Socialist statuary as post-socialist hybrids: following the statues of Dr Petru Groza in Romania

Duncan Light and Craig Young

Department of Geography, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD, United Kingdom
Division of Geography and Environmental Management, School of Science and the Environment, Manchester Metropolitan University, John Dalton Building, Chester Street, Manchester M1 5GD, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the post-socialist lives of Communist statues. While acknowledging that post-socialist transformation frequently involves searching for new identities based on the disavowal of the communist past and the de-communisation of cultural landscapes, the paper stresses the importance of exploring complex continuities from the state-socialist period. This is illustrated by a case study of the fates of three socialist-era statues of the Romanian Communist leader Dr Petru Groza which were erected in Bucharest, Deva and Bâcia. The paper examines how these socialist-era statues have been de- and re-contextualised, translated and re-valued into ‘post-socialist hybrids.’ The analysis explores the complexities of the historical geographies of these statues after 1989, particularly the way that they continue to play a role in the shaping of identities, societies and politics.

Keywords: Cultural landscapes; Socialist statues; Translation; Post-socialist hybridity; Petru Groza; Romania

Statues are key elements of cultural landscapes linked to the political inscription of public space, nationalism, commemoration, and memory. The placing of statues to mark public space is well known to be characteristic of state-socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, in this paper we explore the diverse fates of socialist-era statues after 1989 and what they reveal about the nature of post-socialist transformation. We do this by tracing the subsequent ‘lives’ of three socialist-era statues of Dr Petru Groza (1884–1958), a key Romanian communist leader. The paper first explores the limited literature on socialist-era statues to outline the complexities of their post-socialist trajectories. It then contextualises Groza’s significance in Romanian history and his commemoration by the Communist state. The analysis then reconstructs the de- and re-contextualisation, translation and re-valuing of the three statues during post-socialism. We argue that these statues can be considered as ‘post-socialist cultural hybrids’ which play complex roles in wider processes of socio-political transformation.

The complex post-socialist lives of socialist statuary

There are many circumstances in which ruling elites create ‘material landscapes as stages to display a distinctive national past and articulate an exclusive understanding of a cultural-political community.’1 Those in power seek to create an ‘official public landscape’ through which to communicate their political visions.2 Research on these processes has focused on statues because of their role in ‘marking’ space:

among the most common ways in which political regimes mark space are by placing particular statues in particular places...These provide contour to landscapes, socializing them and saturating them with specific political values.3

In the state-socialist countries of Eastern Europe the consolidation of political control ‘was cemented by an aggressive ideological campaign’.4 For Fowkes, ‘Building socialism involved changing people’s minds and view of history, not just the material

---

conditions of their lives, and new public monuments were expected to play a major educational role. Statues representing the ‘special dead’ — communist leaders, activists, heroes — were important elements of commemorative practices. However, it is important to be sensitive to the diversity of commemorative practices across state-socialist regimes.

Though their political intent is clear, little is known about the reception of these statues by various publics, a factor influencing their post-socialist lives. Socialist-realist artefacts were unstable cultural signifiers and there was often ‘a disjuncture between their inscribed meaning and the significance attached to them by others’, depending on the viewer and historical context. Such iconography often shifted from ‘proclaiming the imminent arrival of the communist utopia’ to being a symbol of external control. Some socialist statues were destroyed under state-socialist regimes. A notable example is the statue of Stalin in Budapest that was destroyed during the Hungarian uprising in 1956. However, statues also became enmeshed with everyday life, with people referring to them jokingly or using them as meeting places. Moreover, some sculpture was produced in a national style by respected artists. Thus socialist-era statues were more than either the revered symbols of powerful regimes or objects despised by colonised subjects. The fall of state-socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 was often accompanied by efforts to remake the cultural landscapes created by socialist regimes and to create new public landscapes that accorded with broader processes of post-socialist identity-building. This process involved reconfiguring a range of landscape elements. For example, public monuments were removed, socialist iconography was destroyed or defaced, streets were renamed and public buildings given new uses. Like these other elements of the cultural landscapes of socialist regimes, statues have undergone a range of trajectories in the post-socialist period. Some statues were removed to mark the collapse of socialist regimes and the emergence of a new political order which may have fulfilled an immediate political need for some, but socio-political reform is complex and tearing down a statue is often only the starting point. Furthermore, de-communisation was not a comprehensive process and many statues met fates other than destruction. Even in the former East Germany the destruction of the Berlin Wall was not accompanied by the destruction of other socialist iconography by the public.

Many socialist statues have been pulled down and abandoned. However, many others remain in situ and Czepczyński argues that these form ‘left-over spaces of socialism’ which may be forgotten, neglected and reviled, or undergo a change in meaning as part of new cultural landscapes. In some cases vandalised socialist-era statues were retained, protected and cleaned by local communities. Other statues (such as those which commemorate Soviet war dead) were moved to new contexts, often military cemeteries. Others have been relocated to public spaces and museums in different contexts, and one statue of Lenin was even moved from Slovakia to a street in Fremont, Seattle, USA. In some cases museums have been created from redundant socialist statuary, most notably Szoborpark (Statue Park) in Budapest and Grittas Park in Lithuania. Some statues have even been reinstalled in their original position.

The trajectories of these statues are, then, socially and politically contested. James argues that ‘If the design, execution and display of [statues] are culturally constitutive, their redesign and displacement or destruction are arguably even more significant as highly charged political acts’. Pribrersky argues that statues are a focus for ‘memory politics’ (which) has become a central issue in post-'89 claims of political legitimacy... because of the necessity to redefine the national past. In Turkmenian official attempts to exclude the Soviet past from the new national identity are disrupted by Soviet-era memorials commemorating the ‘Great Patriotic War’. 5

---

7 James, Fencing in the past (note 4), 291; Schultz and Serban, Public memory and national identity under construction (note 5).
8 Fowkes, The role of monumental sculpture in the construction of socialist spaces in Stalinist Hungary (note 5), 65.
9 James, Fencing in the past (note 4).
11 Schultz and Serban, Public memory and national identity under construction (note 5).
15 James, Fencing in the past (note 4); B. James, Imagining Postcommunism: Visual Narratives of Hungary's 1956 Revolution, College Station, TX, 2005; G. Lankauskas, Sensuous (re)collections: the sight and taste of socialism at Grittas Statue Park, Lithuania, Senses & Society 1 (2006) 27–52; see Vukov, Death and the desecrated (note 6), on the re-erection of a Dimitrov statue in Dimitrovgrad’s central square (Bulgaria) in 1997.
16 James, Fencing in the past (note 4), 292.
Another high profile example is Tallinn’s ‘Bronze Soldier’. A memorial to Soviet soldiers who ended the German occupation of Tallinn during World War II, it stood in the city centre until 2007 when it was moved to the peripheral Estonian Defence Forces cemetery. In its original location the monument held two main competing meanings after 1989: for Estonia’s sizable Russian minority the statue represented ‘liberation’ from the Nazis by the Soviets, while for Estonians it was a symbol of ‘occupation’ by the Soviet Union. The process of moving the statue lead to protests, riots and one death and provoked tensions between Russia, Estonia and the European Union (EU). These studies illustrate that post-socialist publics and elites are not unified in their views on the socialist past and statues. Palonen’s analysis of Budapest demonstrates the internal diversity of the state, with the commemorative landscape not representing ‘an agreed-upon post-communist value system, but...the result of a symbolic struggle between different levels of administration over what should be commemorated in the city-text’. In Hungary and the former East Germany various publics and art critics opposed the wholesale de-communisation of the public landscape. Public opinion is fragmented along lines of national identity, political allegiance and personal experiences and memories of state-socialism. Some people may be uninterested in the fate of socialist statues; others remember them (positively or negatively) as part of their lived pasts; while others may resent using scarce resources to remove them. However, the fate of statues can also be determined by mundane factors such as whether the state has the incentive or resources to remove them.

Whatever the reason for relocating statues their mobility is accompanied by radical shifts in meaning. After 1989, the discourses attached to monuments changed in a way central to post-socialist identity formation. As a result, socialist statues have undergone complex de- and re-contextualisations. Evaluations of the socialist past and the individuals represented by statues have changed around them. Displaced statues undergo a geographical de- and re-contextualisation. As James suggests, ‘The relocation of communist monuments radically destabilized whatever meanings they had come to embody to the various publics that encountered them in their original settings’. Processes of re-contextualisation are central to the subsequent roles of these statues in broader processes. While original layers of meanings may be stripped away, some persist and become inter-twined with new layers of symbolism. These statues therefore undergo a variety of ‘translations’ in which they are re-valued in complex ways. As Popescu suggests, socialist statues become translated into new entities and new spaces, entering the circuit of commodities on a globalised market—...The symbolic residue and surplus rendered in the process of translation...speak of the different modes of emplotment of the same artefact...in different cultures and critical discourses...As landmarks of the hegemonic discourse of the communist past, the statues...need to be obliterated or ‘translated’ into more useful forms. Saunders suggests that statues in the former East Berlin have become sites of emotional and political engagement in ways largely unconnected with their appearance (socialist-realist art) or the historical figures they represent (Lenin, Marx and Thälmann), instead becoming the foci of struggles around democracy. Forest and Johnson trace the transformation of Soviet symbols into symbols of Russia. The movement of Tallinn’s ‘Bronze Soldier’ makes it less the locus of national or ideological causes and more the focus for individual memories.

A prominent example is Budapest’s Statue Park museum but the many studies of this park exhibit a lack of consensus over how it can be interpreted and what meanings the relocated statues represent. Nadkarni suggests the park is a compromise between those wishing to remove socialist statuary from the public landscape and those who argued to keep them. She argues that putting together an eclectic collection of public art from the socialist era and marketing it as ‘monuments of Communist dictatorship’ produces an homogenisation of the past which makes the museum a political ‘monument to transition’, a site which implies that the socialist past is definitively over. Similarly, James argues that the park is about ‘fencing in’ or putting the socialist past to rest, and Williams suggests the intention is to devalue statues’ former political capital. In this way the park becomes an emblem of democracy. Further layers of meaning are added during the marketing and presentation of the park and its consumption by tourists which are marked by irony and humour rather than serious political and historical intent. However, elites and the public were divided over the statues’ removal and the creation of the park. Some objected to the cost and the loss of familiar landmarks, while art critics decried the removal of post public art and the equally politically motivated nature of its replacement. Thus the statues in their new location are overlain with competing meanings associated with the loss of the monuments’ lived presence in the everyday life of the city and political visions claiming that they now have an additional, democratic content. Schultz and Serban argue that rather than producing an homogenised view of the past the result has been a fragmentation...
of memory which Williams suggests makes the relocated statues as much emblems of the uncertain future of post-communist transition as simplistic indicators of democracy. Thus, even during the apparently straightforward process of commodifying socialist statues in museum and tourism spaces they continue their lives as highly unstable cultural signifiers, and we lack knowledge about the translations these statues undergo for the citizens of these cities.27

The act of translation imbues the statues with new sets of meanings but their socialist origins are never entirely stripped away — they are still socialist-era statues representing socialist figures, often in a socialist-realist style. Indeed, their socialist-era characteristics are often the basis for their re-valuation, whether as commodified tourism products or sites of memory and identity politics. The intertwining of their socialist-era meanings and the layering on of new meanings during their re-contextualisation produces post-socialist cultural hybrids.28 ‘Post-socialist hybridity’ arises because ‘As post-socialist transformations take place, they produce hybridized cultures of local specificities, involving a material and emotional architecture that mixes “old”, enduring socialist realities with...new models of desirable identities.’29

Thus, while dominant imaginings of the end of state-socialism focus on the destruction of statues we would argue that research must consider the complex subsequent lives of socialist-era statues and their links to broader socio-political transformations in a range of contexts. We seek to develop this complexity in the context of Romania through reconstructing the mobilities of three statues of Dr Petru Groza and exploring what they reveal about the nature of post-socialist transformation.

**Commemorating Dr Petru Groza**

Petru Groza (1884–1958) had an unconventional biography for a socialist leader.30 He was born in the Transylvanian village of Bâcia into a bourgeois family of lawyers and priests. Educated at universities in Budapest and Leipzig, he practiced as a lawyer in the city of Deva (close to his birthplace). In the 1920s he was elected to parliament and held various ministerial posts but in 1927 he withdrew entirely from political activity to focus on his business interests. In 1933 he returned to politics launching Frontul Plugarilor (The Ploughman’s Front) a left-wing agrarian formation which later joined an alliance with Partidul Comunist Român (PCR) the Romanian Communist Party.

During the Second World War Romania allied itself with Nazi Germany and Petru Groza was imprisoned for a time as an opponent of fascism. In 1944 the Soviet Union invaded the country and swiftly set about bringing Romania into the Soviet orbit. They needed a reliable ally as prime minister and Groza was ideally placed. He was an experienced (and popular) politician and was sympathetic to the Communist Party. Moreover as a lay member of the Romanian Orthodox Church he was potentially able to secure the allegiance of the Romanian population. Under Soviet pressure Groza was appointed as prime minister on 6 March 1945. One of his first acts was to oversee the return of northern Transylvania (annexed by Hungary in 1940) to Romania, an event orchestrated by the Soviets to win him popular support. Between 1945 and 1947 he oversaw the Communist Party takeover of all state ministries. On 30 December 1947 Groza (along with Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the leader of the RCP) compelled the King to abdicate and the Romanian Peoples’ Republic was declared on the same day.31

Although he was not a member of the Communist Party Groza continued as prime minister. He benefited from intense rivalries between various factions within the Party and while these groupings were fighting each other Groza’s position as a neutral figure was secure. He oversaw the implementation of key socialist reforms demanded by the Party including nationalisation of businesses, industry and banks and the start of rural collectivisation. In June 1952 Groza was replaced by Gheorghiu-Dej who had by now established himself as the undisputed leader of the PCR, having purged or eliminated his rivals. Groza was given the symbolic title of President of the Presidium of the Grand National Assembly (parliament) which technically made him head of state but granted him little power.

Groza’s death on 7 January 1958 was the first among the elite who established socialist Romania and consequently Groza was accorded an extravagant state funeral.32 He was buried in a military cemetery in Bucharest but in 1963 his body was moved to a grandiose mausoleum intended to honour the leaders and activists of the socialist state.33 The state also announced various measures to commemorate Groza. The Transylvanian mining town of Ștei was renamed after him, as were streets in Bucharest, Cluj and Deva, along with schools, a collective farm and an agricultural institute. The parliament also called for statues of Groza to be raised in Bucharest and Deva.34

The remembrance of Groza after his death needs to be considered in the context of the commemorative practices of the Romanian communist state. Romania differed from other socialist states in its use of public statuary in that while it erected statues and monuments in honour of the Soviet Army, Stalin (in 1951; it was removed in the early 1960s) and Lenin (1960), statues commemorating Romanian socialist leaders were very rare.35 Instead, commemoration took the form of anniversaries, naming streets and buildings, memorial plaques and busts.36 In large part this was due to the personality cult created around the figure of Nicolae Ceauşescu (who succeeded Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965). Ceauşescu set about discrediting his predecessor as well as rewriting the history of the PCR to present himself as its leading activist. In this context he had no desire to celebrate the earlier generation of the party leadership.

---

27 Nadkarni, The death of socialism and the afterlife of its monuments (note 22); James, Fencing in the past (note 4); Williams, The afterlife of communist statuary (note 14); Schultz and Serban, Public memory and national identity under construction (note5).
29 Marciniak, Post-socialist hybrids (note 28), 173.
33 Light and Young, Political identity, public memory and urban space (note 28).
34 Marea Adunare Naţională, Hotărârea cu privire la cinstirea memoria dr Petru Groza, *Buletin Oficial al Mârii Adunare Naţionale a Republicii Populare Romîne* Anul VII Nr. 5 23 (1958) ianuarie, 57.
so that no statue of Gheorghiu-Dej was erected in Bucharest. However, socialist Romania did erect numerous statues of the medieval voivodes who had fought for Romania's independence since Ceaușescu liked to imagine himself as the successor to such figures. Surprisingly, however, no major statues of Ceaușescu himself were erected.

Ceaușescu's regime collapsed in the Romanian 'Revolution' of December 1989 and a group calling itself Frontul Salvării Naționale (FSN, National Salvation Front) took control promising a renunciation of the cultural landscape that took place in other post-socialist countries.

Petru Groza has enjoyed an ambivalent status in the post-socialist period. In official discourse Communist Party rule is repudiated in Romania. The 2006 Tismăneanu Commission declared the communist regime to be illegitimate and criminal and dismissed Groza as an opportunist and a puppet of the Romanian Communist Party. However, some public memories (reproduced in biographies, documentaries and academic commentaries) are more nuanced and express appreciation for Groza as a good manager and statesman. In the part of Transylvania from which Groza originated local memories among the public are more positive (and are sometimes shared by the local state).

These practices of commemoration before and after 1989 are significant for interpreting the fate of the Groza statues and their significance for understanding post-socialist transformation. This is undertaken in the following sections, which consider the post-1989 trajectories of the three statues in Bucharest, Deva and Băcia.

Displacement, marginalisation and re-valuation: Groza's statue in Bucharest

The Bucharest statue of Groza was unveiled on 6 March 1971, the 26th anniversary of the formation of his first government. Designed by the Transylvanian sculptor Romul Ladea (1901–70), who had completed other commissions for the state, it consisted of a 4.25 m statue of Groza on a 2.8 m high pedestal faced with red granite. The politician was presented standing, hat in one hand, the other outstretched addressing a crowd (Groza had a reputation as an orator). The statue did not dominate public space in the centre of the city, as the statue of Lenin did, but was erected 2 km from the city centre in a small suburban square by the Institute of Medicine and Pharmacology. It was located on the boulevard that had been renamed after Groza in 1958. This enabled the Communist state to commemorate Groza without making him central to the identity of socialist Romania or a challenge to Ceaușescu's cult of personality.

Since Petru Groza was not a member of the PCR (but was an important 'fellow traveller' who assisted the Communists in taking power) and was not implicated in the Party infighting of the early 1950s he posed no threat to Ceaușescu's reputation. For this reason Ceaușescu was prepared to publicly honour Groza through raising statues to the former prime minister, and Ceaușescu himself unveiled the Bucharest statue with the words:

in the memory of our people Dr Petru Groza is a shining example of an ardent fighter for freedom, progress and the flourishing of the homeland, for the strengthening of friendship and alliances with socialist countries, for peace and collaboration with all nations of the world. The unveiling of this monument represents a profound homage to this great son of our people who, through his struggle and untiring activity, won a place of honour in the history of Romania.

Groza’s statue stood as an undramatic part of Bucharest's landscape for the remainder of the socialist era and was even promoted as a tourist attraction to Romanians.

Groza's statue (along with Lenin’s) remained standing until March 1990. Given that many in the FSN had roots in the Romanian Communist Party they were perhaps slow to recognise the need to de-communise the public landscape of Bucharest. However, in February 1990 crowds gathered in front of the statue of Lenin calling for its destruction and asking if communism was still alive in Romania. On 2 March Ion Iliescu (the leader of the FSN) belatedly proposed that the statue should be removed. However, it was not the state that pulled down the statues of Lenin and Groza. Instead, on 3 March 1990 a crane operator called Gheorghe Gavrilescu, who had experienced state repression and was vehemently opposed to Communist Party rule, used his crane to rip Lenin's statue from its pedestal, spurred on by cheering crowds. It was loaded onto a lorry and driven out of the city. Later that day Gavrilescu did the same with the statue of Groza. Both statues were taken to Palatul Mogosoaia (Mogosoaia Palace — a former seventeenth-century private residence, now a museum) about 10 km from the city centre. They were dumped behind a wall, on their backs with Lenin's head resting on Groza's (see Fig. 1). What had been highly visible public statements of ideology now largely disappeared from view with few people knowing of their resting place. These statues of Lenin and Groza were thus exemplars of the displaced and abandoned communist-era statue symbolising the fall of state-socialism. Indeed, the Lenin statue has featured in this way on book covers in the UK and Romania. However, their removal from the landscape was the work of one individual acting with public support (and tacit state backing) months after the 1989 'Revolution'. It was symbolic of a desire by the public (and one individual in particular) to gain some revenge over and disavow the communist past, but it did not represent either a convergence of public attitudes with those of the political elite or a simplistic, media-friendly event which correlated easily with the overthrow of Ceaușescu's regime.

The statues' abandonment at Mogosoaia seemed to symbolise a dramatic rejection of the socialist past but this was not the end of

[37] Boia, Istoria și Mit în Conștiința Românească (note 35).
[40] Tuc and Cucu, Monumentele de Amintire de Luptă și Jertfă, Editura Militară (note 36).
their ‘lives’. Since 1990 the statues have remained marginalised but gradually new roles have emerged for them as they are re-valued and translated into new cultural and economic forms in the post-socialist context. Though they are not part of the official tourism promotion of Romania or Mogosoaia Palace, the statues became an established part of Romania’s ‘communist heritage’.\(^{46}\) The first edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Romania and Moldova ‘discovered’ the statues and publicised their location as ‘Lenin’s graveyard’.\(^{47}\) In recent years a steady flow of Western tourists and expatriate workers based in Bucharest have made the journey to Mogosoaia to see the abandoned statues. Lenin, the more widely known and significant figure, is the principal focus of interest. Being photographed standing on Lenin’s statue quickly became one of the performative tourism rituals of the site. Such practices allowed predominantly Western tourists to engage in their own performances of the ‘fall of Communism’, and to incorporate the Lenin statue as a part of their wider understandings of the end of state-socialism.

Through these performances, Lenin’s statue as cultural signifier is translated from its original intention of symbolising Communist ideology to symbolising the end of state-socialism. Groza’s statue is less involved in such translations, because fewer tourists understand who his statue represents. Groza’s statue, unlike Lenin’s, is not worn smooth by the feet of tourists climbing over it, for a photograph, nor is a photograph standing on Groza’s statue prized in the same way.\(^{48}\) However, the presence of Groza’s statue adds to the sense of the site as a ‘graveyard of communism’, and his anonymity contributes further to the idea of communism as something that is ‘closed’ and can therefore be turned into the focus of the tourist gaze. However, the statues have also gone a further cultural translation among some elements of the Romanian public. Romanians were initially indifferent to the statues, but some schoolteachers have brought their pupils to the site to teach them about the communist period.

More recently, both statues have been re-valued in a different way by some social groups. From being works of public art, symbols of the Communist system, and commemorations of individuals, they have undergone another translation into objects possessing economic value in the new market economy. As Romania’s economy struggles to achieve EU standards of growth, particularly following the 2008–9 global recession, both statues have come under attack from scrap metal thieves armed with electric cutting torches, with any protruding parts of the statues being the first point of attack.\(^{49}\) Renounced in political terms, the statues are now re-valued in economic terms. Security guards at Mogosoaia Palace responded by turning Lenin’s statue onto its front, leaving less that could be removed by thieves. Groza’s statue remained on its back, arm outstretched, effectively sacrificed in order to protect Lenin. Though the actual scrap value of any parts of the statues that could be removed is very small, this is indicative of how Romania’s economic conditions are forcing a re-valuing and translation of the statues into things possessing economic value.

The attacks on the statue seem to have finally spurred the state into action to protect them. In late summer 2010 the Romanian Ministry of Culture quietly removed both statues for safekeeping. Their current location is unknown as are plans for their future. There are, however, rumours that Romania will follow the example of other post-socialist countries and re-erect the statues in a dedicated park. More than two decades after they were pulled down these statues now appear to have been re-valued and re-evaluated by the Romanian state so that what was once repudiated is now considered worth protecting. These statues are now firmly established as heritage.

The trajectory of this statue of Petru Groza thus partly fits dominant narratives of the tearing down of socialist statues. However, together with the Lenin statue, it presents a more nuanced picture which must be understood in the context of post-socialist Romania, one which provides an insight into an alternative set of processes from those stereotyped in media-friendly imaginings of post-socialist political elites and publics operating together to erase the communist past. The subsequent fate of the statues also parallels narratives of socialist-era statues being displaced from their original context and abandoned, but rather than being destroyed these statues are slowly undergoing more complex translations that reflect and reveal the nature of post-socialist transformation, and their lives are not yet over.

**Continuity of the state-socialist cultural landscape: Groza’s statue in Băcia, Transylvania**

A small statue of Groza still stands in the Transylvania village of Băcia, his birthplace. Groza retained strong links with Băcia, returning each summer to the village where his father had been the local priest and where his family owned a house. Throughout his period as Premier he helped Băcia commune by building the Caminul Cultural (Cultural Centre), a small hospital, a bridge, dam and flood defences, and brought electricity there. To commemorate Groza’s connections with Băcia the statue was unveiled on 3 June 1973 (see Fig. 2).\(^{50}\) This 90 cm statue is still situated on a pedestal in front of the Caminul Cultural. It is a small-scale and intimate

---


\(^{47}\) N. Williams, Romania and Moldova, Hawthorne, Australia, 1998, 135.

\(^{48}\) Fieldwork by the authors, 1998–2010.

\(^{49}\) Adevărul, 26 April 2010.

\(^{50}\) Tucă and Cociu, Monumente ale Anilor de Luptă şi Jerfâ, Editura Militară (note 36).
monument that is in proportion to its site and the village, rather than exhibiting the gigantism of the other two statues.

This statue was not torn down during the 1989 ‘Revolution’, but it was vandalised shortly after and the nose smashed off. This attack is attributed to a villager who was a member of the Partidul Național Țăranesc (National Peasants’ Party), which was dissolved in 1947 during Groza’s period as Prime Minister. The party was reformed in early 1990 as part of the opposition to the FSN with a resolutely anti-communist platform. Either in that attack, or afterwards, the base and pedestal have been smashed to further deface the monument or to steal the marble facing.

The persistence of this statue in its original location indicates a different trajectory for a socialist-era monument. The local state has had other priorities than de-communising the landscape and the survival of the statue is also related to a strongly positive local counter-memory of Groza. Although renounced in the official narratives of the post-socialist Romanian state, Groza is held in high regard locally. Many in the village knew him personally and respected what he did for the locality. Furthermore, Emil Rîșteiu, the current Primar (mayor) of Băcia, has let the statue stand as a public reproach to those who damaged it. A member of Partidul Social Democrat (PSD, the Social Democratic Party, successor to the FSN) the Primar shares the favourable local opinion of Groza. He argues that he has left the statue to say to those who attacked it: ‘look at what you have done… and is capitalism so good? [It is] a reproach, a deliberate policy’. Beyond this political point, the Primar also has strategic reasons for retaining the statue, as he seeks to build upon Băcia being Groza’s birthplace to boost a distinct place identity for the commune in support of economic development strategies.

The attack on this statue of Groza was representative of the wish of some members of the public, particularly those with a particular political allegiance and memory of the past, to lash out at this symbol of the communist past and perhaps at Groza in particular. However, the statue’s continuity illustrates a different fate for a piece of socialist iconography than destruction, and through its persistence in the cultural landscape illuminates how rememberings of the past are differentiated and contested below the level of the nation-state. While Groza is discredited in official state evaluations of the socialist era, locally he is held in high regard and neither residents nor the local state have sought the destruction of this statue. This illuminates the complex nature of post-socialist transformation, in that the local state is undertaking actions counter to those of the nation-state, and that processes of remembering the state-socialist period are differentiated at the local scale and explicitly challenge official state-level narratives. The statue is therefore a complex post-socialist hybrid, a piece of surviving socialist-era public art commemorating a key communist leader which remains in situ and is the focus of both anti-communist sentiment and local pride amongst a differentiated public. These points are further expanded upon in the consideration of the third statue of Petru Groza.

Claiming and re-erecting an abandoned socialist statue: Groza’s statue moves from Deva to Băcia

In 1963 a statue of Petru Groza was unveiled in Deva, the county town of Hunedoara County, Transylvania, about 15 km from Băcia. Groza had been a lawyer and businessman in the town and launched the Ploughman’s Front there in 1933. The 4.6 m bronze statue on a 2.5 m white marble pedestal depicted Groza standing addressing a crowd. It was designed by Constantin Baraschi, one of the regime’s leading sculptors who produced numerous other works of public art.

This statue was taken down in 1990 and abandoned in the courtyard of the County Prefectura offices in Deva. It was later replaced by a statue of the Roman Emperor Trajan, who ruled AD 98–117 and conquered the Kingdom of Dacia which lay within present-day Romania. This choice of an alternative statue is symbolic of the desire by the local post-socialist state to stress Romania’s historical and cultural ties with the West. These changes parallel broader strategies to de-communise the cultural landscape. However, even the removal of the statue was more complex than this. As in Băcia, Groza is viewed positively by many in Deva, and thus the pulling down of his statue may have been more to do with a general hatred of ‘all things communist’ during and after the ‘Revolution’, rather than a reflection of widespread popular hatred for Groza. Its subsequent ‘life’ demonstrates that it is not just another abandoned communist statue.

51 Interview with the Băcia Primar, September 2010.
Unlike the Bucharest Groza statue, the Deva statue remained in the city centre and could easily be found. There was no attempt to destroy it or further remove it. In fact, in January 2001 the President of Consiliul Judeţean (Hunedoara County Council) proposed re-instating the statue, either in its original location or elsewhere in Deva.⁵⁴ The County at this time was run by the Social Democratic Party (the successor to the FSN) which was more inclined to be sympathetic towards Groza and his place in Romanian history. In addition, Groza is held in high regard in Deva and, since he was never a Communist Party member, he can be remembered without the animosity directed at the Party. His achievements when in power (particularly securing the return of Transylvania from Hungary in 1945) are also remembered with respect. The existence of a ‘Petrus Groza Association’ in Deva also testifies to the importance of local countermemories of Groza. The proposal to re-erect the statue in Deva eventually came to nothing. However, it illustrates that some elements of a community can have a very different attitude towards a socialist-era statue than wishing its abandonment or destruction. The proposal also raised the prospect that the statue might be re-erected elsewhere.

Groza’s statue lay abandoned in Deva until 2007 when it underwent further geographical and socio-political re-contextualisation and translation. By this time a different political grouping was running Hunedoara County which no longer had plans to re-erect it. On the contrary, the new administration wished to remove the abandoned statue to free up space for parking. At this time the Primar of Băcia proposed moving it to the village. Hunedoara County Council agreed to provide funding for the move and for its subsequent re-erection in Băcia and associated landscaping of a park where it would stand.⁵⁵ In May 2007 the statue was moved to Băcia and it currently lies protected under polythene sheeting in the security of the garden of the Groza family house (see Fig. 3).⁵⁶ That the local state supported the movement of a socialist-era statue of a major communist leader with a view to re-erecting it in the community points to a very different translation and re-valuing of this statue. There has been some opposition towards its re-erection. The Primar of Băcia was criticised in the local press for proposing to resurrect a statue of a prime minister responsible for overseeing the Communist Party takeover of power. Some villagers also express disinterest or disapproval. However, there are many in Băcia that feel positive about re-erecting the statue there, linked to local countermemories of Groza.⁵⁷ Local people even express opposition to it having been taken down in Deva in the first place. As one resident stated ‘It should still be in its place in Deva...Petru Groza did good things’. Another considered that it ‘should never have been pulled down in Deva and of course it deserves to be placed here’.⁵⁸ These statements contest state-structured remembrances of Groza and attempts to de-communise the cultural landscape.

Moreover, local opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of re-erecting a socialist-era statue. One respondent stated that ‘there aren’t monuments in the commune and it would be good if there was one’. Neither the size nor the aesthetics of the statue are seen as being an obstacle to it enhancing the commune — ‘Yes, why not [re-erect it]? Rather than lying there abandoned why don’t we make something good/nice of it’, and ‘Yes [re-erect it], because it would be bigger than the statue that is already there [outside the cultural centre]’.⁵⁹ Support among residents for re-erecting the statue is bound into a selective construction of the memory of Groza. In Băcia, Groza is remembered as a villager who was also a successful leader of the nation, a good statesman who remembered his origins and was not a Communist. This statue has thus also undergone a translation from being the symbol of the communist regime to a representation of a local hero and source of pride. As one villager put it, ‘If the saints and the [medieval] voievodes have statues, why shouldn’t Petru Groza have a statue?’ Another typical response was that ‘For these reasons he deserves to have a statue, he was an important man’ and ‘Yes, sure, he did many good things for the commune, he deserves a statue’.⁶⁰ Again, this statue is a post-socialist hybrid, visually and materially still a socialist statue, but with layers of meaning removed from it and others grafted on. Local processes of memory have translated the meaning of the statue, stripping it of its Communist connotations and replacing them with new formations of local pride at being identified with a key figure responsible for building the modern Romanian nation-state.

---

⁵⁵ See note 51.
⁵⁶ Fieldwork in Băcia, September 2010.
⁵⁷ This analysis is based on 35 semi-structured interviews conducted with Băcia residents in September 2010 (a 5% sample of the population of 702). Interviewees were randomly sampled. The sample comprised of 19 men and 16 women, spread across all age ranges over 18 years old and with people in a wide variety of occupations.
⁵⁸ Interviews with Băcia residents: male, 70s and male, 50s.
⁵⁹ Interviews with Băcia residents: male, 20s; female, 40s; male 20s.
⁶⁰ See note 59.
Furthermore, these translations of meanings attached to the statue are bound into local narratives comparing Groza favourably to contemporary Romanian politicians and Bacia to Bucharest. As one respondent stated ‘It would be good to put the statue here [in Bacia] but it would be better if it was in Bucharest, so all the smecheri [“wheeler-dealers”] could see it.’ This reference to smecheri encompasses the narrative that Groza can be held up to present-day Romanian politicians as an example of what a good statesman should be. However, it also reflects a wider distaste among many Transylvanians for the people of the capital who are frequently evoked as ‘Balkan types’. Again, this points to localised and differentiated renegotiations of the communist past and contemporary identity which run counter to those of the nation-state.

This point is revealed further by the actions of the local state with regard to the statue. The Primar of Bacia still intends to re-erect the statue in a new park opposite the Groza family home as part of proposals for the development of the commune. This is part of a potential commemorative project which could incorporate Groza’s family home and the Bacia cemetery where he was reburied in 1990 into place marketing strategies and the creation of a place identity. The statue and the park are seen as a potential focus for tourism, not through museumising or commodifying the statue, but by using it as a way to generate a distinct local identity for the commune in post-socialist Romania.  

The movement of the Deva statue to Bacia represents an unstudied aspect of post-socialist transformation – the claiming and re-erecting of a statue of a key Communist leader by a local community. It runs counter to more widespread state initiatives in post-socialist countries to de-communise landscapes and discredit the Communist past. That Bacia has welcomed a socialist-era statue of a major Communist leader, and plans to re-erect it, points to a very different trajectory for such statues. The return of the statue is also linked to a localised counter-memory of Groza and actions by the local state, both of which run counter to those of the nation-state. Once again the Groza statue has undergone a set of complex translations, in this case from being a symbol of the communist state to a representation of local pride and positive identity.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the fates of three socialist-era statues to reveal the complexities of their subsequent lives and mobilities (as opposed to destruction and abandonment) to explore how the statues continue to play a role in the reshaping of societies and politics during post-socialist transformation. To do this, the paper deployed notions of de- and re-contextualisation, translation and post-socialist hybridity to analyse the different fates of three statues of Dr Petru Groza.

De-contextualisation is a geographical and a social process that is often accompanied by the stripping of meaning from a statue. However, we argue that the original meanings of socialist statues are not entirely removed in their re-contextualisation and translation. Many aspects of what they once were persist, and what is significant is not that the past is entirely stripped away, but that it displays continuity which becomes inter-twined in complex ways with the circumstances of the re-contextualisation of the statue. The active translation of statues from one context to another results in the production of post-socialist cultural hybrids, combining elements of the socialist past with a variety of new social, cultural, economic and political processes. More broadly, many other elements of the cultural landscapes of state-socialism also persist, including massive (often ruined) industrial complexes and even entire industrial towns, large areas of socialist housing developments, parks, public buildings, infrastructure such as roads and canals and shop fronts, and all of these could be approached within the same framework.

The engagement with socialist statues as post-socialist hybrids helps to reveal a more nuanced picture of the nature of post-socialist transformation. As Verdery argues, post-socialist transformation goes beyond ‘technical’ processes of introducing market economies and democratic systems, and involves a reordering of people’s ‘worlds of meaning’, and this process is both fundamental to how people experience post-socialism and more long-running and complex. Following the fate of the Groza statues has revealed how, once analysis gets beyond the tearing down of (some) of these statues, their stories and people’s relationships to them can illuminate the nature of this change. In some cases (Bucharest and initially in Deva) the tearing down of Groza statues do symbolise a sudden revolt against the communist past. However, even in these cases the stories are more complex.

Political elites and publics are not unified in their treatment of the communist past. Indeed, processes of commemorating, remembering and evaluating the socialist past are revealed to be highly fragmented below the scale of the nation-state. Though post-socialist states have attempted to construct uniform visions of the nation-state which are often based on a disavowal of the communist past, the stories of these statues reveal how difficult it is for nation-states to impose and maintain these imaginings. Instead, these statues play a role in the fragmentation of memory and identity below the scale of the nation-state, and commemorative practices and the creation of new cultural landscapes at times run counter to the desires and practices of the state. Such processes are implemented by both a differentiated public and disaggregated elites. There is considerable scope for historical-geographical analysis to engage with the many forms of post-socialist hybrids which illuminate how the socialist past is dealt with in the present and how societies are still negotiating the complexities of post-socialist transformation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Christian Ciobanu for his work as research assistant on this project. We would also like to thank Emil Rîsteiu, Ilie David, the staff of the Bacia Primarie and the villagers of Bacia who helped us with this study. Financial support was provided by Manchester Metropolitan University Humanities and Social Science Research Institute and by Liverpool Hope University.

---

61 Interviews with Bacia residents: male, 30s.
62 See note 51.
63 Verdery, The Political Lives of Dead Bodies (note 3).