

Popular hostility against pro-war denigration of Engels statue in Manchester, UK

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The US-NATO war drive against Russia has been accompanied by a frenzied ideological propaganda campaign against all things Russian. The chauvinist campaign is aimed not just at legitimising but encouraging a social constituency supportive of war with Russia in the upper middle class.

The degraded character of efforts to seek the removal from Manchester of a statue of Friedrich Engels reveals the pro-war agenda behind official handwringing over the fate of Ukraine.

A memorial to a world historic figure who, along with Karl Marx, sounded the tocsin for a revolutionary socialist movement against nationalism, militarism and war, “Workers of the world, unite!” has been placed in question due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This transparently anti-communist argument is made despite the declared hostility of Vladimir Putin’s capitalist regime to the October Revolution and its embrace of Great Russian chauvinism that is antithetical to the internationalist foundations on which the Soviet Union was established.

For this reason, the popular hostility aroused by this attack is of great political significance. It is proof that the majority of working-class people have not been swept up in the official war fever and are hostile to it.

The statue of Engels (1820-1895) was erected to mark the closing event of the 2017 Manchester International Festival (MIF) of the arts. Engels lived in Manchester for more than 20 years and his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) was a devastating Marxist exposure of the brutal poverty in the city.

But the inspiration for Turner prize-nominated artist Phil Collins in fact came during a visit made to Ukraine, during which he negotiated acquisition and transportation of a Soviet-era statue of Engels to Tony Wilson Place outside the HOME centre for contemporary film and theatre. The Engels statue became available to purchase as a result of the anti-communist hysteria generated by the right-wing Ukrainian government. It was originally erected in Mala Pereschchepina, a village in Ukraine, in 1970, but was torn down in 2015, cut in half and left in two pieces.

More than 600 people crowded into the nearby Bridgewater Hall car park to celebrate the statue’s inauguration, with a live projection link of the unveiling. In a filmed part of the event, Collins intercut the statue’s voyage across Europe with footage of working-class life in Manchester and live interviews with audience members. The statue has been warmly embraced by Manchester’s working class.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, local newspaper *The Mill* tweeted this comment from HOME: “In light of the illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army, we are in discussions with the co-commissioners of the artwork [MIF] and the artist Phil Collins about how best to respond.”

The *Mill* also tweeted HOME’s explanation that this was “a previously co-commissioned piece of work.”

HOME deluged with support for Engels

HOME clearly expected that an implied association with Russia would lead to support for the statue’s removal. They were wrong.

The *Mill*’s/HOME’s tweets were responded to by hundreds of people, overwhelmingly supportive of Engels.

One person tweeted of Engels, “His politics are hated by Putin. In fact last month Putin blamed those politics for Ukraine no longer being part of Russia... Lots of Russians oppose this war.”

Another commented, “It started with anti-slavic [actions] a few days ago, now it’s anti communist. This should end well.”

When a reader asked sarcastically if HOME had also banned playing Tchaikovsky, Matthew Booth, wrote, “Not sure about that, but I saw a tweet earlier this week from someone who said they felt sick when they hear Tchaikovsky now. I’d like to say they were joking, but they weren’t.”

Since then, the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra has removed Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture from its concert repertoire.

Caio Almendra wrote, “Engels was a German anti-war activist. Contemporary Russia is a capitalist economy that doesn’t follow any of Engels writings and Putin hates communism. This has nothing to do with the war, has it?”

Readers quoted Marx and Engels that “No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations.”

Doug Fender quoted Engels writing in 1887 of “...the impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will emerge as victor from the battle. Only one consequence is absolutely certain: universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class.”

He might also have quoted Engels’s opening comment to that text, in which he predicted the carnage of World War One with startling accuracy several decades before it broke out:

“[T]he only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war, moreover of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other’s throats and in the process they will strip Europe barer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent: famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism, both of the armies and the people, in the wake of acute misery, irretrievable dislocation of our artificial system of trade, industry and credit, ending in universal bankruptcy collapse of the old states and their conventional political wisdom to the extent that crowns will roll into the gutters by the dozen.”

Noticeable in the comments was a healthy sympathy for Engels as a socialist who had addressed the conditions of the working class, and its relevance for today: “Supposedly we are the bastions of democracy yet here we are having a public conversation about a statue of a man whose Crime appears to be his pioneering thoughts on the plight of the poor.”

One tweet suggested the *Mill* read *The Condition of the 51,495 streets and 1,087 cities and villages were renamed, and more than 2,000 monuments removed.* in *England* “and maybe do an article about how much has changed? (Not much).”

“No workingman in England... ever treated me as a foreigner”

It is worth noting also what Engels wrote in 1845 of the working class: “No workingman in England... ever treated me as a foreigner. With the greatest pleasure I observed you to be free from that blasting curse, national prejudice and national pride, which after all means nothing but wholesale selfishness—I observed you to sympathise with everyone who earnestly applies his powers to human progress—may he be an Englishman or not—to admire everything great and good, whether nursed on your native soil or not—I found you to be more than mere Englishmen, members of a single, isolated nation, I found you to be Men, members of the great and universal family of Mankind, who know their interest and that of all the human race to be the same.”

That class response has continued, forcing HOME to retreat—posting a statement that “there is not an intention to remove the artwork installation of Friedrich Engels from the front of our building.”

However, HOME then added, “Given the origins of the artwork, everyone involved believes it is important that we consider its meaning in the context of the illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. We also want to do more to explain how the installation came to Manchester and the reasons behind this.”

Nick Thornsby, a local Liberal Democrat, described the statue as “a particular insult to the people of Ukraine, for whom Engels represented a grim part of the country’s history.” He suggested “to at least temporarily remove the statue and replace it with a Ukrainian flag.”

Thornsby is a political ignoramus, who will no doubt be blissfully unaware of Engels’s consistent championing of Ukrainian independence from Tsarist Russia.

This has been a theme of various hostile right-wing and liberal figures since the statue was first erected. Local archivist Kevin Bolton, in a *Guardian* article in 2017, had opposed the statue being put up in Manchester on bogus grounds of it being Soviet propaganda, supposedly installed without appropriate discussion with the city’s Ukrainian community. Bolton “was drawn to the faded blue-and-yellow paint of the Ukrainian flag on the legs... A part of me longed to repaint the statue in the Ukrainian colours.” This has now been suggested as an alternative to removal.

Ukraine’s far-right “decommunization” laws celebrate fascist Stepan Bandera and other Nazi collaborators

What is the real significance of the Engels statue’s connection to Ukraine? The process of “decommunization” began in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, but accelerated in 2015. A year earlier the Maidan protests erupted in Kiev, backed by the US with billions of dollars and in which extreme right-wing and openly fascist forces played a leading role, ended in a coup ousting the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovich. The new pro-US, pro-European regime led by Petro Poroshenko outlawed all Soviet symbols. Laws authorised the removal of communist monuments (excluding World War II monuments) and the renaming of public places. In May 2015, 22 Ukrainian cities and 44 villages were renamed. In 2016,

While statues of great Marxist figures were torn down by Ukraine’s far-right government, the Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera and other Nazi collaborators were designated “national heroes.” Bandera, as head of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and its military formation the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), oversaw the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Poles during World War II.

In December 2019, Kiev’s City Council renamed Moskovsky Avenue in honour of Bandera and changed Avenue of General Vatutin into Avenue of Roman Shukhevych. As leader of the UPA, Shukhevych was instrumental in carrying out the ethnic cleansing of Poles and Jews in western Ukraine. In addition to being a general in the UPA, Shukhevych served as a commander in the Nazi-led Nachtigall Battalion and 201st Schutzmannschaft Battalion made up of Ukrainian far-right nationalists.

Putin, a former Stalinist KGB official, is just as fervent an anti-communist as his Ukrainian opponents. He denounced the Bolsheviks for “chopping the country into pieces”, saying that “Russia was robbed” and declared as he invaded Ukraine, “We are ready to show you what real decommunisation means for Ukraine.”

The defacing in Ukrainian colours of the Engels statue in Mala Pereschchepina (the village was formerly named Engels) was the result of the nationalist reaction actively promoted by western powers since 2014, as it escalated its provocations against Russia. But when the statue was taken down, the head of Mala Pereschchepina village council decided to preserve it “until better days come.” It was left outside in the grounds of a private creamery mill until Collins took ownership.

The continuing struggle over the Manchester Engels statue reveals his lasting stature among the most class-conscious workers and youth taking their stand against the war fever being generated by Britain’s rulers. It is an indication of what is still to come.

In 1845, Engels concluded his letter dedicating *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to the workers of Britain with words which remain as true now as then:

“Much remains to be undergone; be firm, be undaunted—your success is certain, and no step you will have to take in your onward march will be lost to our common cause, the cause of Humanity!”



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