

FREEDOM SQUARE IN KHARKIV: LOCALIZATION OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL MEMORY

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Historically, one of the greatest inventions of European civilization is the central city square. It is not only the central architectural and planning element of the city, but also what forms and reproduces the community [1]. Through the study of the interaction of space and culture in the square, it is possible to show how culture influences the formation of public spaces and how the physical form of the square encodes social, political and economic relations within the city [2]. City squares are also the subject of identity and memory politics, playing an important role in the formation of collective identities. This gives rise to new angles of humanitarian discussions about the "memorial landscape" of the main squares of cities [3]. The idea of "expanding the horizon" of understanding the city's identity through cultural means, delineating the architectural objects of the squares in the coordinates of the symbolic urban space, is also relevant. The analysis of these factors in an historical survey and in an investigation, by field, research of Freedom Square in Kharkiv, is the subject of this paper.

The initial idea of this research is the understanding of the central squares of cities as important "public arenas" that shape and reveal the politics of the time. Squares can be the public space where political communities have been formed throughout history. Historians call such "political squares". In particular, Peter Stachel notes that such political squares do exist in most states: the Place de l'Étoile in Paris, the Pariser Platz in Berlin, Trafalgar Square in London, Heldenplatz in Vienna. All of them play the role of political scenes as the transmission of historical and political symbols into the social space of the city [4]. One characteristic of many political squares is their connection to ruptures or violent events in the history of the country. For instance, the Viennese Heldenplatz is a square, which refers to a traumatic event on March 15, 1938, Adolf Hitler proclaimed to a jubilating mass of people on the Heldenplatz Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany. This event marks the beginning of years of political persecution, war, and genocide. This event also proved the ethical capitulation of a part of Austrian society before Nazism [5].

The generally research aim is to examine the role of Kharkiv central square in the transformation of the Ukrainian political landscape. Relationship between collective memory and identity forms the epistemological framework of this research. Conceptual framework include the mnemohistory analysis of national cultural identity (the history experience, remembering, and memory).

Freedom Square in Kharkiv is the tangible location of Ukrainian politic and a specific place of national and local memory. Some significant events for the national existence of Ukrainians are associated with the central square of Kharkiv. Kharkiv was the capital of Soviet Ukraine (UkrSSR) from 1919 to 1934. The "capital" history of

Kharkiv is full of dramatic events. The pathetic statement that Kharkiv was the first capital of Ukraine is a stamp from Soviet historiography. It is obvious that Kyiv was the main city of the Ukrainian state long before Kharkiv. At the beginning of the 20th century, the national state emerged on Ukrainian lands, the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR, 1917-1921). The Soviet Russia's military aggression against the UNR led to significant losses in Ukrainian society at the time, the Bolshevik occupation of Ukraine and the inclusion the UkrSSR to the Soviet Union (in 1922).

Ukrainian historians consider UkrRSR as a communist state-political formation that emerged because of the armed aggression of Russia with the help of local Bolsheviks against the UNR. Formally, it was a war between supporters of an independent Ukraine with its capital in Kyiv (UNR) and the Bolshevik puppet state – the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (until 1919 known as the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets) with its capital in Kharkiv. Current Ukrainian historiography claims that in some periods of its existence, the UkrSSR had certain formal signs of statehood in the structure of government bodies. In the 1920s and 1930s, the UkrSSR was known for large-scale industrialization, Stalinist-style totalitarianism, and the genocide of Ukrainians.

The capital character of the architecture of Kharkiv was formed in 1924-1926, in particular, due to the construction of a new district with a square in the center. The new district had the appearance of concentric rings (1, 2, 3 and 4 ring streets – Nezalezhnosti, Chichybabina, Danylevsky, Kultury), separated by radial streets (1, 2, 3 and 4 radial streets – Yura Zoifer, Romain Rolan, Nauki and Literaturna). In 1925-1928, the first Soviet 13-story skyscraper “Derzhprom” (an abbreviation of two words that, taken together, mean State Industry) was built of concrete and glass on the inner ring of this district. The use of concrete in its construction and the system of overhead walkways and individual interlinked towers made it extremely innovative. The building became the most spacious single structure in the world by the year of its completion in 1928 to be surpassed by New York's skyscrapers in 1930s. The building was one of the few demonstration projects that highlighted the country's industrial capacity. This square was designed to house other administrative buildings in the constructivist style typical of the time, such as the House of Projects, the House of Cooperation, and the International Hotel (Fig.1). Abstract and functional, constructivist art was aimed to reflect industrial society and urban space. Moreover, in the USSR, constructivism was ideologically approved as “proletarian art”. According to the ideological plan of the communists, the central square of Kharkiv was to be an absolute model of industrialized landscape.



Figure 1. Kharkiv Derzhprom on Freedom (former Dzerzhinsky) Square, early 1940s [6]

The desire of the Bolsheviks for visually capture of the entire square is also evidenced by the constructivist reconstruction of the facade of the building in the eastern part of the square. The Bolsheviks as hostile “bourgeois” regarded the Neo-Renaissance style of this building. Along with a new aesthetic of the building, there were also functional and symbolic transformations. Before the Bolsheviks came to power, this building housed the institution of local government (“zemskaya uprava” in the times of the Russian Empire, “people’s uprava” in the times of the UNR). The Bolsheviks abolished such institutions, and in 1925, their party office (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Bolsheviks of Ukraine) was located in the building of the former Kharkov local government. The Building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (abbreviated – CC CP(b)U) was placed at the end of the rectangular part of the capital square and visually completed the architectural ensemble from its eastern side (Fig.2). Overall, the new architectural and symbolic interpretation emphasized the direction of movement from the old city centre to the new capital square.

The new square had a high aesthetic potential and functionality, its construction was compared to a “communication leap”. Architectural functionalism included the following functions: utilitarian (a place for industrial management activities in UkrSSR), ideological (the disclosure of the idea of industrialization as a progressive phenomenon), social (a spacious center of the new Kharkiv, a socially significant object of government, a place of mass events like holidays, demonstrations), symbolic (“organized world”, a symbol of a new era and industrialization). It is remarkable that the new square was named Dzerzhinsky Square, after Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Bolshevik secret police (the Cheka, precursor to the NKVD, late KGB). It was a

powerful symbolic marker of the policy of forcible maintenance of Ukrainian lands under the control of Soviet Russia.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 2. The eastern part of Freedom (Dzerzhinsky) Square:
the Building of the Kharkiv Zemstvo, until 1925 (a),
the Building of the CC CP(b)U (b), panoramic view (c), early 1940s [7]

In 1928-1934, Derzhprom also housed the Council of People's Commissars of UkrSSR (the highest governing body of executive power; until 1937 it was also a legislative body as well). The Communist Party of Ukraine that was created in Moscow and was originally formed out of the Bolshevik organizational centers in Ukraine managed government of the UkrSSR from very start.

Dzerzhinsky square became the venue for festive events that filled the public space of the city with a certain symbolic meaning and formed to create a "Soviet community". For this purpose, a special type of commemorative events was used - May 1 (International Workers' Solidarity Day), November 7 (celebrating the anniversaries of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917), with the help of which the official interpretation of the revolution was formed as a heroic event that opened the way to a brighter future. "Revolutionary holidays" designed in the minds of Soviet citizens a memory that would meet the tasks of the authorities on the formation of a "new" person. In the USSR, anniversary celebrations turned into an annual formalized holiday ritual with theatrical processions and demonstrations of workers. The degree of influence of the festive ritual on the consciousness of the participants enhanced by its artistic and aesthetic design. Emotionally influencing society, the holidays consolidated the population and created a canonical system of symbols and rhetorical

figures. Figure 3 depicts Dzerzhinsky Square on May 1, 1930, where a globe with photographs of Lenin and Stalin stands in front of Derzhprom.



Figure 3. Derzhprom on May 1, 1930 [8]

The anniversaries of the October Revolution became not just holidays, but milestones in the history of the country, during which the history of the USSR was presented as the Bolshevik authorities wanted to see it. Particularly significant was the celebration on Dzerzhinsky Square of the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution in 1932, which coincided with the end of the first Stalinist five-year plan, when forced industrialization took place in the USSR through the policy of collectivization. For this celebration, teams of artists decorated the square with posters and photos showing “achievements of industry and agriculture”. However, behind the “façade” of the celebration on the main square of the UkrSSR, the glorification of prosperity, there were tragic realities. For Ukraine, the consequences of collectivization were extremely tragic, leading to the Holodomor, the killing of millions of Ukrainian peasants by artificial famine. According to Timothy Snyder, if the Ukrainian city then lived, then the Ukrainian village was dying [9]. Oleksandr Zinchenko claims that there was a “life zone” around Kharkiv (a suburban area where workers of industrial enterprises and their families lived), and the “circle of death” began 40-50 kilometers from the capital Kharkiv [10]. Nevertheless, even in Kharkiv itself, 120,000 inhabitants died of hunger in one year [11, p.167].

From the beginning of the 1930s to the mid-1940s, the territory of Ukraine was the most deadly place on Earth; Timothy Snyder is convinced [8]. With the exploitation of fertile Ukrainian lands, both dictators Stalin and Hitler connected their dreams of world domination, which led to the Second World War (Fig.3). The German occupation of Kharkiv began on October 24, 1941 and continued intermittently until August 23, 1943. In Nazi-occupied Kharkiv, instead of Dzerzhinsky Square, the German Army Square (German: Platz der Wehrmacht) immediately appeared, then the Leibstandarte SS Square (German: Platz der Leibstandarte SS). In Kharkiv, the system of occupation authorities was distinguished by cruelty. Unlike other captured Ukrainian cities, where power was transferred to civilian bodies, in front-line Kharkiv, special military

command and control bodies were created to manage the occupied territory. Already in the first days of the occupation, the Nazis hanged local communists on the central square, moreover, symbolically on the balcony of the building of the CC CP(b)U. Kharkiv 1941-1943, according to the British war correspondent Godfrey Blunden, experienced “the time of the assassins” (the Soviet NKVD and the Nazi SS) [12].

With the victory of the USSR over Germany, the communist totalitarian regime became even more established [13]. The central city squares continued to be a means of propaganda and representation of the communist monopoly on power. In particular, the central square of Kharkiv was returned the name Dzerzhinsky. Symbolic shifts took place when the architectural and spatial restoration of the ensemble of the square was ideologically inspired by the figure of Stalin “as the organizer of the victory” in World War II. Dzerzhinsky Square, which in the 1930s was a representative of the architecture of the era of the first Stalin’s five-year plans, is turning into a place of the era of “high Stalinism”. In August 1944, an exhibition of military equipment was organized on Dzerzhinsky Square in order to glorify the victories of the Soviet army, and a temporary monument to Stalin was erected (Fig.4).



Figure 4. Exhibition of military equipment on Dzerzhinsky Square (in the foreground a monument to Stalin), 1944

The post-war turn in architectural style from Avantgarde to neoclassicism (“Stalin’s empire”) led to the fact that innovative trends were first sharply criticized, and then completely banned as bourgeois. The constructivists fell into disgrace, and many of them were repressed. The Freedom Square complex is a reminder of a fleeting period of artistic freedom and active participation of Soviet architects in the world artistic process, since it is well known that Soviet constructivists actively collaborated with their colleagues from around the world, including the United States and Germany (the famous Bauhaus movement) [16]. The romantic-utopian revolutionary asceticism is being replaced by a tendency towards increased splendor and decoration of facades. The reconstruction of Dzerzhinsky Square in the neoclassical style (the second half of the 1940s and 1950s) significantly changed the appearance of the square. All

constructivist buildings, except Derzhprom, have lost their authenticity. Constructivist houses were hurriedly redesigned. Their authors-architects publicly renounced the avant-garde art principles and often redesigned the facades of their constructivist creations in the “correct” style from the point of view of power. The new neoclassical (neo-Stalinist) building facades were unnaturally overgrown with columns, pilasters, cornices, etc. A vivid example of this is the building of the “International” hotel (now “Kharkiv”). The author, Kharkiv architect Hryhoriy Yanovytskyi, himself reconstructed it. His constructivist project was awarded a gold medal at the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris in 1937. However, in the post-war period, he had to create a project for the restoration of his constructivist creation according to the principles of the Stalinist Empire style (Fig.5). A typical example of Stalin’s neo-renaissance was also the Building of the Kharkiv office of the Communist Party of Ukraine, which was constructed in 1954 on the site of the building of the CC CP(b)U destroyed during the war. The next step of the totalitarian intervention of the authorities in the architectural space of Dzerzhinsky Square was the installation of the monument to Lenin in 1963.

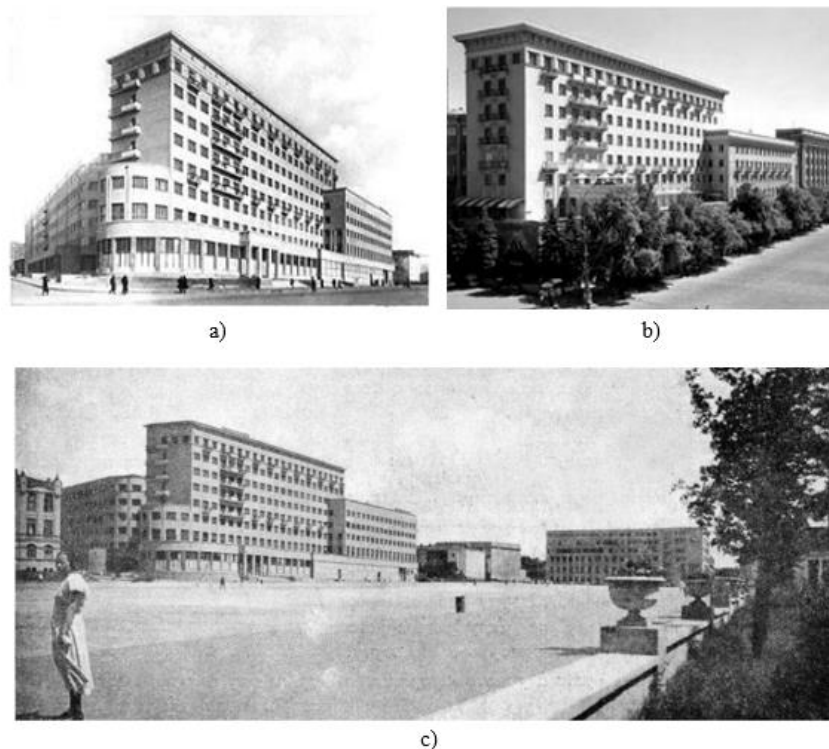


Figure 5. Hotel on Freedom (Dzerzhinsky) Square: “International”, 1936 (a), “Kharkiv”, 1956 (b), panoramic view, 1936 (c) [14]

The myth of Victory became the main sacred foundation of the entire Soviet identity. The communist regime of the USSR deliberately set a date separate from the rest of Europe for celebrating the victory in World War II and turned the celebration of May 9 into a propaganda tool. On Victory Day, parades were traditionally organized, in which the military and veterans took part. For Kharkiv, the celebration of the “Day of the city’s liberation from the German invaders” (August 23) has turned into an annual formalized ritual. In the 1980s, this day became officially known as City Day. On this

day, mass festivities, a concerts and fireworks held on the main square. The USSR public holiday Victory Day was transferred to independent Ukraine, and it continued to be a symbolic way of uniting with imperial Russia and distancing from the Western world.

When Ukraine regained its independence after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Kharkiv's Dzerzhinsky Square was renamed Freedom Square. Nevertheless, 1991 was not the end for the "Sovietization" of the Kharkiv's central square, neither architecturally nor in terms of the nature of the political, social and cultural activities of the citizens. The sculpture of Lenin remained its integral attribute, while the governing bodies of independent Ukraine were located on the eastern part of Freedom Square, in the former office of the Communist Party of Ukraine (hereinafter – the building of the Kharkiv Regional State Administration, KRSA). It will noted that Freedom Square became a concentrator of national and political activities. The main factors influencing the existence of contradictions between citizens were differences not only in the interpretation of the events of the historical past, but also in the foreign policy course of independent Ukraine. The Agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine, widely referred to as the Kharkiv Pact (2010) aroused much controversy in Ukraine. It was a treaty between Ukraine and Russia whereby the Russian lease on naval facilities in Crimea was extended beyond 2017 until 2042 in exchange for a multiyear discounted contract to provide Ukraine with Russian natural gas. From 2010 to 2013, Freedom Square hosted an annual military parade in honor of Victory Day with the participation of the military units of Ukraine and Russia.

Freedom Square in Kharkiv was the site of demonstrations by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian activists. In 2013-2015, a series of mass demonstrations, known as the Euromaidan and Anti-Euromaidan, erupted across Freedom Square. Activists were located on two opposite parts of the square, pro-Russian ones on the western side, near the monument to Lenin (they set up a tent camp there, held their own rallies), and pro-Ukrainian ones on the eastern side, near the building of the KRSA). Anti-Maidan activists, supporters of the annexation of the Kharkiv region to Russia, twice seized the building of the KRSA, accompanied by the beating of the Euromaidan activists, installed the flag of the Russian Federation on it, and proclaimed the "Kharkov People's Republic". The capture of the KRSA building was accompanied by a brutal beating of the Euromaidan activists. These events are very reminiscent of the events in Kharkiv almost a century ago, when Kyiv was the capital of the UNR, and in Kharkiv, Russia, with the help of local Bolsheviks, formed a puppet state. However, this time Ukrainian statehood in Kharkov survived.

The monument to Lenin on Freedom Square itself became a magnet for all people who did not take the Euromaidan, were Putin's and the SRSR's adherents. There were stench and in support of Russian aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, Euromadan activists demanded special attention to the symbolic structure of the city's politics of memory (monuments, memorial plaques, national celebration practices, etc.). In their opinion, independent Ukraine, preserving the monuments to Lenin, deforms its present and even its future. They demanded the condemnation of the communist totalitarian regime at the state level. On September 28, 2014, after a after a demonstration of many thousands under the slogan "Kharkiv is Ukraine", pro-

Ukrainian activists demolished the monument to Lenin from Svoboda Square. In this way, through the rethinking of the “hero” and “anti-hero”, a kind of reformulation of the place of memory was carried out (Fig.6). Monuments erected in public locations are the final element not only of the architectural landscape, but also of a certain cultural-historical and national-political meaning, which is concentrated in it.

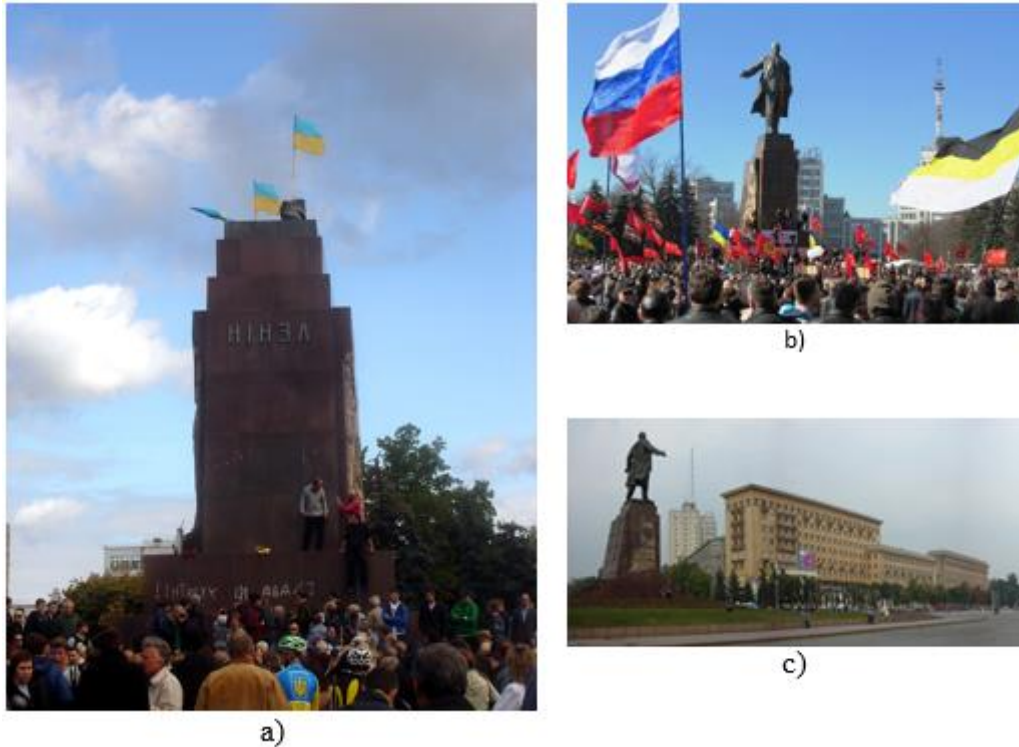


Figure 5. Monument to Lenin on Freedom Square: pro-Ukrainian demonstration (a), pro-Russian demonstration (b), panoramic view until 28.09.2014 (c)

Freedom Square has its own historical rhythm, and at the same time, it inextricably linked with the national politics. In 2014, the volunteer tent “Everything for Victory” was installed on Freedom Square. Activists used it as a symbolic campaign stand informing about Russia military aggression in eastern Ukraine. In 2019, the Kharkiv City Hall tried to demolish the tent, but Kharkiv activists defended its placement on the square. Volunteer tent “Everything for victory!” was destroyed by an air strike by Russian troops on the central square of Kharkiv on March 1, 2022.

Therefore, the history of Freedom Square is also about making meaningful statements about the past in a given political context of the present. It became a place of worldview transformations of the citizens, as well as their formation of their civil and national positions.

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