

Soviet Memorial in Former Communist States: The Case of Ploiesti



Age group: 16 to 18 years old



Time: 100 minutes

Key question: How are the perceptions of national heroes changing over time? How do different perspectives of the same figure appear in society?



Materials needed for the lesson: Photo of the Columbus Monument to show in class, one copy of the worksheet for each group of students, and cards with the excerpts. If it is considered necessary, the glossary and the guiding questions. If the activity is done in the classroom instead of in situ, provide photos of the monument's details (printed or on digital support) for each group.

Skills and Concepts developed in the lesson plan:

C.1.2: Using specific historical terms to coordinate a presentation about a historical event or process.

C.3.4: Analysing the diversity of social, cultural, and political perspectives in the contemporary world.

C.4.1: Identifying the consequences of human actions on the heritage and the environment.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify the historical context of the Soviet arrival in Ploiești (August 1944).
- Deconstruct the visual symbolism of the Soviet Monument using the 'Monumental Challenges' framework.
- Argue why the monument is considered 'controversial' by comparing the official 1950s narrative with modern historical perspectives

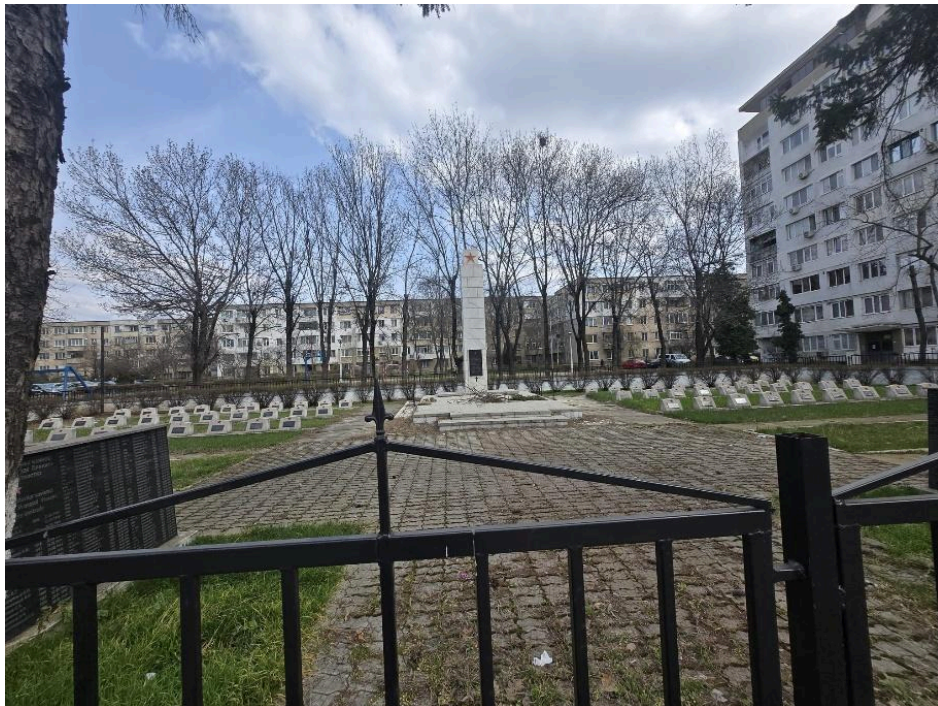
Breakdown of Activities Step-by-step

Step 1

Class discussion

In a classroom, this would be the start of the activity - a warm-up reflection in which you discuss the nature of monuments with your students. You might reflect on the following questions:

- ★ Why do we make them?
- ★ What forms do they take?



You might also look at specific examples and debate what people or events are memorialised, what memorials say about a society's values, and what the symbolic nature of monuments is. This part of the activity would last around 8-10 minutes.

Romanian Army did not betray: a short movie showing the importance of the Romanian Army during the Second World War: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQifqXU2Cp4>

Step 2

Analyse and reflect upon specific monuments to Soviet memorials



Links to images:

- ★ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_War_Memorial_\(Tiergarten\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_War_Memorial_(Tiergarten))
- ★ https://www.reddit.com/r/comicbooks/comments/2e0gik/people_in_bulgaria_painted_a_n_old_soviet_monument/
- ★ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_War_Memorial_\(Treptower_Park\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_War_Memorial_(Treptower_Park))
- ★ The Soviet Soldier Monument in Ploiesti, photo credit: Ioana Ionescu. Courtesy of the owner.
- ★ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Soldier_of_Tallinn
- ★ <https://www.google.com/search?q=monumentul+eroilor+sovietici+bucuresti&oq=monumentul+eroilor+sovietici+bucuresti>

Examine 'soviet soldier ' statues in various countries. Students are encouraged to identify the symbols and their meanings, and asked to describe how these representations vary by country.

Based on this, you can explain to students the iconography of the 'soviet soldier statue in Ploiesti and initiate a debate about the meaning of the symbols and the information on the plaque.

How does the representation of 'Soviet heroes' change from country to country?

Write at least 50 words on how the representation of Soviet memorials in the monuments differs from country to country

What did you get right and wrong?

Download and read the PDF of the plaque from one of the statues. Write 50 words on what you think the plaque should contain the plaque and, if it is in Russian, what it needs to be brought up to nowadays.

https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Monumentul_eroilor_sovietici_din_Suceava2.jpg

Step 3

Make some constructive criticism of some of the "Soviet heroes" monuments/memorials.

Action → Question 1

Pick 1 monument and explain three good qualities that it has.

Action → Question 2

Pick 1 monument and explain three negative qualities that it has

Step 4

The Ploiești 'Memory Council' Debate

The Scenario: Ploiești City Hall is holding a public hearing. A decision must be made:

Should the monument stay as it is, be modified with a 'Truth Plaque,' or be moved to a museum of communism?

1. The Roles: divide the class into groups and assign them roles

The Traditional Historian	Focuses on the 1944 context and the defeat of Nazism.	Text Analysis: Task questions based on the text: 1. Identify the metaphor used in the text to describe the effect these monuments have on the psychology of the Romanian people. <i>(Expected answer: 'schizoid memory' or 'memory engineering').</i> 2. Why does historian Șerban Pavelescu consider that these monuments make us vulnerable today? <i>(Expected answer: They allow for the reuse of propaganda within the current geopolitical context).</i> Formulate a legal counterargument: Which institution in Romania protects these monuments, and why can they not simply be torn down overnight? <i>(Expected answer: National Office for Heroes Worship, based on international conventions).</i> https://pressone.ro/serban-pavelescu-despre-cimitirele-sovietice-din-romania-istoria-si-soarta-acestor-monumente-este-legata-de-felul-in-care-regimul-politic-comunist-a-inteles-sa-rescrie-istoria
The Former Political Prisoner	Focuses on the 1947–1958 occupation and the 'SovRoms.'	'This soldier didn't bring freedom; he brought a different cage. Every time I see this statue, I remember the friends I lost in the Pitești or Sighet prisons.' https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/hunedoara/marturii-rare-despre-armata-rosie-din-romania-2008277.html
The Modern Urban Architect	Focuses on the 'Heritage' and the city's aesthetic.	'The monument is a high-quality piece of Socialist Realist art. We shouldn't destroy art just because we dislike the era it came from.' https://artmargins.com/the-socialist-life-of-modern-architecture-bucharest-1949-1964/
The High School Student	The High School Student Focuses on the future	'I don't feel 'liberated' or 'oppressed' by a statue. I just want to know the truth. We need a way to make this monument a lesson, not a symbol.' 'One of the issues is the following: usually, there were no battles fought where these cemeteries are located. That is the first statement that needs to be made. In some of them, there are Soviet casualties, but they died under what we might call common-law circumstances. We had a case with an archivist

	and education.	from Sibiu who accidentally discharged his weapon into a Soviet officer standing above him on the balcony. There are also many other cases where official Soviet soldiers died due to behavioural issues. A portion of the victims appeared after the front had already passed. The Soviets did not build these cemeteries solely for those who had died. They did it as part of a state policy. These are sites that never disappear. And they can subsequently become the object of political negotiation between two states. There is international legislation, the Geneva Convention, which obliges states to protect these burial grounds, these monuments, which serve as reminders of traumatic past events that must remain part of people's historical identity.
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During the debate, students must use their photos to support their points. For example:

The Historian might point to the red star in your photo to talk about the harsh conditions of the front lines in 1944.

The Political Prisoner might point to the high pedestal in your photo as a symbol of how the Soviet Union looked down upon and dominated the Romanian people.

The Architect might point to the sculptural details (stonework) to argue for its preservation as a historical artefact.

How to use your photos in the classroom:

- ★ The 'Silent Gallery Walk': Print your photos and place them around the room. Have students walk around and stick 'Post-it' notes on them with one word describing an emotion the photo evokes (e.g., *Power, Fear, Pride, Coldness*).
- ★ The 'Zoom-In' Technique: Show a close-up photo of just the soldier's face or the inscription. Ask: *'What is the sculptor trying to tell us about this man's character?'*
- ★ The 'Then and Now' Comparison: If you have a photo of the monument's current state (perhaps with graffiti or in disrepair), compare it to an archive photo from the 1950s. Ask: *'Why has the city's relationship with this object changed?'*



In the first image, there are delegations of workmen that are laying wreaths at the monument and in the second image, the mayor of Ploiești, Pata Nicolae, is revealing the monument on the 23rd of August 1949.



In the second image, there are children playing in the cemetery in August 2017.

Step 5

Post-Debate Reflection: The Ploiești Monument

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. The Perspective Shift

During the debate, which role (other than your own) presented the most convincing argument? Write down one specific point they made that made you stop and think.

Example: 'The Architect made me realize that even if we hate the history, the statue itself is a unique piece of 1950s art that can't be replaced.'

2. Using the Visual Evidence

Look at the photos provided by the teacher again. Choose one specific detail (the obelisk, the plaque, the inscription, or the weathering/damage on the stone).

Detail chosen: _____

How does this detail support the 'Occupier' narrative?

How does this detail support the 'Liberator' narrative?

3. The 'Monumental' Conclusion

After hearing all sides, what is your personal recommendation for the future of the Ploiești Soviet Soldier? (Check one)

☐ Preservation: Keep it exactly as it is to respect the original historical intent.

☐ Relocation: Move it to a museum or a 'Statue Park' (like Memento Park in Budapest).

☐ Contextualization: Keep it in place but surround it with modern educational signs/art that tell the 'whole story.'

Justify your choice in 2-3 sentences:

4. Self-Assessment (Competency 3.4)

On a scale of 1 to 5, how well do you feel you understood the 'other side' of this controversy today? (1 = I still only see one side; 5 = I fully understand why this is a complex historical challenge)

Rating: [5] [4] [3] [2] [1]

Assessment Guidance

When reviewing these sheets, look for students who mention the strategic importance of Ploiești's oil or the duration of the Soviet presence (1944–1958). This shows they are connecting the local monument to the broader national curriculum.

Monument information background

The soviet memorials in Romania serve a purpose in imposing Soviet sacrifice, victory, and superiority, though they do so in different ways. The quick construction, militaristic aspect and central location reflect the prominent role of Soviet Sacrifice in Allied victory. The constructions send a message of dominance. About 150 Red Army soldiers were buried on the grounds, but not all of them died as liberators; as the survivors said, most of them had their guns discharged or were involved in scandals and fights because they drank too much. The plaques of the monument are written in Cyrillic, and there is no information in the Romanian language regarding the events or the names of the soldiers. The memorial stands on the busy Republic street. Ploiești has a history concerning this way of government. The Republic of Ploiești is the name of a movement from August 8, 1870, considered the last great attempt at revolution in the Romanian space of the 19th century or the last wave of the revolution of 1848. In Romanian historiography before 1989, this movement was considered anti-dynastic. Also, the name of the street suggested the victory of communism over the monarchy. Before 1944, the name of the street was King Ferdinand I, as a symbol of royalty during the interwar period, and the communists changed it immediately after gaining power.

The Ploiesti Goddess of Victory, a commemoration of Romanian independence from 1877, sits a mile south along Republic Boulevard. This sector, dense with monuments, memorialised significant periods of Romanian history. The Soviet memorial's addition to the already defined space forces the inclusion of Soviet victory into the city and country's commemoration.

The monument was built in 1949, giving Soviet planners time to carefully craft every aspect to communicate specific messages. The memorial is only in Russian, suggesting the importance of the occupiers and the fact that the territory was occupied by a great power and it was Sovietised.

The communist ideologues used it for celebrations of Victory Day and Liberation Day. The functional use is consistent with the Great Patriotic War mindset that "no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten", deriving meaning from past suffering. Holding celebratory events there gave it an active role, continually imposing the idea of liberation. The Soviet memorial in Ploiesti advanced a common postwar Soviet agenda.

Originally, intentions were rooted in the events of the Second World War, aimed at educating the Romanian population on the Soviet narrative, commemorating sacrifice, and reminding the Western Allies of the indispensable wartime role. As Europe settled into division in what would become the Cold War, Ploiesti became a microcosm of the broader struggle. The messages of these monuments shifted with regional and world developments. After the fall of communism, many people in Eastern Europe viewed Soviet memorials as symbols of domination and suppression, a sentiment many continue to harbour today. In recent years, Vladimir Putin's leadership has revived Russia's regional and global position in part by adopting Soviet strategies.

This trend has renewed disagreement about the meaning of Soviet symbols.¹ Street names and monuments in Ploiesti and all over the country were caught in the crosshairs of a contentious debate as the population grappled with interpreting the RCP legacy.

After conquering the power, the Soviets erased all the monuments and symbols of the monarchy, which is another example of contested memory. So, Romania had to “make a break with the past”, resulting in Ploiesti’s “unwisely buried and denied” history. In Romania, politicians issued the Proclamation of Timisoara in 1990, proposing that former high-ranking communists be banned from public office for 10 years. The subject of years of debate, the proposal represented popular disagreement with the former regime. Russia experienced widespread condemnation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Veterans and monuments became frequent targets for their representation of the failed Soviet system. Attacks on the Soviet liberation narrative were rampant and drew comparisons to fascism, contradictory to fundamental communist beliefs. National humiliation encompassed Russia until the mid 1990s economic depression set in. At the 1993 Victory Day Demonstration, many of the common people joined the celebration in defence of Red Army veterans, relating their own struggle in the economic downturn to the vigorous criticism against the veterans’ efforts. The idea of the Great Patriotic War emphasising martyrdom, suffering and trauma linked these to previously sparring groups.² Preserving Soviet memorials is a way to perpetuate the memory of Soviet success. It creates a self-reinforcing cycle, justifying the contemporary rationalisation that serves to improve future prospects of its existence. Proponents of Soviet memorials concentrate on the act of victory, resembling the 1945 Soviet liberator interpretation. Others view them as expressions of Soviet domination, instead focusing on the inability to interpret history individually during the Soviet period. These polarised understandings represent the collective past struggles of individuals.

In conclusion, the Soviet monument located in Ploiesti exemplifies the impact of shifting contexts on the meaning of public space. Initially imposing Soviet dominance and ideology, they still stand today, albeit with varying meanings according to different people. The Ploiesti memorial epitomises the Soviet paradox by suggesting that the Soviet spirit is alive. With contemporary Russia assuming the Soviet Union’s legacy, Russians retain the Soviet sentiments of ideology, war memory, and symbolism. Additionally, Soviet memorials have acquired new meaning as representatives of the Soviet past and Russian present and future, adding an active political role. Russia’s geopolitical reorientation means that Soviet memorials will be at the forefront of future controversy. Though people will remember Soviet repression, Russia will overtake the memorials’ symbolism. No end is in sight for the memorials in Ploiesti. Diplomacy between Russian and Romanian delegations will be necessary, as the agreement states no expiration. It will require a concerted effort, as they are funeral monuments and are too complex to simply move or take down. Whether Soviet planners purposely included seemingly endless life as an expression of domination is doubtful. However, the contemporary political environment created largely from the Soviet past seems to suggest eternal life for the Ploiesti memorials.

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<https://pressone.ro/serban-pavelescu-despre-cimitirele-sovietice-din-romania-istoria-si-soarta-acestor-monumente-este-legata-de-felul-in-care-regimul-politic-comunist-a-inteles-sa-rescrie-istoria>, 16.05.2026

² Alexander Collins, Ideology, narrative and adaptation: A case study of the Soviet war memorials in Berlin [file:///04_alexander_ideology_narrative_and_adaptation%20\(1\).pdf](file:///04_alexander_ideology_narrative_and_adaptation%20(1).pdf), 18.05.2026