UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Removal of Controversial Monuments and Statues

Overview

Across many societies, public monuments and statues are physical ways to represent history, often depicting figures who are honoured for their contributions to the nation at large. However, some of these structures have been subject to controversy, becoming disputed due to their subject, symbolism, or historical context, or because communities disagree about what values the monument communicates today. For some communities these monuments represent heritage and identity; for others they can represent exclusion, intimidation, or the public celebration of oppression.[1] These debates raise difficult questions about cultural rights, historical memory, social cohesion, and the responsibilities of governments and institutions when heritage becomes divisive. While every country has its own revered and respected history, nations must consider what message they are sending through the display, whether state-sanctioned or otherwise, of these monuments.

The UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) serves to promote peace and security through education, science, and culture, and encouraging the conservation and protection of cultural heritage in various forms. Simultaneously, UNESCO's constitution restricts intervention in matters essentially within domestic jurisdiction, meaning UNESCO's influence is primarily exercised through international standards, cooperation, and

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[1] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Resolution 33/20: Cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage," A/HRC/RES/33/20 (2016) (accessed December 7, 2025). https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/33/20

technical support rather than coercive enforcement.[2] UNESCO values the respective right of

nations to honor their histories while still promoting positive and tolerant values through the

monuments and statues they choose to display.

Source of the Issue and Historical Background

Many controversial monuments were created in periods when political power was

unevenly distributed and official narratives often excluded marginalized voices.[3] When promoted

by the government, monuments can function as official 'statements' about who belongs, whose

contributions are celebrated, and which histories are centered in national identity. As societies

reassess legacies of colonialism, slavery, and discrimination, monuments that once seemed

uncontroversial to dominant groups may be newly recognized as symbols of injustice by others.[4]

An example of such controversy is the Rhodes Must Fall debate in South Africa, where a statue

of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town became a focal point for student protest and

broader demands to decolonize institutions and public memory. Rhodes was a British imperialist

who assisted in expanding Britain's hold over African land through annexation of land.[5] While

the man undoubtedly contributed to the current state of South Africa, many criticize the notion

that history that promotes colonial activity should be promoted, or at the very least, normalized,

[2] UNESCO, "Constitution," UNESCO Office of International Standards and Legal Affairs (updated July 24, 2024; accessed December 7, 2025). https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution

[3] UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, "Guidance for custodians on how to deal with commemorative heritage assets that have become contested," GOV.UK (accessed December 7, 2025). https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested

[4] UNESCO, "Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape" (PDF), UNESCO World Heritage Centre (adopted November 10, 2011; accessed December 7, 2025). https://whc.unesco.org/document/160163

[5] Reuters, "South African university to remove Rhodes statue following student protests," Reuters (April 8, 2015; accessed December 7, 2025). https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-african-university-to-remove-rhodes-statue-following-student-protests-idUSKBN0MZ243/

through immortalizing such figures. Furthermore, South Africa's history as a formerly Apartheid nation that marginalized its black population despite them composing the majority of the population. While this example seems more one-sided than others, it highlights the dichotomy between maintaining historical accuracy and adapting to modern morality.

Current Consequences

Keeping contested monuments in place can deepen social polarization and inflict continuing harm, particularly when affected communities view the monument as public approval of past violence or exclusion. At the same time, removal can trigger counter-claims that "history is being erased," creating a policy dilemma between memory, accountability, and social cohesion.[6] However, while there may be two sides of the issue, nations must decide which party's claims hold more ground.

Case Study: The Charlottesville Rally

In February of 2017, the city council of Charlottesville, Virginia voted to remove a statue depicting Robert E. Lee, a notorious Confederate general, from their city. In August, a large group of activists marched at the University of Virginia to protest the statue's removal. Jason Kessler, who organized the rally, claimed that its goal was merely to protect the statue from being removed. However, many attendees wore and displayed articles of clothing or flags with racist and antisemitic insignias, slogans and logos, chanting similarly hateful phrases.[7] Commentators disputed whether protesting the statue's removal itself was racist, seeing as Lee's

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[6] Historic England, "Contested Heritage," Historic England, https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/planning/contested-heritage/
[7] Facing History, "Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville Timeline," https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Unite_the_Right_Rally_in_Charlottesville_Timeline.pdf

Confederate allegiance implies that promoting his values is akin to promoting slavery. Others

rejected this notion, proclaiming that Confederate history and values are separate from

supporting slavery.[8] Ever since the civil war, the Confederacy has largely been viewed as an

institution that fought for values since rejected by American society. As such, delegates should

consider whether fighting for a past with potentially outdated values should be treated with the

same legitimacy as those advocating for public works that reflect modern values.

Global and Institutional Responses

While stances regarding the issue of controversial monuments and statues can vary

drastically from nation to nation, several cooperative efforts have been made to encourage

societal re-evaluations of what history is worth commemorating. For example, under the 1972

World Heritage Convention, each individual nation has primary responsibility for protecting

heritage on its own territory. However, the Convention also creates cooperative tools, including

the World Heritage Fund to financially support and encourage cultural preservation, and a system

for international assistance to help States protect and conserve properties connected to the

Convention's lists.[9] By promoting international cooperation, nations can be held mutually

accountable should they choose to promote harmful or otherwise controversial figures and

events.

UNESCO has itself ensured that this issue is addressed by all its nation members. 2011's

Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape supports integrating heritage management

with broader social goals and encourages inclusive approaches to managing change in historic

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[8] NPR, "The Charlottesville rally 5 years later: 'It's what you're still trying to forget'", August 12, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1116942725/the-charlottesville-rally-5-years-later-its-what-youre-still-trying-to-forget
[9] UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Convention text)," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/

environments.[10] Additionally, UNESCO's work on cultural property protection in conflict, notably the 1954 Hague Convention, reinforces the principle that cultural heritage is of universal importance and merits collective protection, especially in high-risk contexts.[11] By approaching this problem with collective importance, UNESCO aims to ensure that every nation's culture is preserved while simultaneously ensuring that tolerant and forward-thinking values are the focus.

Questions to Consider

1. Should contested monuments remain in public spaces, be relocated to museums, or be recontextualized in place with clear interpretation?

2. What minimum standards of consultation and transparency should apply before a monument is removed, altered, or replaced?

3. How should governments balance cultural heritage protection with the need to address historical injustice and prevent ongoing harm?

4. What role should museums and schools play in preserving memory when monuments are removed from public space?

5. Should UNESCO issue more specific guidance on contested monuments—and if so, what should it prioritize (process standards, documentation rules, education strategies, or conflict-mitigation tools)?

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[10] UNESCO, "Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape" (PDF), UNESCO World Heritage Centre (adopted November 10, 2011; accessed December 7, 2025). https://whc.unesco.org/document/160163
[11] UNESCO, "1954 Convention," UNESCO – Cultural heritage and armed conflicts (accessed December 7, 2025). https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/1954-convention

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