

141 Years On, Lenin's Legacy Floundering

April 24, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Workers have begun pulling down the largest statue of Vladimir Lenin in Central Asia from its place of honor, earning outrage from die-hard communists celebrating the 141st anniversary of the revolutionary's birth.

A significant but waning number of people in former Soviet countries remain faithful to the iconic founder of the Soviet state even 20 years after the collapse of communism. Lenin statues were demolished as Communist regimes crumbled two decades ago, but the monuments remain ubiquitous — and sometimes controversial — across parts of the former Soviet Union still ambivalent about the era.

As hundreds of Communists laid flowers at Lenin's Red Square tomb in Moscow, workers in Tajikistan were dismantling the 22.5-meter Lenin monument in the city center of Khujand, once known as Leninabad in honor of the Soviet founder.

The statue, which was built in 1974 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the leader's death, is being moved to a new location next to a war memorial on the western fringe of the

city.

City authorities insist there is no political motive, but that doesn't wash with Tajik Communist Party leader Shoddi Shabdolov.

"Nobody can rewrite the history," Shabdolov said. "More than half the world's population supports the ideas of Lenin and understands that socialism and equality are what we need, not democracy, which creates a fake sense of equality."

Workers will be painstakingly taking the statue apart over several weeks to avoid damaging it. The sheer size of some Lenins has made relocating them hard work: When city authorities in Karaganda, an industrial town in central Kazakhstan, decided last year to move their 270-ton granite Lenin, they had to import specialized material from Switzerland to cut the statue into more easily transportable pieces.

Lenin's embalmed body remains on display in its glass case in the landmark mausoleum outside the Kremlin walls in Moscow. But polls suggest that at least six out of 10 Russians support his burial, for a variety of reasons: Some hate him; some think Red Square shouldn't serve as a cemetery or believe that embalming bodies defies Orthodox tradition; some point to Lenin's own wish to be interred alongside his mother.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has avoided taking a public stance on the issue, apparently fearing alienating potential voters ahead of next March's presidential election in which he may reclaim the presidency.

As in many parts of the former Soviet Union, the Communist era is a touchy issue in Central Asia. The period was marked by great strides in industrial development and educational achievement, but also saw sweeping repression.

After independence, regional leaders sought to assert the legitimacy of their fledgling nations by trumpeting symbols with a stronger local connection.

Tajikistan, an impoverished and mountainous nation of 7 million people that lies north of Afghanistan, stresses its Persian roots and has steadily chipped away at the legacies of Russian rule. Lenin's current spot in Khujand will eventually be taken by a statue of ninth-century ruler Ismoil Somoni, whose reign saw the rise to prominence of the Persian Samanid empire.

In Uzbekistan, statues have sprouted of medieval Muslim conqueror Tamerlane, who is lauded as the founding father of the Uzbek state.

Meanwhile, the late president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, renowned for his bizarre behavior, had gold-leafed statues of himself erected all over his energy-rich desert republic.

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