

Canada's Stephen Harper Wants to Redesign a New Collective Memory of World War II

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Stephen Harper has been changing our collective self-image. He has emphasized the martial, rather than the peace-making episodes, in our history, and had a war memorial replace art and literary images on the ubiquitous 20-dollar bill. Now his government wants to leave an even more durable trace of its rule: a "monument to the victims of Communism". The concrete structure is to be erected near the Supreme Court.

Irregularities and waste plaguing this project have already become the object of criticism. So has its partisan nature, promoting Mr Harper's party among voters of Eastern European origin. But this project also raises the issue of collective memory, which he tries to mould as part of the radical transformation of Canadian society, pursued with remarkable ideological consistency ever since assuming power.

The name of the monument is borrowed from the vocabulary of the Cold War. Communism has always been a vision, a goal, a future to be constructed 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 twenty-five 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, fascists were common in Europe, each hailing the supremacy of an ethnic group, a race or a nation. Naturally, during the Nazi occupation of Europe they took part in massacres and other brutalities. As ethnic nationalism has re-emerged in recent years, monuments have cropped up in Eastern Europe to honour these Nazi collaborators, including SS members, nowadays presented as patriots who struggled against "Communism".

To do so one needs to declare a moral equivalence between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In Estonia, for instance, I have visited a "museum of occupations", where four years of Nazi military occupation are put side by side with half a century of peace-time Soviet Estonia. The country, where the war Nazi collaborators exterminated virtually every Jew, making Estonia one of the first to earn from Berlin the title of *jüdenrein* (free of Jews), is portrayed as an innocent victim. 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 that destroyed it are basically the same.



Stephen Harper and Ukraine President Poroshenko

By trying to downplay the role of the Soviet Union in the struggle against Nazism, the Harper government tries to shape a new collective memory of World War II all the while reinforcing hostility toward Russia. Mr Harper has been by far the most hostile to Russia among world leaders. Unlike the Chinese president, who took part in V-Day celebrations on Red Square, or the German Chancellor who went to Moscow to honour Soviet soldiers killed fighting her country, Mr Harper scorned the occasion, thus helping erase from our collective memory the decisive role of the Soviet army, which resisted the Nazis all alone for nearly three years. At the same time, Mr Harper ardently supports ethnic nationalism, frequently anti-Russian. As it just turned out, his government allowed the Canadian Embassy to become a haven for anti-government rebels in Ukraine.

Defence Minister Jason Kenney who promotes the monument “to the victims of Communism” in Ottawa recently visited Ukraine where he encouraged a military confrontation with Russia. Curiously, Canadians of Chinese or Soviet descent are absent from the group Tribute to Liberty, which is behind this project, even though the number of “victims of communism” in the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union is incomparably higher than in all the countries of Eastern Europe combined.

The monument to “the victims of Communism” is also meant to discredit any left-leaning alternative to a triumphant neoliberalism. Elizabeth May of the Green Party has suggested that a monument be erected to the victims of capitalism (slavery, colonialism, exploitation, etc.), according to some estimates, over a billion people around the world. In Ottawa there is no monument to the victims of fascist regimes in Europe or to the victims of the Nazi regime in Germany. There is no monument to the victims of the vile treatment of the First Nations, which the official commission has recently termed “cultural genocide”. Canada has no monument for the victims of its own colonial wars, such as the one waged in South Africa, where the troops of the British Empire invented the concentration camp, an innovation that quickly spread to other places.

According to a survey on the CBC website, 88% 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 another party is elected next autumn. But Mr Harper, a consistent ideologue and a consummate politician, has already made political capital off this project. More importantly, he has changed the image of Canada in the world and is working hard to change the way we see our future and remember our past.

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