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Kimberly E. Zarecor

*Iowa State University, zarecor@iastate.edu*

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# Book Review of Píchová, Hana: The Case of the Missing Statue: A Historical and Literary Study of the Stalin Monument in Prague

## **Abstract**

In this intriguing and at times frustrating study, Hana Píchová makes a compelling case for the Stalin Monument in Prague as both an object and an idea in physical space and cultural consciousness. The book came about with Píchová's unexpected acquisition of a cache of unpublished photographs of the 1955 monument as it was slowly being demolished in 1962. Taken secretly by Josef Klimeš, the last surviving sculptor to have worked on the project, he hid them for decades since photography had been banned during the year-long demolition process. He gave them to Píchová after an interview in 2012. Of this encounter, Píchová writes that "his patient explanations of the [monument's] technical aspects [...] made me appreciate the endeavor in spite of its political symbolism" (p. 5). This statement encapsulates Píchová's binary approach, which is to contrast the monument's overwhelming physicality and technical complexity with its sinister symbolic presence both in the past and present.

## **Disciplines**

Architecture | Construction Engineering | Environmental Design | Historic Preservation and Conservation

## **Comments**

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*Píchová, Hana: The Case of the Missing Statue: A Historical and Literary Study of the Stalin Monument in Prague.*

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In this intriguing and at times frustrating study, Hana Píchová makes a compelling case for the Stalin Monument in Prague as both an object and an idea in physical space and cultural consciousness. The book came about with Píchová's unexpected acquisition of a cache of unpublished photographs of the 1955 monument as it was slowly being demolished in 1962. Taken secretly by Josef Klimeš, the last surviving sculptor to have worked on the project, he hid them for decades since photography had been banned during the year-long demolition process. He gave them to Píchová after an interview in 2012. Of this encounter, Píchová writes that "his patient explanations of the [monument's] technical aspects [...] made me appreciate the endeavor in spite of its political symbolism" (p. 5). This statement encapsulates Píchová's binary approach, which is to contrast the monument's overwhelming physicality and technical complexity with its sinister symbolic presence both in the past and present.

Píchová's expertise is literary analysis. The encounter with Klimeš and his images required Píchová to expand her focus and engage with discourses, namely visual

culture studies and art and architectural history, in which Píchová has less expertise. The result is a collage of black-and-white images, historical narratives, and fragments of textual analysis. While valuable on their own, these strands never coalesce within analytical or theoretical frameworks. Instead, there is a sense that the monument and its many cultural manifestations cannot and should not be reconciled into a single overarching narrative, since its very existence was absurd and therefore inexplicable.

Adding to the collage quality of the presentation, Klimeš's images are interspersed with dozens of documentary photographs from the Czech News Agency and the Museum of the City of Prague. All eighty-nine images are published unnumbered and without captions. Many images are spectacular, but they remain mysterious throughout the text as they barely inform the chapters other than to document the monument's existence and demolition. This is a lost opportunity because rather than 'reading' the images as she does with the texts, the photographs are presented as self-evident and neutral, which scholars of visual culture would challenge, especially in such a politically charged environment.

The book is organized in three chapters: "Dreaming of the Largest Monument to Stalin," "Construction with Eternity in Mind" and "Hasty Demolition." Each chapter contains two binary sections, the first is a history of the monument in one of its phases (design, construction or demolition) and the second is a deep reading of a text by a postwar Czech author. Píchová consulted archives in Prague and Brno and conducted interviews with people involved in the project. This research exposes confidential debates over site and material decisions, as well as evidence of direct political pressure on the artist to change his design to more strongly emphasize the figure of Stalin.

The first chapter is split between a discussion of the 1949 design competition and poetry by Milan Kundera and other poets at the height of Socialist Realism in the early 1950s. The historical section covers discussions about how and where to place the monument, originally intended to commemorate Stalin's seventieth birthday in 1949. Designed by sculptor Otakar Švec and the prominent communist architects, Jan Štursa and Vlasta Štursová, the controversial winning proposal showed Stalin leading a group of eight figures, four Czechoslovaks and four Russians. Over fifteen-meters tall, it perched on the front of the Letná Plain overlooking the historic city center. In the paired poetry analysis, Píchová finds traces of dissent in a poem by Kundera that praised Stalin. She uses this discovery to reinforce that dissent was present, even if artists appeared to embrace of Socialist Realism. One problematic omission in the book is a scholarly discussion of the concept of Socialist Realism. Neither my research on Czechoslovak architecture, nor the extensive work by Czech art historian Tereza Petišková on painting and the fine arts, are referenced.<sup>1</sup> The journal, *Architektura ČSR*, also devoted a long article to the competition in

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<sup>1</sup> See Petišková, Tereza: Československý socialistický realismus 1948-1958 [Czechoslovak Socialist Realism 1948-1958]. Praha 2002). – Švácha, Rostislav/Platovská, Marie: Dějiny českého výtvarného umění V (1939-1958) [History of Czech Building Art V (1939-1958)]. Praha 2005. – Zarecor, Kimberly: Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960. Pittsburgh 2011.

1950, this could have provided an account of ideas put forward by the participants and images of the competition entries.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter two is divided between recounting construction from 1950 to 1955 and an analysis of Ota Filip's 1993 novel, "Café Slavia", which uses the monument as an allegory of the failures of Communism. The process to build the monument was ill-planned and politically fraught, especially after the 1953 deaths of Stalin and Czechoslovak leader Klement Gottwald. In a chapter full of captivating images, Píchová tells of the struggles to manage the large project, with its frequent delays and personal interventions by Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký, himself trained as a stonemason. As narrated by Píchová, the construction project was doomed from the start and culminated in the suicide of Otakar Švec just weeks before the unveiling. The reasons for his suicide are disputed, but evidence shows that his name was quickly erased from public pronouncements about the project, suggesting that his personal failures threatened to further undermine the controversial monument.

As a binary for the construction process, Píchová chooses a novel that itself has a tortured and difficult history. Written by Ota Filip, who spent time in prison after the Prague Spring and who left Czechoslovakia for West Germany in 1974, "Café Slavia" is a reckoning with his own past. After revealing a 1952 escape plan for himself and men in his military unit to an uncle who went to the authorities, he was punished with hard labor, but the other men were sent to prison, something that Píchová writes "has burdened him ever since" (p. 94). In the novel, Filip centers the narrative on a fictional and personally flawed Austrian Count who is the mirror for the tumultuous events around him from 1910 to 1968. The monument's diabolical presence is heightened through literary invention, including a fictional incident in the novel in which two workers are crushed and "entombed" within the monument by a falling piece of granite.

In Píchová's energetic analysis, both she and Filip imbue this scene with major significance, she writes that

these deaths – gruesome and senseless – are recalled by the Count in an exceptionally graphic manner to install the horrific reality in his future readers' memories as a warning against possible historical repetition [...]. The workers' paltry remains [visible in the joint between two blocks], one leg and two or three bloodstains, signify the complete annihilation of an individual by an overwhelming gravitational force. (p. 100)

A force that represents the "regime's cruelty" and "a society where scruples no longer exist" (p. 101). The two sections together make clear that Filip's monstrous vision of the monument and its architect, who appears in the novel as a weak conformist, resonates much more with Píchová than the historical record she has uncovered. She even speculates that since "only information glorifying the monument was released, we may never find out the number of victims" (p. 93), as if she wants someone to have died to allow the fictional account to converge with reality.

The final chapter chronicles the monument's slow and officially secret demolition. Soviet criticism of the cult of personality required Czechoslovak authorities to take

<sup>2</sup> *Starý*, Oldřich: Pomník J. V. Stalina v Praze [The J. V. Stalin Monument in Prague]. In: *Architektura ČSR* 9 (1950) no. 3-4, 63-77.

action by early 1962. Plans for partial destruction or a replacement monument were considered and dismissed. The final decision was to take it down and replace it with a “Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship cultural center”; the demolition happened, but nothing was built in its place (p. 106). Since the legitimacy of the Communist Party was at stake, the demolition process was tightly controlled and kept out of the media. This seems unbelievable, given that the whole city was watching, but as Píchová shows there was official ‘silence,’ including a ban on photography and missing committee records.<sup>3</sup> The demolition itself proved as difficult as construction. Because of its position on the edge of Letná Plain, demolition happened through “detonative and mechanical” means, which took more than a year (p. 110). Small explosions were followed by workers chipping away at the concrete by hand; a process captured in Klimeš’s images.

The book’s final section focuses on Bohumil Hrabal’s 1965 story, “Zrada zrcadel,” which recounts the stories of three Prague statues, including the Stalin Monument, using its protagonists to reflect on the absurdity of a city that wanted to alternatively demolish and restore its many sculptures. Píchová describes Hrabal’s story as a collage of “incongruous moments,” using his term “Total Realism” to describe its method, which she writes has such accuracy that “it becomes a true-to-life document of the event” (p. 141). This once again hints at Píchová’s desire for a complete fictional world of the monument to overtake its incomplete historical record. The conclusion ruminates on the many proposals for the famous empty plinth of the “missing statue,” such as temporary art installations, a museum, a cultural center, a new national library, and even an aquarium. For Píchová, the absence remains as powerful as the statue itself in forcing people to continue to reflect on communism and its legacies.

The book will be of interest to scholars of postwar Czechoslovak history, European Stalinism and postwar Czech literature. Píchová is at her best in the literary sections, especially since she chose texts that allowed her to express opinions about the monument using the authorial voices of her subjects, rather than her own. It is obvious that in literature she finds the clearest expressions of her negative feelings about the monument and Czech communism in general. Štursa and Klimeš both talked about willingly participated in the project, yet Píchová never questions her absolute certainty that revolutionary fervor for communism, and Socialist Realism as its artistic expression, were not authentic expressions in the early 1950s. Many readers will likely agree, yet it is worth considering how a less subjective reading of the historical sources would change the book conclusions.

Ames/IA.

Kimberly Zarecor

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<sup>3</sup> Píchová may be ascribing a motive here where there is none. For example, the entire archive of Stavoprojekt, the state-run system of architecture and engineering offices, is inaccessible at the National Archives because the materials have not been catalogued (and not because there is a concern about the information). It is likely that information about the competition, construction, and demolition exists in these files.