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Lenin Statue Unveiled in Western Germany After Legal Battle

By AFP

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Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson/NPR

A divisive new monument to Soviet leader Lenin was unveiled in Germany on Saturday, in the middle of a global row over the controversial background of historical figures immortalised as statues.

More than 30 years after the post-World War II communist experiment on German soil ended, the tiny Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD) installed Lenin's likeness in the western city of Gelsenkirchen.

A few hundred gathered for the ceremony, marked by fluttering red flags and the smell of grilled sausages.

"Criticism of capitalism and the search for social alternatives is everywhere. We're criticising that there's no public discussion of socialism as an alternative," MLPD chair Gabi Fechtner

said.

The MLPD says it is the first such statue ever to be erected on the territory of the former West Germany, decades after the eastern German Democratic Republic communist state collapsed along with its deadly Berlin Wall and Stasi secret police.

"The time for monuments to racists, anti-Semites, fascists, anti-communists and other relics of the past has clearly passed," said Fechtner in an earlier statement.

"Lenin was an ahead-of-his-time thinker of world-historical importance, an early fighter for freedom and democracy."

Not everyone in Gelsenkirchen, a centre of the former industrial and mining powerhouse Ruhr region, has welcomed the over two-metre (6.5 feet) likeness, produced in former Czechoslovakia in 1957.

"Lenin stands for violence, repression, terrorism and horrific human suffering," representatives from mainstream parties on the district council in Gelsenkirchen-West said in a resolution passed in early March.

The council "will not tolerate such an anti-democratic symbol in its district," it added, urging "all legal means" be used to block its installation.

But later in March the upper state court in Muenster rejected an attempt to stop the statue that it argued would impact a historic building on the same site.

The MLPD trumpeted interest from as far away as Russia, but urged guests to maintain social distancing and wear nose and mouth coverings against coronavirus infection.

Paint-splattered Bismarck

The worldwide Black Lives Matter movement following the death of African-American George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25 has found some echo in Germany.

Unknown people splattered red paint on a statue of Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg's Altona district this week.

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The "Iron Chancellor" behind Germany's unification in 1871 is also known for hosting the Berlin Conference of 1884, which became a byword for the carving up of Africa between European colonial powers.

Berlin itself has been a hub of activism against commemorations in public space of colonialists, with much ire directed at street names honouring 19th-Century figures in the so-called "African Quarter".

But political decisions to rename roads named after figures like Adolf Luederitz, a merchant who played a key role in colonizing Namibia, or Carl Peters, a colonialist behind German

expansion in eastern Africa, have met with resistance from locals.

In decades of experience addressing the country's Nazi and communist pasts, "things have always been done properly, it all seems very German" with official applications to local authorities and orderly dismantling of monuments, said Urte Evert, head of Berlin's Spandau Citadel museum where many old statues are on display.

"We haven't made so much progress with colonialism, something the USA, Britain and France too have been confronting for much longer," Evert added.

While the United States, Britain and Belgium have seen statues of Christopher Columbus, slave trader Edward Colston and King Leopold II, brutal ruler of the Congo, attacked or removed, in Germany, only a handful of monuments have been splattered by paint.

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