

Monuments tell lies – deliberate, calculated lies. For those with the power to place statues on pedestals or raise commemorative monuments the size of a mountainside or as small as a plaque, they have been tools in efforts to shape historical narratives. Nationalist and civic traditions are invented.¹ And communities imagined.² Statues of street corner genocidaires and colonial mass murderers have been used to white-wash individual reputations and justify empires. There is substantial evidence that most twentieth-century Confederate monuments were erected to uphold Jim Crow spatial segregation and the myth of the Lost Cause, rather than being genuine commemoration of Civil War casualties from half a century before.³ The lies are legion.

The contestation of monuments is today the material of culture and history wars fought between those seeking social justice – including symbolically in the commemorative environment – and those resisting change to hegemonic narratives, or indeed any material social change. In the United States, this escalated following the 2015 murder of nine members of an African-American church in Charleston by a white supremacist. After the 2020 killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota, the Black Lives Matter movement fired up pre-existing calls to topple colonial statues worldwide. In Britain, for instance, this led to toppling slave trader Edward Colston's statue in the port of Bristol, while in Belgium there were attacks on statues linked to atrocities in the Belgian Congo.

At the same time, populist governments in the former Eastern Bloc are demanding the removal of monuments and street names in an effort to suppress memories of the Communist era. Meanwhile, in Australia, a federal government promoted the founding narrative of Captain Cook's discovery and the concept of *terra nullius*, rather than foregrounding First Nations' narratives of dispossession. Statues of Cook became battlegrounds.⁴

If one is interested in social justice, an equitable public realm, and an accurate portrayal of history, why keep any of these lying, distorting monuments? Arguments against retention have been justified by applied philosophers such as Tim Timmerman who has argued that there is a moral obligation for removal because of the unnecessary harm they cause.⁵ See also the work of Timothy J. Barczak and Winston Thompson.⁶ These arguments are, however, often deterministic and made without evidential foundation of any harm caused, and confuse offence with actual harm. A corollary of these determinist beliefs is the widely held notion in the international heritage community that the construction of post-war monuments or the reconstruction of wartime losses is crucial to post-conflict community cohesion and reconciliation. While heritage losses may damage social cohesion, there is no

empirical evidence that their reconstruction makes any difference to practical peace-building as continued divisions in Mostar with its reconstructed bridge attest.⁷

Yet despite the attempt to shape national historical narratives using honoured individuals and events, monuments are often failures in these terms. As Robert Musil famously observed, there is nothing as invisible as a monument: «They appear impregnated with something that repels attention [...] like water droplets off an oilcloth.»⁸ As time passes, the original meaning of monuments is often lost, their intended ideological purpose blunted by time until reactivated by contestation. The impact of monuments in the long term on the polity also seems very limited: Germany's totalitarian monuments were comprehensively removed at the end of the war; those in Italy mostly remain in place while the last images of Francisco Franco in the public realm are only now being removed from Spanish territory – yet one would be hard pressed to demonstrate that the different fortunes of these material reminders has had any specific and discernible effect on national politics since.

Those calling for retention have used the argument that removal amount to erasing history. The UK government, for example, has issued guidance demanding that monuments are «retained and explained» rather than removed.⁹ Former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly said that the dark periods of history should not be edited out to sanitise the historical record. However, in the current UK context at least, government and establishment must be regarded as bad-faith actors who have little interest in the crucial «explain» part of their policy. There is little evident appetite among the establishment to explain empire, colonialism or the slave trade, let alone to atone for them. The argument that we are judging history using contemporary values is a false one given, for example, the continuing legacy of slavery and colonialism today in terms of systematised racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

Just as in Eastern Europe where populist governments have sought to assert control over historical museums and sites, the British cultural Right is now attacking organisations such as the National Trust, museums, and municipalities when these organisations attempt to shine light on dark places. Attempts to remove commemorative honours from a museum building were met with ministerial threats to its public funding. The UK's bad faith «retain and explain» policies or, similarly, Donald Trump's suggestion after Charlottesville that we could learn from historical monuments, should be seen for what they really are – political positions aimed at resisting change.

In the UK, prominent academics supporting removal have argued that, because of their distortions, these monuments do not constitute history or historical evidence. David Olusoga, the respected broadcaster and writer on Black British history, for one, has returned to this point repeatedly, telling the BBC that it is «palpable nonsense» that removing controversial statues «somehow impoverishes history [...] statues cannot tell us our history because they're acutely incapable of performing that role,» he argued. «History is fluid and mobile and plastic. Statues are literally immobile – they're set in stone.»¹⁰ Gary Younge, sociology Professor at the University of Manchester's Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE), who helmed a report into problem monuments, wrote in *The Guardian* that to remove a statute is to erase history is «arrant nonsense [...] Statues are not history [...] to claim that statues represent history does not merely misrepresent the role of statues, it misunderstands history and their place in it.»¹¹

Monuments as Evidence

While these revisionist positions are no doubt held honestly, they demonstrate a peculiarly narrow view of what history is and of the value of material culture to the historic record. Buildings and monuments tell us about the past just as much as any document in an archive – if less obviously. Like written documents, the built past is a primary source. True, like any text, they can be partial and evasive, and it is our duty to query any source for its accuracy, but that does not mean that material culture is not an historical resource. They have important evidential value. For example, in war crimes trials, patterns of destruction of representative architecture and monuments have evidenced of genocidal intent, such as in the Former Yugoslavia.¹² The devil can be in the material detail. The ruins of gas chambers/crematoria at Auschwitz have been at the centre of Holocaust deniers' arguments: they take a 'no holes, no Holocaust' position, falsely arguing that there is no evidence of holes in the concrete roof slab of the chambers to deliver the Zyklon B. Such evidence was, famously, at the heart of the libel trial in which disgraced historian David Irving sued Deborah Lipstadt.¹³ Architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt amassed hundreds of pages of evidence from the ruins themselves, blueprints, and other documentation to prove the presence of the holes.¹⁴

Revisionists are not just risking evidence but taking an overly narrow view of the importance of the physical world when they argue, as David Olusoga has, that the statue of Colston was not a true historical artefact until it was toppled and displayed in a museum.¹⁵ US Philosopher Travis Timmerman argued for the removal of all Confederate monuments in the US, suggesting that a Wikipedia entry is sufficient substitute for a removed monument.¹⁶ But such civic artefacts in their spaces (far more than in a museum case) tell us about the values of nineteenth-century Bristol's elite and its willingness to gloss over slavery in the interests of binding the populace together across class using the philanthropical Colston narrative. This was in the face of rising working-class militancy in the city. Such monuments patrolled and surveyed the public spaces of Bristol's city centre, including approaches from working class districts. They are physical evidence of class-conflict that are only fully understood when we see them occupying space.¹⁷

Despite all the lies and distortions, some of these monuments can have a good-faith purpose, suitably transformed into sites of shame or conscience, rather than sites of honour. They can play a valuable role, re-activated as 'thinking sites'. They can evidence truths, both in the broadest sense, such as Leon Trotsky's concept of architecture as illustrating the shift from the yoke of the Gothic arch to the Renaissance as the mercantile class grows in cultural confidence, or by determining the criminal responsibility for misdeeds in the recent past and contemporary world, such as ethnic cleansing and genocide.¹⁸ Who dropped the barrel bomb? Who sundered the bridge? Who looted the museum and smashed its artefacts? Who, in the case of London's Grenfell Tower, allowed the wrapping of high-rise public housing with deadly inflammable cladding? Falangist party founder José Antonio Primo de Rivera's name, commemoratively carved on Granada cathedral's façade, tells us about his collusion between the Catholic Church and a totalitarian regime. The pattern of Jim Crow Confederate memorials is evidence of how race-based segregation was played out. Where monuments were erected to the perpetrators of terrible deeds, they can tell us about the cynicism of a monuments' backers and the values of the time in which they were erected in. When erected to foster lies, they tell us that those lies were thought necessary. They are documents that tell us about history, about

the manipulation of history, and the various purposes that the commemorative environment has been put to over time.

Retention – making, erasing, or revising history

The argument that protestors are making history not erasing history is then not one that bears close examination. (They can, of course, be doing both at the same time). Sometimes this may be the necessary response. However, we need to understand the past and guard evidence of wrong-doing of reality itself so that we can make informed decisions. History is written and then revised constantly, but on the basis of new evidence, rather than destroying old evidence – except for very good reason and perhaps only where demonstrable harm is caused.

This is not a new concept. Amidst the iconoclasm of the French Revolution, the pioneering preservationist Abbé Grégoire called for the retention of some royal statues, arguing that symbols of oppression could become «permanent reminders of tyranny, forcing them to become a kind of permanent pillory».¹⁹ Jaume Bosch was right when he said that the Valley of the Fallen, the massive Francoist basilica cum mausoleum and focal point for Spain's Far Right, should be transformed rather than dynamited entirely, however tempting.²⁰

This is absolutely not a call for the wholesale retention of the extant commemorative landscape – quite the opposite. Many of these monuments are just too egregious to remain in the form they are now, aggressively attempting to control public space and public memory. They should not remain unchanged as sites of honour. If what is being remembered via an object is inaccurate then that inaccuracy needs correcting and symbols given new meaning. Such a goal demands new layers for commemorations that question their record, and which provide some form of permanent contestation and, essentially, a suitable and at least matching scale if they are to undo the honour given. A small plaque may offer additional, accurate explanation, but will not alone change the monument's public role or the context in which it operates. In Oxford, there has been a vigorous student-led campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes (the mining magnate and colonialist whose legacy in Southern Africa includes mass deaths and the early architecture of Apartheid) that he endowed in his will to the front of the Rhodes Building at Oriel College. After much prevaricating and obfuscation, the College eventually announced that it was retaining the statue in situ, high above a city street, and instead launched a website telling a fuller story of Rhodes' deeds and installed a small explanatory plaque nearby. The appalling honour given to Rhodes, exalted in the public realm of the city thus remains unchanged.

A good-faith «retain-and-explain» policy may also demand a rebalancing of wider monumental landscapes by the addition of new memorials to those whose narratives and lives have been hidden from history by reason of their marginalised identity and/or lack of access to gatekeeping power. Meaningful conversations and decision-making framework involving affected communities is necessary before we agree what to keep, move or discard. There will also be instances where aesthetic value needs to be considered in decision-making.

How best, to use German terminology, do we turn an *Ehrenmal* – a monument that honours – into a *Mahnmal* – one that symbolises shame or regret? These new layers should challenge but not entirely obliterate the monument's original intent so that its prior meaning can still be understood. Some institutions have begun using the

term «recontextualization», but this has chiefly been in relation to better interpretive texts, rather than to physical changes to an object itself or to its context which would alter the role of the monument at the scale of street or square. A good faith «retain-and-explain» policy of subversive transformation demands a comprehensive recontextualization at scale that changes the meaning of a monument, ideally in an additive, layered way. This is especially important within a multicultural context, where total removal could encourage heritage and history to be regarded as a divisive zero-sum game of «your commemorations or mine».

There is, for example, a long history of unsanctioned «guerilla memorialization».²¹ Recently we have seen the trolling of Soviet war memorials such as that in Sofia, Bulgaria, where liberating/occupying military figures were transformed through bright paint into a jokey Superman, Ronald McDonald, and Santa Claus. The Russians were not happy. There are countless other recent responses, from quotidian (if inarticulate) vandalism, to the considered reworking by gender-nonconforming activists of the bronze Stonewall National Monument in Christopher Park, New York, in 2015. Erected in 1992 to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the symbolic birth of the gay rights movement, sculptor George Segal took his signature approach of painting his bronze human forms white to resemble their original moulds. It was not a smart aesthetic move given the decades of argument within the LGBTQ+ community about the whitewashing of the upfront role played by Black and Latina trans women and homeless youth in the Stonewall Riots. The 2015 activists repainted the statues' faces and hands brown and dressed them in wigs, bras and scarves: «What we did was rectification, not vandalism» said one of the activists. «Those statues are bronze (brown) underneath the layer of white paint – the symbolism behind that is infuriating.»²²

Guerilla memorializations are generally conducted by those who don't have the deep pockets to pay for a permanent statue, or the power to steer their proposals through the bureaucracy demanded to erect one. Their grassroots origins and political pointedness can make them particularly effective but their unofficial and usually ephemeral nature means they are more fragile compared with the object they are commenting upon. Temporary interventions can fall away, leaving the original unchallenged.

Permanence can begin to address the power imbalances. Carlos Colombino's intense, almost literal-minded, re-use of parts of a monumental figure of the deposed Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, is often cited. Stroessner's statue once stood at the highest point of the capital Asunción. Following a debate on the future of the memorial, Colombino displayed Stroessner's steel body parts between two concrete blocks in the Square of the Disappeared, crushed and reconfigured but still recognizable. Such commentary is impossible where a problem memorial has been entirely removed.

Counter-memorials (*Gegendenkmal*) where a new work is set up in relationship to an existing work to comment upon it, are another tactic but are also valuable only where the object being challenged remains in some form so that the commentary is sustained.²³ In Baltimore in 2015, artist Pablo Machioli set up his *Madre Luz* figure as a pregnant African-American maternal figure with a raised fist, confronting a military monument to Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee – a monument itself erected at the astonishingly late date of 1948, when white supremacists in the city were actively resisting desegregation. In 2017, the Lee-Jackson monument was among four spiri-

ted away on a flat-bed truck by the city council overnight. Vandals then attacked the papier mâché *Madre Luz*, scrawling ‘honour history’ nearby. After repairs, she was temporarily placed atop the empty plinth on which the generals stood, but with the soldiers gone, her poignancy vanished – the objects of her *j'accuse* no longer there.

One perennial recontextualisation suggestion is to take a statue off its plinth, so that honour and elevated status is reduced and you can look at your opponent squarely in the eye (presuming a life-sized rather than colossal figure). Cartoonist Art Spiegelman, in his submission for the 1993 exhibition on transformations *Monumental Propaganda*, held in Moscow and New York, took this idea further. He took a photograph of Moscow’s gigantic Socialist-Realist figures of the *Worker and Kolkhoznitza Woman*, originally created by Vera Mukhina for the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris, and manipulated it. He shrank their pedestal so that, instead of striding into a Socialist future, the stainless steel pair was stepping off their pedestal into space like Wile E Coyote running out of solid ground on a cliff top.²⁴ Another contributor, John Murray, proposed burying huge statues up to their neck while creating an underground viewing platform for those wishing to see their feet. Humiliation is a common theme here. At Oriel College, a solution could be as simple as turning around the statue of Rhodes in its niche – facing the wall in disgrace.

Bolzano

Examples of permanent contextualisation, re-layering or re-working at scale are otherwise remarkably few – this is a practice in its infancy. We can learn much though from the multi-lingual Italian town of Bolzano (Bozen in German). As elsewhere in Italy, a number of massive Fascist-era monuments survive; indeed a whole town quarter was laid out in the Italian Fascist architectural language that can merge classicism with modernism. The town is the gateway to Italy from Austria via Brenner Pass, and under Mussolini, its monuments marked your arrival into a Fascist land. In 1943, when the Nazis formed a northern Italian rump state, the occupation enjoyed much local support among the Germanic Far-Right, who saw Nazism as a bulwark against Mussolini’s forced Italianization. In the post-war period, inter-communal unrest across the South Tyrol region (including a bombing campaign by German-speaking separatists) only subsided after a complex power-sharing autonomy statute in 1972. Given the shifting regimes and changing patterns of wartime oppression, who was a victim and who a perpetrator in Bolzano-Bozen is complicated and has no single narrative. To many Italian-speakers in Bolzano, in the immediate post-war period some of the symbols of Fascism simply became symbols of Italian identity and it is these voices that triumphed.

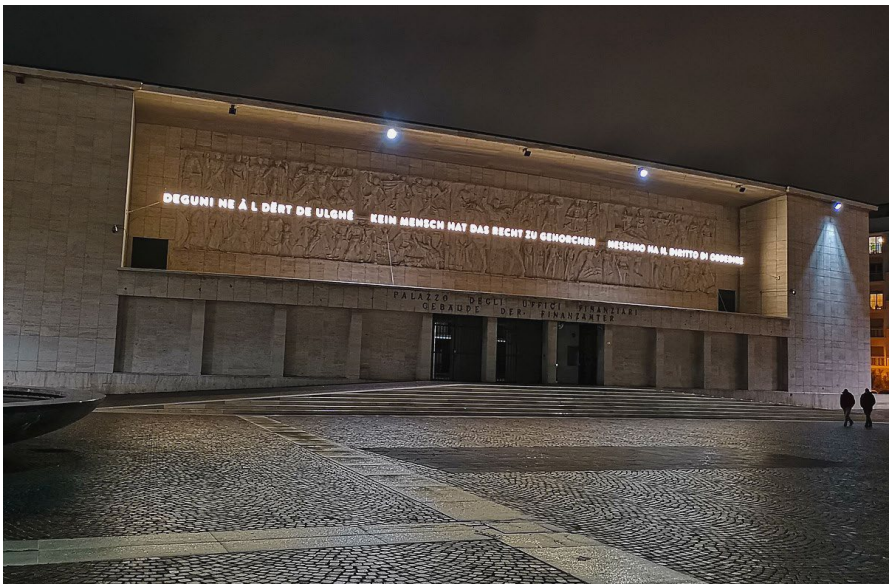
Unusually for Italy where Fascist art and architecture remains mostly intact (apart from images of Mussolini), since 2010 Bolzano-Bozen has tackled two of its key Fascist monuments head on, led by a team of local historians, archivists, and activists. The first to be addressed was the *Monument to Victory*, a giant stone triumphal arch that Mussolini had built in 1928 and which was dedicated to Italy’s First World War ‘martyrs’ (fig. 1). In style, it is pure Fascist classicism, with lictoral columns, and bronze wolves, lions, axes and helmeted soldiers, and it sits in a park surrounded by Fascistic buildings. A decision was made following the team work to carve a museum out of the basement rooms below the arch that would address both the German and Italian Fascist history in the town. It opened a few years later in 2014 with the slogan: ‘One monument, one city, two dictatorships’. The arch’s



1 Marcello Piacentini's *Monument to Victory* in Bolzano-Bozen (1928) seen here following its electronic tagging in 2016 with signage related to the new BZ '18-45 in the basement of the arch – one of the only museum's in Italy examining the legacy of Fascism.

masonry triumphalism was undercut by a wrapping a digital sign for the museum in the form of a ring around one of its main columns. Red digital lettering rotates around the sign, desacralizing the monument, shaming it like an electronically tagged criminal.

It took longer to address the façade of the pale stone Casa Littoria, built as Bolzano's Fascist headquarters and which still today displays the largest surviving Fascist fine artwork in Europe. Massive travertine panels make up a 198-square-metre sculpted frieze that celebrates Mussolini and his Fascist party achievements. At its centre is Mussolini mounted on his horse – the new Augustus Caesar. There are various party symbols and figures of heroic workers, farmers, and soldiers. Below Mussolini's mount is the Fascist slogan: CREDERE, OBBEDIRE, COMBATTERE (Believe, Obey, Fight). Shifts in power left the frieze unfinished and, astonishingly, it was completed in 1957. The building, with its oversized doors, Roman torch uprighters, oak leaves and other totalitarian devices, now houses financial courts. Most locals simply preferred to pretend not to see the frieze even though, unlike a triumph arch whose symbolism one could simply see as traditionally Italian (if you did not look too hard), the stone bas-relief set out the glories of Fascism as a celebratory strip-cartoon. With the victory arch tagged, what to do with the frieze became an unavoidable question. To leave it unchanged would be obscene.



2 Guido Pelizzari, Francesco Rossi and Luis Plattner were architects of the former Fascist Party headquarters in Bolzano-Bozen (1939–1942) that now displays a Hannah Arendt inspired quotation in LED – *No-one has the Right to Obey* – in front of the original frieze by sculptor Hans Piffnader.

A design competition was held to decide its future, and in 2011 a judging commission was appointed to choose a winner. Bolzano-Bozen did not get to this point without a significant struggle. Some in the German community wanted the frieze to be removed entirely. German-speaking Rightists were particularly keen on demolition, vehemently distancing themselves from the Fascist/Nazi period. Local academic and activist Hannes Obermair, who has been assiduous in uncovering the history of the town's monuments, said that for achieving change, establishing the facts is vital. In 2010, he and local historians published an open letter arguing against removing the frieze from view. «We wanted to tell the whole story including the darkness.»²⁵ The local council balked because they wanted a solution that covered up the frieze entirely, but eventually local artists Arnold Holz knecht and Michele Bernardi were announced as the outright winners. They had met the brief's demand (not set by the council) that the frieze be transformed in a way that would not allow the frieze to be read uninterrupted but would allow it to be «accessed thoughtfully».

The solution was elegantly simple. Foot-high LED letters in three local languages were suspended in front of the frieze reading: «No-One Has the Right to Obey» (fig. 2). The wording is from a radio interview where Hannah Arendt paraphrased Kant while discussing her work on the 1961 Eichmann trial. The choice of words is a clever, layered commentary on the Fascist slogan. The monument is preserved, but its meaning has been changed by the addition of the condemnatory phrase. Arendt reminds us that we have an ethical duty to resist, that there is always a choice, including whether we properly act to address contested heritage in ways that serve both justice and history. The minimalism of the intervention, the artists say, is a pointed contrast to the grandiloquence of the Fascist aesthetics. Truths have been told. An *Ehrenmal* has become a *Mahnmal*.

When the project was finally unveiled in 2017, various critics in the Berlusconi-owned press weighed in about the erasure of history despite nothing being taken away. Indeed, the entire frieze was cleaned, polished, and repaired in the process. Instead of *damnatio memoriae* (the Roman practice of erasure by iconoclasm), we have another layer of history that intelligently comments on its predecessor, and instead of resulting in denial or forgetting, or leaving a repugnant commemoration unchallenged, the frieze now invites people to reflect on this history and its complex layers. «It is deliberately tricky and questioning,» says Hannes Obermair of the chosen quotation. «And by far the most intelligent response. It humiliates the frieze.» Humour, he notes, is not something Fascists are very good at, which is why humiliation is such a useful oppositional tool.²⁶ Even so, the letters do not stand alone and unexplained; there is an extensive linear plaque, many metres long, in the square that tells the full facts of the monument and the changes made to it.

Giorgio Mezzalira, one of the competition judges, thinks the changes at the Monument to Victory and to the frieze at the Casa del Fascio have been important. These and other changes have, he says, «defused the last weapons in the hands of the [local] agitators of ethnic conflict, those who have forced history for political ends», changing places of conflict between Italians and Germans into places of understanding – the passions of identity have to be faced, rather than expecting them to simply subside. And crucially, «when one finds oneself in a context of multiple identities and symbols, it is always better to <add> rather than <remove>».²⁷

Concluding Thoughts

We can all learn from Bolzano, a multicultural, multi-lingual town where, in freely crossing and re-crossing the river, between Germanic gothic arcades and Mussolini-era classical arcades, from imbissen stalls to gelato shops, one can take in problem monuments that have become sites of conscious reflection. The town's inhabitants appear to be growing ever more at ease with a modern polyglot European identity, and indeed the Far-Right performed notably poorly in this area in the Italian national elections of 2022. How much this is due to changes in monuments, or the fact of having a conversation about them, or the fact that this is a wealthy corner of the EU where borders now matter far less, remains moot. Bolzano is an object lesson in how history can be updated and made more accurate without being erased.

At the same time, we must distinguish between irrelevant symbolism and genuinely damaging ideology, between positive real-world change and misguided architectural determinism. Tolerating uncomfortable evidence becomes easier not just with an honest reckoning but when real change is made in the world rather than simply in its symbols. We must understand the circumstances when symbols of oppression might be intrinsic to actual oppression (as perhaps with the Confederate monuments of Jim Crow) and when they are simply objectionable and offensive – but ultimately powerless – symbols. We need to understand that change comes through the agency of people and not through change to symbols or material objects. At the same time, we need to be able to trust the veracity of our built environment. Hannah Arendt can guide us here too. She warned that the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or Communist but «people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction [...] and the distinction between true and false [...] no longer exist».²⁸ Evidence, including material evidence, matters.

Notes

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Image Credits

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