

Strolling through downtown Kyiv, half a block off of Khreshchatyk, the city's broad central boulevard, something totally incongruous catches my eye and challenges my brain. Like an obscenity carved into a church pew, there, over the driveway to a venerable office building, in plain sight, is a large iron Star. The Red Star that was once ubiquitous throughout the Soviet Empire, a constant reminder of who was in charge.



As an American baby boomer, for much of my life I tended to equate the Soviet Union with permanence, an ugly dangerous thing that would always be with us. Like an ancient plague waiting to spread its infection. Or a massive meteor floating through space that might or might not strike the planet.

But today in Ukraine, as in most of the former empire, there is almost no tangible physical evidence of the Communist party's seven decades of complete and total dominance. Ugly high-rise apartment complexes are common of course, and old power plants still spew filth into the air. Monuments to the Second World War too are ever present, but somehow these are different. The political symbols of Soviet triumphalism, however, are as absent as swastikas in Germany. Very rarely one spots

a hammer & sickle high up on an unimportant building that somehow escaped decommunization, but for the most part the trademarks of scientific socialism have vanished. Thousands of emblems, statues, murals are gone. And for Ukrainians, this is as it should be. Why should a people whose ancestors were deported to Siberia, or who experienced the man-made famine of the Holodomor (when millions – yes millions – died of hunger) be reminded of their former colonial masters?

Great monuments of the Assyrians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and others still stand. But Communism's Ukrainian heritage survives only in a few small irrelevant ways, like the old Soviet military medals sold in Kyiv's Podil street market. Aside from the Third Reich, did ever a political movement ever sink beneath the surface and leave so few visible vestiges?

The exception is those parts of Ukraine that the Russians have stolen, where Soviet statues are back in fashion, along with their companions, fear, thuggery, and incompetence. Make of that what you will.

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