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DECOMMUNIZATION/RENAMING IN ODESSA REGION: HISTORICAL COMPARISON, METHODS AND RESULTS

- Abstract -

The issue is considered in the discourse of decommunization/ renaming in Ukraine and, in particular, in Odesa region after the events of the Revolution of Dignity and the adoption of laws on decommunization in 2015. Against the background of the retrospective into the history of World War II, the methods of “decommunization” of the society under occupation are shown. Modern Ukrainian authorities have made significant gains in decommunizing through renaming cities, settlements, streets and squares, which is the mental release of ordinary Ukrainians from the ideological dependence of the past.

Keywords: decommunization, Odesa region, Stalinism, communist ideology.

Renaming the streets is not decommunization! Decommunization is not just a change of names. It is important to realize that we are talking about the values which a new Ukrainian society should be built on. The main thing is the change in consciousness, rethinking of the past. The key to this process is the condemnation of totalitarianism. The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on behalf of the people has proclaimed that totalitarian practices are unacceptable for Ukraine, regardless of the colour they are. This dialogue about the past will last for a long time, Ukrainian historian and publicist Oleksandr Zinchenko believes. Since every generation has its own memory about the past ...

Old pre-revolutionary street nominations for us, the students of the Faculty of History of the 80s of the last century, were rather anachronistic, but for those who were more than half a century older than us, these were their historic memories – Red Army Str. – Preobrazhens’ka Str., K. Marksa Str.– Katerynyns’ka Str., Peace Avenue – Oleksandrivs’kyy Avenue ... Despite the ideological pressure from the

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promoters and supporters of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the old pre-revolutionary names were acceptable for them!

At the time of military confrontation in World War II, the Romanian administration in Odesa, in collaboration with the Russian national chauvinists, who dreamt of “Great Russia without Bil’shovky”, renamed the streets and squares too, as though they were confident that they had “captured history”¹ for years to come. The adherents of the Russian etatistic anti-Bil’shovyk ideology also took care of rooting/returning the old propaganda forms. The Soviet system of the 20-30s of the twentieth century had been changing, becoming an integral matter in carrying out “decommunization “ and “de-Stalinization” in an occupying way, first of all, in terms of renaming streets, parks, avenues, libraries, etc. “Decommunization” in Odesa began literally a month after the end of hostilities in the southwest theatre of the German-Soviet and Romanian-Soviet front. By the Decree No. 8 of Odesa Municipality dated November 19, 1941, City Mayor G. Pyntya undertook the responsibility to introduce the names of the majority of the streets according to the city plan of 1914, i.e. pre-revolutionary names used in the tsarist times were returning. However, three central streets of Odesa received new names. Thus, the 10th Anniversary of the Red Army Str. (before the Bil’shovyk coup in 1917 and now it is called – Preobrazhensraya Str.) was to be called “His Majesty the King Mihai I Str.”; K. Marksa Str. (before the Bil’shovyk coup and now it is called Katerynyns’ka Str.) was renamed into “Adolph Hitler, the leader of Great Germany Str.”, and the street of the Bil’shovyk People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs G. Chicherin (before the Bil’shovyk coup and now it is called Uspens’ka Str.) was named as “Marshala Iona Antonescu, leader of Romania Str.”²

By the order of the City Mayor, a commission was formed in Odessa, headed by Professor of History and Philology Faculty of Odesa University and Director of the Historical and Archaeological Museum V.I. Selinov. The commission immediately drafted a project list of the main names of the streets of Odesa, and in January 1942 it was reviewed and approved by the Scientific and Technical Council of Odesa Municipality and submitted for approval by the City Mayor. In early February 1942, the aforementioned commission completed its work on other street names. The names of the streets which contained Jewish names or surnames caused active discussions. Taking into account the anti-Semitic attitudes of some Romanian officials, who were under the influence of the German Nazis, Yevreys’ka Str. was

¹ The expression used by the Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak in the book *26th Procent, or how to overcome history*, K.: Poroshenko Foundation, 2014, 136 p.

² “Odesskaya gazeta”, 1941, 26 noyabrya.

renamed into Skobeleva³ Str. and Isaaca Babelya Str. was renamed into “Duce Mussolini Str.” Trying to perpetuate their role in the struggle against “Stalin’s Communist yoke”, the Romanian occupation officials managed to rename Politseys’ka Str. into “October 16, 1941 Str.”⁴ At the same time, the existence of both outdated names and the new ones was often observed in the streets of the city, which caused active dissatisfaction and appeals to the authorities to introduce unified nameboards on all streets of the city of the advocates of the “new orders”.

The article entitled “On Monuments, Portraits and Inscriptions” in the newspaper “Molva” was especially sardonic. It presented the scheme of forming the cult of J. Stalin and his successors. At first, after the October Revolution of 1917, the Bil’shovyks, having seized power, destroyed the monuments of the old regime, and after that their communist leaders were set on the pedestals, for example, in Kiev on the Dums’ka Square instead of P. Stolypin, there was placed a bust of K. Marx. A monument to General M. Skobelev was replaced by a monument to Yuri Dolgoruky. And then one thing led to another. Everywhere there appeared bronze, copper, gypsum monuments to Lenin, Stalin and others. The monuments to the “genius father of the people” were everywhere, at every turn, on the squares, at the crossroads, at the stadiums, near the libraries, clubs, at the houses of scientists – in a word, everywhere! Later on, Stalin began to name the towns after himself. He did not take the risk of renaming Moscow and he turned his grace to the provincial centres, having named them as Stalingrad, Stalin, Stalin, Stalinobad.

Somewhat different things were happening to the less significant figures of the “social revolution”, especially to those who did not get along with Stalin. Referring to the names of the cities, it should be noted that, as the newspaper “Molva” wrote, the less the significance of the leader was, the smaller was the town which received his name, and since the “leaders” became “the enemies of the people” very often, the town was renamed again. For example, as it was with the town of Zinov’yivs’k, which received its name from Yelisavetgrad, and after the assassination of the secretary of Leningrad Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bilshoviks Serhiy Kirov, the town was given the name of Kirov. It was not without curiosities, so in the Russian town of Perm, several railway stations were called “Perm I”, “Perm II”, and when Perm was renamed into Molotov, nobody dared to call these stations in a similar way, fearing dissatisfaction of the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs who was a person close to Stalin.

³ Skobelyev Mykhaylo Dmytrovych – Russian military leader, general of infantry, adjutant general. A participant in the aggressive campaigns of the Russian Empire in Central Asia and the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878; he also participated in the liberation of Bulgaria.

⁴ “Odesskaya gazeta”, 1942, 17 fevralya.

Marshal of the USSR, the former Commander of the 1st Cavalry Army Semen Budyonnyy was lucky as most of the collective farms, state farms and stud farms were given his name.

Thus, trying to immortalize themselves in history, the Bil'shovyky changed the geographic map of the country beyond recognition. "The great liberation war removed the figures of self-appointed rulers from the pedestals and eliminated their names from the nameboards nailed on the corner of the streets"⁵, concluded the editorial office. This peculiar excursion in remote history will remain a definite experience from a distant totalitarian past, a subjectivist attitude to history and its characters.

And what happened in Odesa region after the events of the Revolution of Dignity⁶ and how was the policy of decommunization being carried out in the region of the influence of the "Russian world?" In the country as a whole, according to the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine A. Porubiy, decommunization of the settlement names was almost completed⁷. We agree with the Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament and would like to emphasize that, without any doubt, the question of decommunization is no less important than the question of judicial reform or national security. In our opinion, this matter is strategic and conceptual.

After the entry into force of the law "On the Conviction of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of the Promotion of Their Symbols"⁸, the map of the names of streets in Odesa region changed significantly. However, the oblast took only the 10th place in the number of decommunized streets. Within a year there appeared around 460 renamed streets on Yandex. Maps. Odesa Oblast was between Sumy Oblast (440 renames) and Vinnytsia Oblast (470 renames).

In the first echelon of changes in the names of the streets there were streets named after the Bil'shovyk experimenter – V. Lenin, pseudo-heroes of the Bil'shovyk Revolution – RSCHA commanders⁹ G. Kotovsky, V. Chapayev and

⁵ "Molva", 1942, 20 dekabrya.

⁶ Revolution of Dignity (EuroMaydan, Kyiv Maidan) was a political and social change in Ukraine, which began on November 21, 2013; it was caused by the protests against the deviation of the political leadership of the country from the course on Eurointegration. One of the reasons for the protests was the excessive concentration of power in the hands of Viktor Yanukovich, his environment, the reluctance of Ukrainians to put up with the transformation of Ukraine into a colony of Russia.

⁷ "Solidarnist". Partiyana hazeta", №1 (70), 2017, 17 sichnya.

⁸ This law was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on April 9, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada signed it on April 30, 2014, and on May 15, 2015, the law was signed by President Petro Poroshenko.

⁹ Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, armed forces of the Soviet Union.

others. The rest of the streets were “Komsomol”, “October”, “Comintern”, etc. Today's statistics of the renamed streets is as follows: 41 Lenin Streets, “Komsomol” and “Chapaev” Streets – 25 streets of each name, “October Street” – 23 streets and 17 streets named after Kotovskyy.

The striking difference from other regions of Ukraine lies in the fact that in Odesa region local authorities and communities gave neutral names to the streets and squares for the most part, avoiding ideological/party bindings. Instead of “Soviet” Streets, “Apricot”, “Grape”, “Guelder-rose” and “Cossack” Streets appeared in the region. However, the largest number of streets appeared to have such names as “Central” – 12, “Cathedral” and “Peace” – ten streets of each name.

While choosing the names of the streets, religious issues predominated; thus, in Odesa region there were 20 streets named in honour of the church holidays, Christian saints, etc., “Trinity”, “Pokrovskaya”, “Ascension” Streets being predominant. 18 streets referred to neutral names, which were too remote from the political context – “Cherry”, “Honey” and “Bread” Streets. An example of the tiredness of various communities – urban and rural ones by the politicization of everyday life of an average person, the bloody totalitarian past is the third group of streets, the essence of their names conveyed feelings and emotions (for example, “Happy”, “Joyful”, “Cozy” Streets), the number of such streets was 15. Sometimes, decommunization was brought to the point of absurdity, when the only Lenin Street in the village was renamed into a neutral “Steppe Street” (for example, the village of Nova Hryhorivka near Odesa). Sometimes the streets were given “convenient” names, similar to the previous ones. In Vilkovo (Southern Bessarabia) “Soviet Army” and “Soviet Border Guards” Streets were renamed into “Ukrainian Army” and “Ukrainian Border Guards”¹⁰ ones.

Renaming affected not only the streets, squares and public squares. Cities, settlements, objects of economic activity were renamed. According to the press office of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 987 towns and 25 regions¹¹ were renamed in 2016 in Ukraine. In the settlements of the country, almost 51,500 toponyms were renamed, 2,389 monuments and memorable signs which contained propaganda of the totalitarian regime were dismantled. Recently, on November 11, 2017, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Andriy Parubiy noted that the “mental de-occupation of the Ukrainian nation” took place in the country. Having dismantled 1,320 monuments to V. Lenin and hundreds of other monuments connected with the totalitarian regime since May 2015, “we threw out

¹⁰ <https://www.izbirkom.org.ua>.

¹¹ <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/28313711.html#comments>.

forces that propagated the anti-human criminal communist ideology into the political dump”¹², said the Speaker of the Parliament.

Within the framework of decomunization, the Ukrainian government renamed, for example, two southern Ukrainian sea ports. From now on, the port of Illichivsk, like the town itself, is called “Chornomors’k”, and the specialized seaport “Oktyabrs’k” is called “Ol’viya”. Similar changes were made to the infrastructure of the railway transport. “Tsyuryupinsk” station has been renamed into “Oleshki” railway station. 16 out of 28 infrastructural facilities at Odesa railway were subjected to decomunization and dismantled, and relevant works were carried out at 7 infrastructural facilities. However, two infrastructural facilities, depicting the events of World War II and the so-called “Great Patriotic War” are still in dispute.

One of them has gained wide publicity in the media and is perceived differently among the residents. It is about a bas-relief on the facade of Odesa railway station, where there are images of V. Lenin and J. Stalin. The “Odesa-Holovna” central railway station designed by L. Chuprin was built in 1950-1952. In the middle of February 2016 the Advisory Council on the Cultural Heritage of Odesa region concluded, “The elements widely used in decoration of the exteriors and interiors of the railway station are an integral part of the building, and, therefore, cannot be removed according to the Law on Decomunization”. We are talking specifically about the bas-relief composition connected with the courage of the city residents during the defence of Odessa in 1941 and the victory in World War II. On the medal “To a Partisan of the Patriotic War” there are profiles of V. Lenin and J. Stalin.

Par. 3 of Art. 4 of the Law of Ukraine “On Decomunization”¹³ states that the prohibition of symbols of the communist regime does not apply to cases of use in works of art created prior to the entry into force of the current law, state awards, jubilee medals and other honours awarded to persons until 1991. In 1982, Odesa railway station building was recognized as an architectural monument of local significance and taken under the protection of the state. In accordance with Article 22 of the Law of Ukraine “On the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage”, such objects and their segments are not to be changed or demolished. In this case, the mentioned above Advisory Board recognized that “all the decorative elements of the station building are authentic, have a high artistic, architectural and historical value

¹² <https://www.unian.ua/politics/2237909-v-ukrajini-u-ramkah-dekomunizatsiji-pereymenovano-mayje-tisyachu-mist-i-sil-ta-demontovano-ponad-13-tisyach-pamyatnikiv-leninu.html>.

¹³ See: Par. 3 of Art. 4 of the Law of Ukraine of 09.04.2015 №317-VIII “On Conviction of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of Their Symbols” // <http://izbirkom.org.ua/news/Obschestvo-19/2016/Odesskaya-oblast-nazvana-hudshey-po-dekommunizatsii-6182>.

and cannot be considered separately from the structure of the station-monument; therefore, they cannot be dismantled”¹⁴.

Representatives of patriotic centres, including All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” party, took an active position in the case of decommunization in Odesa. The head of the city organization of this political force S. Soltasyuk applied with letters to the President of Ukraine, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Head of the Government of Ukraine, the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure of Ukraine, the Minister of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with a request to oblige the city council to deconstruct 5 memorial plates dedicated to Marshal of the USSR G. Zhukov, as well as boards in honour of G. Kotovskyy and the “wall of Cheka officers.”

The process of decommunization, even in this form, reduced to renaming the streets, became a test both for local authorities and the population. As it can be seen from the recent practice, the previous authorities afforded undisguised and arrogant legal nihilism, refusing to comply with state laws, and society, in the vast majority, showed complete ignorance of local history and its historical characters. Here we fully agree with the exact characteristic of this particular problem, which the senior researcher of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance Bohdan Korolenko defines as “the broken continuity of historical and human existence”.

In conclusion, we will put an equally important issue both for Ukraine and for our neighbours, who tear the shackles of the totalitarian past on their hands.

Can a simple prohibition of any symbols be effective in the process of building a society free of communist (Nazi) ideology and practice? Would such a policy lead to the assimilation of the communist symbols by the youth culture through its prohibition? We must take into account this hidden side of decommunization, too. Indeed, the experience of Norway proves just that. A similar viewpoint was expressed by Swedish politician Goran Lindblad¹⁵, one of the authors of the PACE Resolution No. 1481 “Need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes” (2006). The politician is convinced that a simple prohibition may not be effective¹⁶. Let’s recollect T-shirts with images of E. Che Guevara, “sickle and hammer”, the inscriptions “I want to the USSR”, etc. which were common in Ukraine. We must realize that this is a paradoxical nostalgia for young people who did not live at that time and, accordingly, they do not know anything about it! “A prohibition of the symbols of Nazism and the emblems of Nazism does

¹⁴ Such was the answer to the request from the regional branch of “Ukrzaliznytsya” – the Odessa railway, published by IzbirKom, as reported by the “E-95 Route” agency (<http://trassae95.com>).

¹⁵ Since 2011, G. Lindblad has been the president of the non-governmental organization “European Platform for Memory and Conscience”.

¹⁶ <http://tyzhden.ua/News/183896>.

not mean that Sweden does not have any neo-Nazi movements, or other countries do not have them, too”, says the Swedish politician.

Therefore, it seems to us that prohibition of the symbols and emblems of the Communist Party in Ukraine is necessary only in the context of raising the historical awareness of the population, in the words of Y. Hrytsak, “overcoming our own history!”