other" (Dobre, 2015, p. 299) and with regard to attitudes towards the past, Caterina Preda highlights the notion of "ambivalent socialist heritage" (Preda, 2023, p. 148) shared by both countries. Indeed, it has been noted that, despite a number of similarities in their societies and experiences during communist rule, Romania and Bulgaria also display divergent memorial policies relating to the issues of monuments and statuary in the post-Communist context (Dobre, 2015, p. 300). As mentioned, with the topic having already been the subject of considerable academic analysis, the present brief summary aims to focus on the most recent literature pertaining to the Romanian and Bulgarian contexts.

In first outlining the Romanian case, some contemporary studies have looked at *lieux de mémoire* from a post-imperial perspective. These include the restoration of the emblematic Habsburg-era citadel in the city of Alba Iulia within the framework of the 2018 centenary of the request to incorporate Transylvania into the Kingdom of Romania (Bădescu, 2020). And in the primarily rural counties of Transylvania where ethnic Hungarians form a majority (historical Szeklerland), Ionut Chiruta illustrates that the restoration of old monuments commemorating aspects of the Habsburg period has been the subject of attempts to promote greater kin-state affinity with modern-day Hungary (Chiruta, 2022).

The immediate post-communist era saw, as Dobre attests, an abrupt break with the past, with the names of streets and places changed, and "placards, red stars and other communist insignia were removed from the walls of factories, plants, construction sites and important buildings, especially in large cities" (Dobre, 2024a, p. 121). Statues were toppled – most notably, those of Lenin and Petru Groza, the first communist prime minister of the Socialist Republic of Romania – and were dismantled or abandoned (see Dobre, 2021, pp. 187-189), with several sites replaced by memorials to the victims of totalitarianism. Yet there have been some successful efforts to conserve elements of communist-era monument culture: for example, the planned destruction of the 1960s mausoleum – known as the Monument to the Heroes of the Struggle for the Freedom of the People and the Fatherland for Socialism (*Monumentul eroilor luptei pentru libertatea poporului și a patriei, pentru socialism*) – in the early 2000s was thwarted by political and civic opposition to the move (see Dobre, 2021, pp. 190-191; Dobre,

2024a, p. 125). Additionally, a certain societal nostalgia for certain aspects of the past, the so-called 'pink' memory, also became part of public debate regarding the legacy embodied in communist-era monuments (Dobre, 2024a, pp. 138-140). And, as will be discussed further in the case of Bulgaria, issues relating to extant communist-era war monuments and memorials in Romania still remain ambiguous, particularly given that many are linked with the Red Army and thus with the Soviet Union (see Dobre, 2024b).

Moving southwards to Bulgaria, narratives relating to the issue of monuments can be traced back to the ostensibly close historical and cultural ties with the Russian Empire and, in the postwar era under communist rule, with the Soviet Union. With regard to the War of Liberation which culminated in Bulgaria's independence from the Ottomans in 1878, Anastasiya Pashova and colleagues observe that it is still widely commemorated and thus heavily present in the country's cultural and spatial landscape (Pashova et al. 2013, pp. 34-35). In addition, it is noted that the first memorials on Bulgarian soil to that conflict were actually imperial Russian ones, further exemplifying the deep links as well as the relationship between the two countries (Pashova & Vodenicharov, 2014).

To turn to the trajectory of Bulgarian monuments relating to the communist era, it must be underlined that this topic has been extremely well-researched over time, as confirmed by the existence of numerous studies. In highlighting some recent additions to the literature, these include a case study of the Banner of Peace (*Знаме на мира*) monument in Sofia, once slated for destruction but which is now a restored urban landmark (Kaleva & Vasileva, 2020). In addition, the same pair of researchers (Vasileva & Kaleva, 2017) also conducted a comparative study of two monuments which both commemorated the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state in 1981, but met with very different fates: the "despised" (and eventually demolished) monument in Sofia, and the "beloved" monument in the city of Shumen, which remains inscribed on the Bulgarian Tourist Union's official list of the 100 Tourist Sites of Bulgaria (*100 национални туристически обекта*) (BTS, 2024). As underlined by Evelina Kelbecheva's analysis, the "social fate" of many communist-era monuments seems to involve either their preservation or their disappearance (Kelbecheva, 2009, pp. 89-90). In this regard, the well-known example of the Buzludzha Monument (*Паметник на Бузлуджа*) is emblematic of the latter: an abandoned space built to glorify socialism but which has nowadays fallen into spectacular disrepair

(e.g., see Petrova, 2017). Though initiatives such as the opening of the House-Museum of Todor Zhivkov (named for Bulgaria's longstanding communist leader between 1954 and 1989) in the rural town of Pravets have occurred (Vukov, 2008), the cases of the Sofia-based Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov (*Мавзолей на Георги Димитров*) and the Monument to the Soviet Army (*Паметник на Съветската армия*) underline Nina Debruyne and Georgeta Nazarska's conceptualisation of 'contentious heritage spaces' (Debruyne & Nazarska, 2024), as other studies have also examined (e.g., Decheva, 2022; Ivanova, 2023). Indeed, the mausoleum – which Michael Kelleher described as "the most ideologically important monument in communist Bulgaria" and where the mortal remains of the country's first communist ruler were "put on par with Lenin" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 50) – was famously blown up in 1999, though this proved to be a controversial act (Decheva, 2022, pp. 94-95). And turning specifically to the case of those military monuments related to the Red Army, a Polish-language study by Kamen Rikev observes that the presence of these memorials (several of which are profiled in depth in Dobre's (2024b) analysis), continues to be somewhat contentious (Rikev, 2022, p. 74).

Conclusions and further research

The present article has aimed to provide some brief comparisons between three different country case studies: the Caribbean republic of Trinidad & Tobago and the two southeastern European nations of Romania and Bulgaria. In charting nascent moves in Trinidad & Tobago towards developing (and eventually implementing) a comprehensive policy with regard to the country's numerous colonial-era memorials, statues, and landmarks, the initial activities of the relevant Committee have been outlined. With the Caribbean nation still at a very early stage in this complex process, some brief comparisons regarding the post-1989 fate of communist-era statues and monuments in Romania and Bulgaria have also been given. As such, this has demonstrated how discussions relating to these contested items can often be contentious, displaying not only considerable ambiguity on the part of politicians and the wider public, but also illustrating how political, societal, and other factors can play important roles in determining the steps taken. As exemplified by the decisions made regarding the destruction, removal, or retention of specific communist-era monuments in Romania and Bulgaria (some of which may have decreased in ideological significance over time and thus become part of the fabric of everyday life for many

citizens), it can be advanced that some of these aspects may also prove to be relevant to the Trinidad & Tobago context and thus warrant further scholarly investigations.

Whilst the comparative data presented in this study has been somewhat limited by the desk-based methodological approach, further examination of legal and sociocultural aspects, as well as interviews and surveys with the public and policymakers, could lead to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. In this vein, it is certainly to be hoped that future steps regarding monuments and landmarks linked to the colonial legacy in Trinidad & Tobago will aim to accommodate the country's distinctive diversity, ensuring that these issues are examined and dealt with in a way that recognises and is acceptable to all stakeholders, thereby opening the door to nuanced discussions on this important topic in the upcoming years.

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