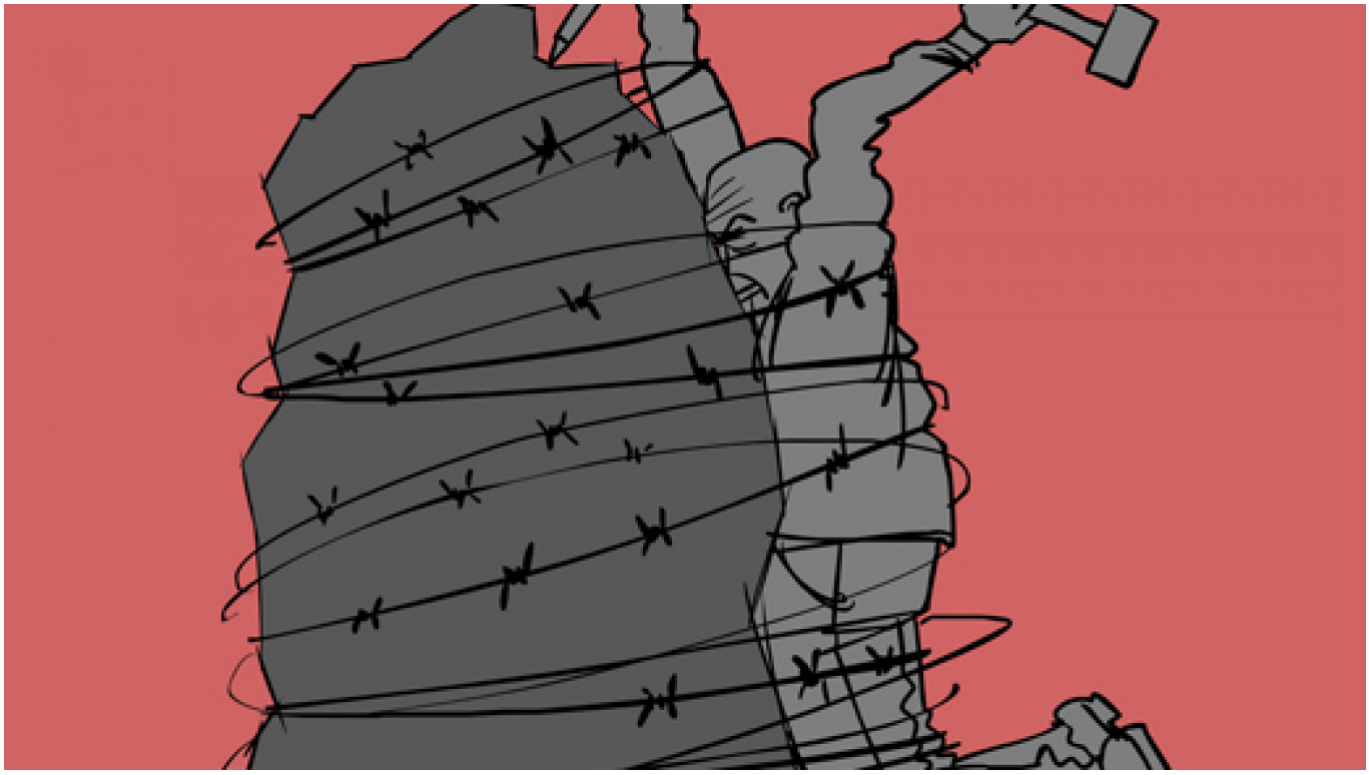
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Canada's 'Victims of Communism' Debacle (Op-Ed)

By Yakov M. Rabkin

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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been changing Canada's collective self-image. He has emphasized violent, rather than peaceful episodes, in the country's history, and had a war memorial replace artistic and literary images on the $20 bill. Now his government wants to leave an even more durable trace of its rule: a monument "to the victims of Communism."

This concrete structure is to be erected next to the Supreme Court of Canada in Ottawa. The project has drawn much criticism for poor artistic taste, inappropriate location and the cost of rededicating the space that was originally allocated for federal judicial institutions. The media has also noticed the project's partisan nature: it promotes Harper's Conservative party among voters of Eastern European origin, whose numbers in Canada are significant.

But this project also raises the issue of collective memory, which he is trying to mould as part of the radical transformation of Canadian society, pursued with remarkable ideological consistency ever since assuming power in 2006.

The name of the monument is borrowed from the vocabulary of the Cold War. Communism has so far been a vision, a goal, an aspired-to radiant future rather than an established reality. No government, whether in Moscow, Beijing or Budapest, ever proclaimed the victory of Communism. Ironically, it is among Cold War warriors that the term came to denote a political reality to be decried and denounced. To invoke Communism 25 years after the end of the Cold War fits in with the aggressively self-righteous rhetoric typical of the Harper government.

Collaborators or Patriots?

In the 1930s and 1940s, fascist groups were common in Europe, each hailing the supremacy of an ethnic group, a race or a nation. Not surprisingly, during the Nazi occupation of Europe they took part in massacres and other brutalities. As ethnic nationalism has regained prominence in recent years, several Eastern European governments are trying to present these same people as patriots and heroes. Today, one can find monuments across Eastern Europe, which honour these Nazi collaborators, including SS members, as "fighters against Communism."

To do so one needs to affirm a moral equivalence between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. An example of such an effort is a Museum of Occupations in Estonia, which first declared independence from Russia in February 1918, the very moment German troops landed on its territory.

The museum, which ignores that foundational occupation, focuses on Nazi military occupation (1941-1944) and nearly half a century of Soviet Estonia (1940-1941 and 1944-1991). The country is portrayed as a victim, even though the Estonian Nazi collaborators committed mass massacres of Jews, making Estonia one of the first to earn from Berlin the title of jüdenrein (free of Jews) and Estonians actively participated in the running of their republic during the Soviet period.

The museum, which one enters between the images of a red star and a swastika, conveys the idea that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are essentially one and the same.

More Than History

By trying to downplay the significance of the Soviet struggle against Nazism, the Harper government is following a trend common in countries of Eastern and Central Europe. He is redesigning the collective memory of World War II and reinforcing hostility toward Russia.

Harper has been by far the most provocative among leaders of major countries with respect to Russia and its president. Unlike Chinese president Xi Jinping who took part in Victory Day celebrations on Red Square, or German Chancellor Angela Merkel who went to Moscow to honour Soviet soldiers killed fighting her country, Harper scorned the occasion, thus helping erase from our collective memory the decisive role of the Soviet army, which fought the Nazis alone for nearly three years before Western allies finally landed in Normandy in June 1944.

While the war brought prosperity to North America, the Soviets paid the heaviest price for the victory, with 27 million killed and much of its industrial infrastructure destroyed.

Harper ardently supports ethnic nationalism, frequently anti-Russian, in Eastern Europe. His government allowed the Canadian Embassy in Kiev to become a safe haven for those taking part in the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in the winter of 2014. Defense Minister Jason Kenney, one of the promoters of the monument "to the victims of Communism" in Ottawa, recently visited Ukraine, where he encouraged a military confrontation with Russia.

Curiously, Canadians of Chinese and Russian descent are absent from the Tribute to Liberty group, which is behind this project, even though the numbers of "victims of Communism" in the People's Republic of China and the largest national group in the Soviet Union were incomparably higher than in all the countries of Eastern Europe combined. This further reinforces the impression that the monument's goal is to target Russia.

The monument to "the victims of Communism" is also meant to discredit any left-leaning alternative to triumphant neoliberalism. Elizabeth May of the Green Party has suggested that a monument be erected to the victims of capitalism (slavery, colonialism, exploitation, etc.), which according to some estimates, would encompass more than billion people around the world. In Ottawa there is no monument to the victims of fascism and Nazism in Europe. Nor has Canada a memorial for the victims of its own colonial wars, such as the one waged in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century.

According to a survey on the CBC news website, 88 percent of respondents were opposed to the monument. As matters now stand, the Royal Institute of Architects of Canada, Heritage Ottawa, former presidents of the Canadian Bar Association and others have objected to the project. The monument may never be built, particularly if Harper loses the election on Oct. 19.

But Harper, a consistent ideologue and a consummate politician, has already changed the image of Canada in the world and is working hard to change the way Canadians see their own future and remember their past. This makes it easier to involve our country in military adventures that have brought chaos and death to thousands of victims of Canada's recent militarism in Asia and Africa. And he has been generous with Canadian lives as well: the Canadian Forces suffered, through 2010, the highest casualty and fatality ratio among member states of the coalition fighting in Afghanistan.

He has now sent military advisors to Ukraine. Harper has been true to a promise he reportedly made in 2006: "You won't recognize Canada when I'm through with it." Indeed, many Canadians no longer recognize either their own country or its redesigned history.

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