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Ukraine: where fallen statues become resurrected as Darth Vader

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In 2015, following the establishment of [Decommunisation Law](#), Odesa's artist, [Alexander Milov](#), intentionally transformed Lenin into the villain who chose the *dark side of the force*. This humorous act of dressing Lenin in Vader's attire brings to life the often forgotten and blurred totalitarian characteristics of his persona as a way of demonising the atrocities of not only the Soviet past, but also, Russia's recent aggression towards Ukraine. The act of defacing Odesa's Lenin - rather than toppling altogether – captures city's desire to challenge and humiliate the Communist predecessor, and by extension, voicing discontent towards the Russian aggressor.

In stark contrast to Odesa, Kyiv's Lenin was aggressively and spontaneously toppled rather than deformed. This particular Lenin was the first to fall – causing a momentum across Ukraine – where far-right demonstrators toppled the statue down in early 2014. The gesture of mounting nationalistic flags and graffitiing the podium is similar to the act of marking territory during war. It signals one from the Other, where in this case it is the Ukrainian against the repressing pro-Russian Yanukovych's state. The contestation of Kyiv's toppled Lenin continued in 2018 where a monument of a hand, titled 'Middle Way', was installed by the Embassy of Romania directly in front of the naked Lenin podium. In 2019, the hand was replaced by the 'Confrontation' installation. The ongoing physical changes of the space that was once dominated by Lenin's statue allude to Ukraine's continuous dialogue about history, memory and identity.

Ukraine's experience with topplings teaches us about the dynamics of actors involved in the reconstruction of the past. Statue transformations during times of rupture involve both elites and mass public in a complex battle between who gets to remake and own history. Furthermore, Odesa's and Kyiv's insights suggest that context matters immensely, where some societies can live with transformed statues, while others cannot. We should keep in mind the lessons learnt from Ukraine when observing the topplings that are happening in the West. When a statue falls, we need to pay attention to the actors involved, historical context and the nature of the transformations, as they can tell us something insightful about the re-construction of national identity.

Events in Ukraine and in current US and Europe show that history becomes challenged during moments of social unrest, where once glorified legacies – be it of Stalin, Lenin or Colston – are put under scrutiny by society. The act of toppling and defacing statues interrupts the normalisation of historical atrocities and in turn awakens a space for dialogue between elites and mass public about their past.

Bio: Anastasiya Byesyedina is a PhD candidate at The University of Sydney in the Department of Government and International Relations. The primary goal of my study is to systematically investigate how social movements construct identity by drawing a comparison between the Ukrainian revolutions: 2004 Orange Revolution and 2013-14 Revolution of Dignity. Furthermore, I am a sessional teacher, Student Writing Fellow (for which I have received the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence as part of the Writing Fellowship program) and an ITAS tutor at The University of Sydney.

The opinions expressed in this blog are solely those of the author and not necessarily those of ESAANZ.