

Flowers for the Liberator: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of *the Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna

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Abstract: This study examines the endurance of the ‘Liberation’ narrative in Bulgaria through a postcolonial reading of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna. It foregrounds what the monument debates often overlook: not only what these sites commemorate, but how they teach subjects to feel history. It argues that the monument operates as colonial pedagogy, rendering geopolitical hierarchy affectively compelling by mobilising gendered imperial repertoires. It reveals a palimpsestic memory structure in which imperial, nationalist, and socialist meanings accumulate. Within this layered formation, the ‘Liberator’ emerges not as a fixed referent but as a mutable, travelling script. Bulgaria’s fractured post-socialist identity thus reflects not only unresolved historical debates but also colonial logics.

Keywords: post-socialism, memory, coloniality

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Eastern Europe’s post-socialist transition – once imagined as a linear path towards democracy and European integration – has instead revealed persistent fractures, with the communist past remaining contested (Holubec, Mrozič 2018). Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine intensified the ‘memory wars’, reviving disputes over Russia as ‘liberator’ or ‘occupier’, reaffirming Soviet monuments as symbolic battlegrounds. Conflicts extend beyond historical interpretations, shaping social divisions, political alignments, and geopolitical identifications.

Tensions have been especially visible in Bulgaria; an EU and NATO member divided between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations. In 2022, the Soviet Army

Figure 1: *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*

Source: Kafedjiiski, Goranov, Baramov, 1978.

monument in Sofia became a focal point, where disputes over military aid to Ukraine escalated into clashes over memory, culminating in its dismantling in 2023. Authorities cited ‘structural safety’, yet contestation persists. On 9 May 2024, pro-Russian actors laid red roses at the site, pledging restoration. Despite declining support for Putin, Bulgaria remains among the EU’s most Russia-sympathetic states (Nikolov 2024). What sustains these fractured identities?

Scholars often cite incomplete historiographical reckoning (Kelbecheva 2019) and uneven post-socialist transition (Dragostinova 2014). Yet debates over Soviet monuments have changed little since the early 1990s (Rikev 2022). These trace back to memories of the Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878) and the ‘Liberation’ myth. Though contested from the outset – amid divisions between Russophiles and Russophobes – it endured, binding Bulgarian nationhood to a Russian patron (Daskalov 2011). Framing the 1944 Soviet takeover a ‘second liberation’ reinforced a deeply rooted moral and emotional debt. Sustained through the metaphor of ‘brotherhood’, it underpins Bulgaria’s ‘eternal gratitude syndrome’ (Stanchev 2023). Soviet monuments are currently framed as ideological apparatus that reproduce pro-Russian narratives – often regis-

tering as socialist nostalgia – perpetuating the ‘liberation’ myth within shifting geopolitical contexts (Preitschopf 2024). This is primarily analysed at the level of discourse.

Turning the focus to representation, this study advances a postcolonial feminist reading of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna (Figure 1), providing insights into the mnemonic mechanisms that render contested memories of ‘liberation’ historically durable and emotionally compelling. It argues that Bulgaria’s fractured post-socialist identity reveals a historical trauma shaped by systemic epistemic violence embedded in sedimented structures of meaning. Approached as a material-semiotic text, the monument functions as a form of colonial pedagogy, where gendered affective regimes reproduce Bulgaria’s subalternity. An iconographic analysis reveals palimpsest memory, where imperial, nationalist, socialist, and post-socialist meanings coexist, rendering the ‘Liberator’ – Tsarist, Soviet, and now nostalgically Russian – not a fixed historical referent but a recurring position within an ongoing imperial script.

Monumentality as colonial pedagogy

The monument was initially conceived as a tribute to Soviet victory over fascism,¹ situating Bulgaria within the wider postwar narrative of Soviet-led ‘liberation’ even though the state was never under Nazi occupation. Rather than reflecting historical realities, it was meant as a colonial marker, inscribing the landscape with Soviet political authority. The monument was not merely commemorative; it was designed as spatial pedagogy.

From its earliest planning stages in the 1950s – when Soviet architect Alexander Gegello² exercised decisive authority over its location and form – the project aimed to communicate what officials described as the ‘true idea’ of liberation (Savov 2007: 197). Proposals that failed to convey ideological clarity were rejected, signalling a colonial relation of authorship: ‘liberation’ was not to be narrated locally but authorised from the centre. In Spivak’s (1988) terms, the subaltern position is marked not only by silence but by the conditions under which speech is authorised.

Monumentality was central to this operation. Rising above Varna’s skyline, the brutalist edifice asserts its presence long before one reaches it, reflecting ‘the strength, power, and fighting spirit of the Soviet Army’ (Savov 2007: 197). Its two-winged concrete form – resembling the ‘Peace Dove’³ – opens towards the Black Sea, sym-

¹ All City Council documents refer to it as the ‘Monument to the Soviet Army’, a designation retained in its 2000 Certificate of State Ownership.

² Gegello, A. I. 1949. Letter to Karlo Lukonov, SACC. National Archive – Sofia (MC f.136, op.5, a.e.7), Sofia, Bulgaria.

³ The dove, a recurrent Christian symbol in Orthodox traditions, was appropriated by secular Soviet ideology as an emblem of peace (Wolle 2017; Viereck 1953).

bolically oriented towards the Soviet Union. At night, floodlights rendered it visible from the sea, while the sounds of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony echoed down the hill. Grandiosity is not aesthetic excess but political technology. As Verdery (1999) argues, socialist monumentality sought to objectify power and present it as timeless and inherited. Scale disciplines perception, dwarfing the individual and rendering authority protective, inevitable, and beyond contestation.

Elevation further inscribes hierarchy into embodied experience. Visitors ascend the monumental 'Staircase of Victors', which choreographs movement upwards. The 'victors' are encountered as literally above. Spatial experience becomes mnemonic instruction. It converts geopolitical hierarchy into lived sensation, teaching visitors where they stand, whom they owe, and how history should be felt. Monumentality here functions as more than representation: it is a training in gratitude and dependence, whereby the climb towards 'liberation', 'rescue', and 'peace' is rendered a form of secular pilgrimage.

At the summit, visitors historically encountered a shrine-like setting: an altar-cube crowned by an eternal flame. The brutalist austerity produced an environment of reverence and submission. Towering concrete planes and sharp geometries replaced religious transcendence with political devotion. This pedagogy mobilises what Buck-Morss (2000) calls political transcendence: the conversion of religious awe into secular reverence through scale, ritual, and form. Drawing on Orthodox and imperial repertoires, Soviet monumental aesthetics embeds socialist authority within older civilisational grammars. Ideology becomes atmosphere; power is felt rather than argued.

The monument's interior reinforces this substitution. The main ceremonial hall is conceived as a modernist cathedral, with horizontal slits of light illuminating a symbolic altar: a massive five-pointed star. This Soviet insignia materialises the communist rejection of religious authority, while simultaneously borrowing the religion's affective technologies. The Orthodox tradition – historically a major link between Tsarist Russia and the Balkan Slavs during the Russo-Ottoman struggles – was refurbished as a new object of reverence. This appropriation of older symbolic forms reflects the broader imperial practice of repurposing sacred imagery to legitimise political power. 'The people of Varna built this temple', local officials proclaimed, 'to eternalise the glory and immortality of the Soviet liberating soldiers', affirming that 'friendship with the Soviet Union is the surest path to happiness, peace, and prosperity' (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 1–11).

The monument naturalises Soviet domination by embedding imperial hierarchies in familiar cultural traditions and symbolic forms, structuring both space and affect so that Bulgarian agency appears as only receptive to power. A plaque at the entrance proclaimed, 'Friendship with the Soviet Union is as essential as the sun, air,

and water for every living creature.⁴ Yet the normalisation of power is not achieved through abstraction alone; it is mediated through gendered visual forms, rendering subordination emotionally intelligible and ethically justifiable.

Gender as the emotional grammar of coloniality

Long conceived as a tribute to the liberating Soviet Army, the monument's official meaning shifted just a month before its unveiling, when it was renamed the *Monument of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*. This late revision reflected a broader turn in Soviet commemorative politics, in which the postwar emphasis on liberation gave way to the language of 'friendship', reconfiguring the affective grammar through which Soviet domination was legitimised. This did not erase the asymmetry of the liberator–liberated dynamic, it deepened it.

Reframed through the idioms of 'friendship' and 'brotherhood', hegemony became 'brotherly help', with the 'advanced' Soviet 'Big Brother' cast as the guardian of a dependent Other with a duty to protect, guide, and modernise (Verdery 1999; Yurchak 2006). The Soviet political rhetoric of 'fraternity' thus exemplifies what post-colonial theory describes as a *discourse of care*, whereby domination is softened into the language of protective kinship (Narayan 1995: 133), a logic that in Bulgaria was reinforced through distinctly gendered semiotic representations.

Despite the semantic shift, the monument's visual grammar remained unchanged: four Soviet soldiers towering above a feminised Bulgaria, represented by three civilian women, positioned on the lower wing of the edifice. These stark asymmetric dichotomies – male/female, military/civilian, elevated/grounded, modern/traditional – produce a rigidly hierarchical visual grammar of authority and subordination. The male Soviet soldiers occupy upper registers of agency and power, while the grounded civilian females signal receptiveness and dependence.

It embodies the familiar tropes of masculine protection and feminised nationhood. As McClintock (1995) and Yuval-Davis (1997) show, such gendered metaphors are central to imperial and nationalist imaginaries. The SSSR is portrayed as the 'elder brother', while Bulgaria is cast as a dependent, feminised homeland. Within this familial frame, asymmetry is reconfigured as the moral obligation to protect. Gender thus functions as the emotional grammar of coloniality. As Chatterjee (1993) and Stoler (2002) argue, imperial power endures through gendered regimes of affect: recast as paternal or fraternal attachment, hierarchy becomes morally legible and emotionally binding. In this framework, the 'gift' of liberation produces a debt of gratitude that entrenches dependency, rendering it acceptable – or even desirable.

⁴ A quote from G. Dimitrov, often inscribed on Soviet monuments in Bulgaria (Kosev 1998; Rikev 2022).

Figure 2: *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*, 9 May 2024



Source: Photo by author.

The monument materialises this affective regime most clearly through gendered gestures. The female figures offer bread and flowers. These are gestures of welcome, recoding military domination as liberation, thus transforming the scene into one of care. Choreographed hospitality translates coercion into protection, rendering domination affectively legible as benevolence. Yet care here is inherently asymmetrical: Soviet figures enact authoritative care, while Bulgarian figures embody nurturing and receptive care – one commands and secures, the other welcomes and reciprocates.

Bulgarian women perform what feminist theorists describe as the ‘emotional labour’ of nationalism (Enloe 2000), sustaining gratitude and loyalty on behalf of the nation. In this configuration, geopolitical hierarchy is reimagined as a gendered relationship of mutual – yet structurally unequal – affection. What is at stake is the production of consent. The monument teaches not only where Bulgaria stands – subordinate yet seemingly (lovingly) protected – but how this relationship should feel: intimate, necessary, and justified. Official descriptions make this logic explicit, presenting the monument as ‘a symbol of boundless love for the great Soviet Union’, invoking ‘pure and sacred gratitude’ and ‘brotherly love’, that ‘the people feel with

their hearts and souls', towards 'the great Soviet land' and its 'liberating army' (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 1-11).

A single detail sharpens this affective economy, staging the limits of agency. One female figure sits with her hands resting idly, as though shackled, in her lap (see Figure 2, the first figure on the left). Her passivity foregrounds questions of silence and absence: where are the Bulgarian men? These ambiguities are not incidental but integral to the organisation of domination. Read through Spivak (1988), this silence marks the nation's subalternity: spoken for, fixed in indebtedness, and deprived of agency. Thus, the monument does not merely represent and normalise subordination – it actively (re)produces it.

This logic extends beyond a single monument and recurs across Bulgaria's commemorative culture (Nedelcheva, Levy 2022). Crucially, this configuration is neither uniquely Soviet nor historically bounded; it draws on older imperial imaginaries already embedded in memory. Soviet iconography reactivated sedimented meanings, rearticulating them within new ideological forms. This explains why Soviet narratives of liberation and friendship found particularly fertile ground in Bulgaria (Vukov 2006).

Palimpsestic memory and the hybrid 'Liberator'

Though still unfinished, the monument was ceremonially unveiled in 1978 to mark the centenary of the liberating Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878). Conceptually dedicated to the Soviet army's 'liberation' of Bulgaria in 1944, yet publicly framed through the memory of 1878 and the language of friendship, it materialises the logic of the 'double liberation'. This collapse of two distinct historical moments into a single narrative reorganised history into a coherent continuum, with the figure of the 'Liberator' as a constant unifying presence. The inscription 'Friendship for Centuries Throughout Centuries' on the façade recasts a political construct as an 'authentic' historical tradition.

This (re)construction of tradition is anchored in the monument's location. Turna Tepe⁵ was saturated with successive imperial and socialist inscriptions. Believed to have been a Russian military encampment during the Russo–Turkish War (1828–1829), it appeared on early 20th-century maps as 'Nikolaeva's Tumulus', with the surrounding area labelled as 'Russian trenches', overwriting the earlier layers of Ottoman toponymy. In 1945, the site was reconfigured as a symbolic ossuary for antifascist fighters and renamed the Brotherhood Tumulus, overlaying socialist memory onto imperial geographies. This transformation from 'tepe' to 'tumulus' sanctified the space. 'For us, this hill is sacred', the inauguration speaker proclaimed. 'We have transformed it

⁵ Turna Tepe is a Turkish toponym translated as Zheraven Hill [Жеравен връх] (Trifonov 2013; Savov 2010).

Figure 3: *Welcoming Brothers Liberators*,
Varna (Pasev, H. 1978)



Source: Photo by author (2021).

into the holiest place.’ (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 11) Within this sacralised palimpsest, where earlier inscriptions remain legible beneath the new, the Soviet soldiers on the façade appear preordained. As the heirs to earlier liberators, they (re)inscribed narratives of historical destiny, sacrifice, and moral obligation within new political contexts.

These narratives were reinforced by parallel commemorative projects that were unveiled almost simultaneously, constructing a broader mnemonic field in which the logic of the ‘double liberation’ is anchored deep within local memoryscapes. *Welcoming Brothers Liberators*, a work unveiled a few months earlier, was the first sculptural representation of the city’s 1878 ‘liberation’. Placed within the grounds of

the former Church of Archangel Michael, converted in 1959 into a museum of the Bulgarian National Revival, it marked the site where representatives of the Bulgarian community welcomed Tsarist forces as liberators in 1878. Officials embedded the monument within earlier imperial and nationalist historical symbols. Drawing on entrenched Slavic and Orthodox discourses of kinship, this placement (re)inscribed imperial authority within local memory, reinforcing the civilisational arc constructed by Soviet-era historiography. The sculptural composition functions as a counterpart to the central tableau of the monument: a young girl gazing up in awe at a towering Russian general and offering him flowers in a gesture of gratitude. Read as a diptych, the two monuments trace a life-course of dependency – from rescued child to grateful woman – in which Bulgaria is placed under continuous masculine protection.

Crucially, this gendered grammar is not uniquely Soviet. Cultural production in the 19th century had already cast Bulgaria as a vulnerable female threatened by a foreign (Ottoman/Islamic) Other and rescued by a familiar (Slavic/Orthodox) masculine protector (Aretov 2010; Peleva, Spassova-Dikova 2010). Shaped by Orientalist and Pan-Slavic discourses, these hierarchies – European/Oriental, Christian/Muslim, civilised/backward, modern/traditional, masculine/feminine – positioned Bulgaria as both Europe's 'backward' periphery and Russia's semi-dependent Other (Todorova 2009). The tropes of the 'noble savage' and the imperial 'civilising mission' cast Bulgaria as a feminised, pre-modern subject awaiting redemption by a paternal 'civilised' power, and recast the Russian liberator as both moderniser and guardian of the tradition (Brower, Lazzerini 1997).

Soviet iconography reactivated these sedimented civilisational mnemonics (Nedelcheva, Levy 2022) and embedded them within the newly constructed socialist narrative. Across the two 'liberation' monuments, Bulgaria – rendered in traditional dress and performing ritualised gestures of hospitality rooted in Slavic custom – embodies a static, romanticised 'authentic culture', recalling not women liberated in 1944 but the feminised ('backward'/'traditional') subjects from 1878. Soviet soldiers, personifying a progressive force, inherit the paternal role of Tsarist 'civiliser'. While the narrative shifts – from Ottoman 'yoke' to 'monarcho-fascism' – its affective structure remains unchanged, with gender continuing to function as the affective grammar that renders the layers emotionally legible. The lesson remains civilisational: Bulgaria's future comes from elsewhere, delivered through masculine guardianship, as the 19th-century civilising mission is rearticulated as Soviet socialist modernity.

'Liberation' thus becomes the narrative bridge linking Bulgarian nationhood to Soviet loyalty, legitimising power as both natural and historical. The exclusion of any counter-narratives that might frame Russian military campaigns as anything other than liberating formed part of the broader Sovietization of Bulgarian memory (Daskalov 2011). This constitutes Gramscian cultural hegemony, whereby power is secured

by embedding itself within the foundational national narrative (Gramsci 1971). This helps explain why post-socialist attempts at historiographical reckoning have been so deeply contentious.

The Monument of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship and the mnemonic infrastructure within which it was constructed emerge as a Derridean (1998) palimpsestic surface on which imperial, nationalist, and socialist inscriptions remain legible. Rather than replacing each other, they accumulate and produce a dense sedimentation of mutually reinforcing meanings. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry illuminate this process, showing how colonial meaning is not fixed but is produced through repetition and rearticulation, as earlier imperial scripts are not simply repeated but are translated into new ideological contexts.

Within this framework, the 'Liberation' narrative – along with the identities it produces – appears not as a fixed historical reference but as a hybrid construct of continuously reproduced myths and a rearticulation of inherited symbols. But this process of repetition and translation renders the narratives unstable. Memory and identity thus emerge as ambivalent and continuously negotiated, yet, for this very reason, they are adaptable and movable, able to travel through the layers of this porous palimpsestic memory structure, where the past and the present continuously authorise each other (Mbembe 2001).

The 'Liberation' narrative thus constitutes a form of 'travelling memory' (Erl 2011): it circulates across regimes, media, and generations and is continually reactivated in new contexts. Crucially, this process is mediated through gender – an internalised self-perception based on gendered civilisational mnemonics. As a result, the narrative remains in circulation, readily available for rearticulation in a new geopolitical context, sustaining the afterlives of empire into the post-socialist present. Thus, the post-1989 period does not mark a rupture but new layers through which earlier meanings remain available for reactivation.

The monument was officially abandoned after 1989, yet it was never demolished, repurposed, or otherwise dealt with. Instead, it became a living archive of conflict, oscillating between reverence and defiance. Feminist and gender-challenging interventions – such as the 2012 Pussy Riot hoods placed over the female figure and the 2014 LGBT flag painted on the façade – targeted its affective, gendered core and recast submission as dissent, challenging Bulgarian conservatism, which is often aligned with pro-Russian positions. A Ukrainian flag in 2022 further re-signified the site within shifting geopolitics. Yet these acts do not displace the monument's underlying logic: on 9 May, flowers still appear (see Figure 2), quietly laid on the bare concrete where the eternal flame once burned.

For some, the monument still embodies cultural kinship and nostalgic solidarity, a tribute to liberators and protectors. For others, it stands as a symbol of subjugation,

materialising an unprocessed past that refuses to release its grip on the present. This tension reflects not only competing historical interpretations, but a deeper historical trauma shaped by systemic epistemic violence and sustained through affective attachments rooted in long-standing dependency. Efforts to reshape, remove, or critically reframe Soviet monuments have been consistently opposed by Russian diplomats and pro-Russian political actors, who frame such interventions as threats to 'national memory' and violations of bilateral treaties.

In this sense, Soviet monuments and their narratives function as what Stoler (2013: 2) terms 'imperial debris': not inert remnants, but enduring structures that continue to shape the present. Through Quijano (2000), Bulgaria's fractured memory and identity emerge as the product of coloniality – an ongoing process of ruination in which the imperial logic survives and is reproduced through affective dependencies that have outlasted the formal empire.

Conclusion

Although Bulgaria was never formally colonised or incorporated within a Russian state, postcolonial concepts remain essential for theorising the country's post-socialist memory as a semi-dependent. This explains why the 'Liberation' narrative remains emotionally charged.

Reading the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna as a semiotic-material text, this essay argues: (1) The monument functions as colonial pedagogy, teaching visitors to experience domination as common sense. (2) By drawing on rooted gendered imperial repertoires, it renders authority familiar, protective, and emotionally credible. (3) As a material condensation of long-durée narratives, the monument reveals a palimpsestic memory structure in which imperial, nationalist, socialist and post-socialist inscriptions do not replace but are rather layered on top of one another. Within this structure, 'Liberation' endures not as a fixed ideology but as a mutable, hybrid script that travels, adapting to new political contexts. Sustained through the mimicry of gendered cultural forms, it persists as an epistemic violence that continues to shape post-socialist memory.

A postcolonial feminist reading makes visible what the debates about the monument often leave unaddressed: that the issue is not only what these monuments commemorate, but also how they teach history to be felt. The Varna monument demonstrates that coloniality persists not only through institutions and discourse, but also through affect. If Bulgaria's fractured post-socialist memory is to be understood more fully, it must be approached not simply as a struggle between communism and democracy, or between liberator and occupier, but as a confrontation with gendered colonial infrastructures of meaning.

This analysis reframes the post-socialist memory wars in Eastern Europe not as a struggle between past and present but as a conflict with layered colonial infrastructures. It foregrounds the affective mechanisms through which colonial memories endure, demonstrating the value of postcolonial and coloniality approaches for understanding post-Soviet spaces. The analysis also suggests that debates over whether to remove or preserve monuments cannot resolve conflict: what must be confronted is the deeper, colonial, and gendered grammar through which narratives are internalised.

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