The magazine of the EUROM - European Observatory on Memories

December 2025

Observing Memories

9

OVERVIEW *SPAIN IN FREEDOM*

CARMINA GUSTRÁN LOSCOS

1975-2025, Fifty years on: celebrating by thinking and thinking by celebrating

DEEP VIEW

MONIKA BAÁR

People with Disabilities in European Memory

INTERVIEW

AMOS GOLDBERG

"Memory itself doesn't seem sacred to me"

EUROM is led by **Fundació Solidaritat de la Universitat de Barcelona** with the support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme of the **European Union**.

EUROM | EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY ON MEMORIES

Observing *Memories*

EUROM
EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY ON MEMORIES

LED BY

Fundació Solidaritat UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Co-funded by the European Union

The European Observatory on Memories, based at the University of Barcelona's Solidarity Foundation, is an international network established in 2012, dedicated to fostering dialogue on historical memory. By building synergies between academia, institutions, cultural centers, and civil society, we aim to promote fundamental rights and values through respect for diversity, ensuring that memory remains an integral part of Europe's cultural and social fabric.
Meet our partners at: **www.europeanmemories.net/network**

Legal deposit: B 27726-2017
ISSN 2565-2923
ISSN (online) 2565-2931

SUMMARY

Credits

Observing *Memories*

Magazine of the **European Observatory on Memories**
University of Barcelona's Solidarity Foundation

Ninth issue: December, 2025

Director
Jordi Guixé i Coromines

Editors
Ricard Conesa and David González

Communications and visual identity
Fernanda Zanuzzi

Graphic design
Jorge Penny

Editoral Board
Xavier López, Oriol López, Núria Ricart, Fernando Hernández, Celeste Muñoz

Advisory Board
James E. Young, Siobhan Kattago, Marcello Flores, Kaja Širok, Elizabeth Lira, Georges Mink, Enzo Traverso, Martí Grau, Matilde Eiroa, Stefanie Endlich

Contact
observatori.memories@ub.edu
c/ Melcior de Palau, 140
08014 - Barcelona
+34 934 035 538

www.europeanmemories.net/magazine
@euromemories

9

COVER IMAGE

Festival of the Iberian Peoples, Universidad Autónoma, Madrid, May 10, 1976. The image is part of the exhibition "Winds of the People. On Iberian Revolutions and Transitions (1974–1977)", organized by the Spanish Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the Portuguese Ministry of Culture and the Commissioner for the Celebration of 50 Years of Freedom in Spain. Picture: © Guillermo Armengol

EDITORIAL

On the eve of one of the gatherings we organised in Brussels, on 18 November, almost by chance, we attended a concert held for peace and against all wars, especially against the Israeli government's attack on Palestinian society. The event combined poetry, creative painting, various texts, music and an atmosphere of protest. It was yet another grassroots cultural action defending the right to live in peace in just societies where human rights violations are not a daily occurrence. Likewise, with the 50th anniversary of the death of dictator Francisco Franco coming up, reference was also made to Spain, raising themes such as democracy and antifascist resistance, calling for the full democratic construction of our system of civil liberties and guarantees at the local, regional, European and global levels. Past and present came together in an intergenerational and intermodal—now we would say interactive—way to remind us that society, in all its diversity, is vibrant and active, remembers its recent past, and that this memory is reflected in today's most pressing issues.

This act of recalling a past within the present through diverse means and methods of action and transmission is one of the objectives we also strive to achieve at our European Observatory on Memories (EUROM). Such interaction is not always evident, but it represents our core line of work.

EUROM's public window—its most reflective public expression—is the annual volume of the journal *Observing Memories*, now in its ninth edition. As its pages show, we are committed to high-quality, original texts by authors from an international and comparative perspective. Two major debates structure the present volume. One is around what we refer to as "memorial subalternity" and the contemporary dissonance of its heritage legacy in the present. We have sought to address subaltern and historically discriminated groups whose realities remain relevant in today's public debates: femininity and gender, anti-racism, asociality and others.

Secondly, this year we also address the fiftieth anniversary of a Spain that fought to transition from dictatorship toward a freedom born in the streets, a struggle which linked with the antifascist and democratic resistance that had been repressed for forty years by a military and national-Catholic regime. "The Dictator died in his bed, the dictatorship in the streets." Indeed, EUROM is part of an agreement with the State Secretariat for Democratic Memory and the "Spain in Freedom: 50 years" Commissioner to conduct cultural activities, colloquia, conferences and exhibitions on topical issues related to the uses of the past, always advocating for the internationalisation of the debate and the memorial and historical knowledge of the Spanish case.

My son, who had just turned 16, asked me how he could engage with a memory that is no longer his but has been inherited, and how it relates to present-day conflicts and problems. Not wanting to give him a moralistic lecture which would go over his teenage head, I proposed a palette of colours representing a multitude of values in which to place the uses of memory. I told him that he should defend access to, observation of and even creative interaction with whichever colours he freely chose. Yet his choice, among many other factors, would involve reflecting on current conflicts and their constant questioning of our human condition, the past and rights which cost so many lives to obtain. I doubt the young man fully understood me, but the acquisition of rights and freedoms, in both the past and the present, should take precedence over the challenges that he and his generation will face in a digital world of predatory economies and an endless stream of daily information, much of it toxic. He made an interesting observation: Francoism was only studied from the fourth year of secondary school onwards, and the subject was almost never covered. He had only studied the interwar period and Mussolini. Nil, as the young man is called, added that now in sixth form he sees how the fascist and racist attitudes and expressions of other young people might be avoided or greatly mitigated if the subject had been covered in secondary school as part of the compulsory curriculum. This opinion was shared by some of the more vocational teachers and also by another young student who was doing a project on her great-grandfather, a survivor of Mauthausen and Sachsenhausen, who said that they had never before covered the Franco period in order to better understand the exile and deportation of Spaniards to Nazi camps. Perhaps we should apply the teaching of history or ethical values "in reverse", as the great Marc Bloch proposed years ago, starting with the contemporary era.

These are paradoxical, complex times. We are embroiled in multiple crises and by threats besetting us from the far right or from wars desired only by a few unaccountable interests. They spread their nets and tentacles, pressuring us to succumb to their siren songs through hate speech propagated on social media and opaque platforms that seek to beguile the youngest minds. Perhaps this is the most delicate manipulative problem of an increasingly fluid society, one ever more subordinate to the dependence on "the digital" in its broadest sense. There are therefore many challenges in the educational engagement of our youth within an international context, which should also shape our European agenda. Without being alarmist, new forms of coup d'état are already being carried out through what some authors call "technological authoritarianism", or a new power that is no longer just merely media-based but rather defined as "the new power of the more ambitious, ideological and increasingly privatised technological-authoritarian complex". This too is undermining the foundations of our participatory democracy. We must therefore remain vigilant and strengthen those foundations currently under attack from various sides.

Turning to more pragmatic, even technical, but no less important matters: Europe is discussing the new long-term budget framework which will affect the destinies and public policies of States, regions and cities across the Union. The European Commission has launched a sound proposal to reinforce and promote projects and unify them under a major programmatic umbrella, what will be called AGORA EUROPE. It will bring together existing programmes and perhaps introduce new ones. The programmes most relevant to our fields of content include the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values Programmes (CERV or CERV Plus), cultural programmes through Creative Europe, educational programmes such as Erasmus or Erasmus+, research programmes under Horizon, and audiovisual creation or support through the MEDIA programme. It is a challenge the Commission intends to improve and which in theory we welcome and celebrate. There are two main areas I would like to pick out: the budgetary aspect, as the amount would double to reach eight billion euros—without a budget, there is no public policy; and the more political aspect, which is the need to strengthen a major programme representing a more social, cultural, civic and human (or humanistic, if I may say so) Europe. A Europe that will promote programmes and policies not only on memory but also on citizen participation, anti-racism, anti-exclusion, gender, LGBTIQ+ issues and more. The big question mark hanging over this good and appropriate initiative is how it will be received by the European Parliament, whether there will be cuts and how the European Council will vote. Ultimately, it is a challenge that will greatly affect civil society organisations based on values—including the founding values of the European Union—and on civil rights.

Returning to the content, this ninth edition of *Observing Memories* offers an overview of debates and issues shaping the contemporary memorial agenda. With a plural and critical approach, this issue brings together contributions exploring the inclusion of subaltern memories, the revisiting of colonial and slaveholding legacies, the challenges of democratic memory in Spain, and the tensions between commemoration and transmission in European and global contexts. Our aim is to open up spaces for reflection that connect research, institutional practice and citizenship, inviting readers to understand memory not as a static archive but as a living tool for justice, diversity and democratic construction.

In the *Deep View* section, we reaffirm EUROM's commitment to making subaltern memories visible through two essential contributions. Monika Baár analyses the historical exclusion of persons with disabilities in European memory and advocates for their inclusion in building more just societies. She examines the causes of silence and proposes narratives that recognise diversity and agency, highlighting the importance of preserving archives and objects that document struggles for rights and the social model of disability. Likewise, Hisayo Katsui presents the case of Finland, which in 2025 launched the world's first truth and reconciliation process directed at a disability community: the deaf and sign-language-using community. After decades of marginalisation, prohibition of sign language and eugenic policies, the process seeks to acknowledge historical harm, offer redress and promote inclusion.

Another of EUROM's strategic lines concerns the deepening of colonial and slaveholding memories and their dialogue with public space and European citizenry. This is the focus of the *Europe Insight* section. Andrew Davis and Nick White present the Waterfront Transformation Project, promoted by National Museums Liverpool since 2021, which aims to renovate the historic docks and integrate colonial legacies into the urban narrative, ensuring community participation and reorienting spaces within the Maritime Museum and the International Slavery Museum. Meanwhile, Krystel Gualde introduces the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, unveiled in 2012, which addresses the slave-trading past of France's main port in the Atlantic traffic as an ethical call to remember the contemporary existence of new forms of slavery.

Our interview features Dr Amos Goldberg, an Israeli historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a specialist in cultural studies of the Holocaust and other genocides. The conversation explores the relevance of Holocaust memory in the European context, analyses strategies to combat antisemitism and offers essential analytical insights into understanding the scope of the crimes perpetrated by Israel in the Gaza Strip.

The *Overview* section includes an article by Dietmar J. Wetzel on the current challenges facing Europe's collective memory, highlighting the need to understand it as a common good integrated into critical education, public discourse and institutional practice. We also have a contribution by Guillermo León on Castuera Concentration Camp in Extremadura (Spain). A paradigmatic site of memory, representative of thousands of stories silenced for decades, it points to the heart of the Francoist repressive system and its material and immaterial remnants across the country.

In a context of exceptional relevance, we highlight the contributions linked to the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. Carmina Gustrán, Commissioner for the Commemoration of "Spain in Freedom: 50 years", outlines the strategic foundations of the commemorative events, emphasising the role of youth and popular mobilisation in generating a more just future. Equally, Kostis Kornetis advocates a model of commemoration that eschews heroism and draws on examples from Portugal and Greece to foster a critical perspective in Spain which includes social movements, micro-histories and cultural practices.

In the *Review* section, we include noteworthy contributions such as Jo Labanyi's analysis of the book *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain* (2025), edited by Akiko Tsuchiya and Aurélie Vialette; David González's review of the film *Marco* (2024); and Oriol López's thoughts on the exhibition *El Negre de la Riba*.

Finally, in the *Sightseeing* section, Emanuele Morezzi, Chiara Mariotti, Leila Signorelli and Alessia Zampini present *Dissonant Heritage and War. Conservation and Communication of a Difficult Legacy (Co.Co.War)*, a project envisioned as a critical reflection and systematic framework exploring theoretical questions and exemplary cases related to interventions in Dissonant Heritage.

We hope that this edition of *Observing Memories* sparks readers' interest and helps expand the debate on memories in the plural, fostering critical reflection and civic engagement. Each contribution invites us to question established narratives, explore new perspectives and embrace memory as a living tool for justice, inclusion and democracy. Our aim is for these pages not only to inform but also to inspire researchers, professionals and civil society to continue building spaces for dialogue and action in the face of contemporary challenges. Because remembering is not a passive gesture: it is an active practice that defines our shared future.

Jordi Guixé
Director of the European Observatory on Memories

DEEP VIEW

People with Disabilities in European Memory

Monika Baár
European University Institute

The field of memory studies has flourished in recent years. However, the memory culture of people with disabilities remains a blank; it still belongs to what might be termed "subaltern memories". Why is it both worthwhile and necessary to pay more attention to this topic? While this legacy has an intrinsic value, as part of humanity's heritage, there is also an ethical aspect: the struggle for inclusion of persons with disabilities goes hand in hand with securing a place for them in history and in commemoration practices. As the saying goes, memory is just as much about the future as the past. Maintaining and cherishing a marginalised group's identity and heritage requires both forward-looking action and active engagement with the past.

In this article, after reflecting on the reasons for the silence that has long characterised this field, I will discuss several examples of commemoration and remembrance from the twentieth century. I will also argue for the importance of recognising and preserving the memory of disability social movements. Of particular significance is the remembrance of the creative ways in which people with disabilities have challenged the status quo—both through outspoken protest and through more subtle forms of resistance. Including such examples of agency helps challenge the two dominant representational tropes: the tragic victim and the overcoming superhero. It also contributes to building a more inclusive memory culture, one that reflects the diverse and multifaceted nature of human experience.

Why, then, has the intention to commemorate disabled people appeared so late on the agenda of heritage studies, even compared to other marginalised groups such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants, and displaced persons? One key factor is that disability constitutes an extremely heterogeneous category: it has no universally accepted definition, and its boundaries have shifted over time. Even the terminology remains contested. For example, while the United Nations Convention adopts

1. The tomb of Louis Braille at the Panthéon in Paris. Por Andresete - CC BY-SA 4.0„ via Wikimedia Commons.

the designation "persons with disabilities," many people prefer the term "disabled people," and this article uses both variants. Often, individuals with one type of disability feel little sense of commonality with others, and this fragmentation can hinder the development of shared memory practices.

A second factor is visibility. For any group to achieve greater recognition, it must first be adequately represented. When its voice goes unheard, it requires strong and effective advocacy to amplify it. This is not merely a symbolic issue but also a practical one with financial implications: the creation and maintenance of archival collections, the organisation of museum exhibitions, and the construction of memorials all require substantial funding. In the neoliberal marketplace of the heritage industry, citizens are often regarded as consumers, and market logic does not necessarily favour the inclusion of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, silences can be broken in alternative ways. Artists, for instance, often play a vital role in fostering remembrance when more formal or institutional modes of commemoration are absent.

The victims of the two World Wars

Disability may be congenital, acquired later in life through accident or illness, or sustained in war. Of these categories, disabled veterans have received the most consistent attention in European memory: they were honoured for having shed their blood and sacrificed their bodies and minds in the service of their countries. The First World War, for instance, left an indelible mark on European memory cultures. The fate of permanently disabled soldiers returning from the battlefields became a recurring theme in novels, films, and paintings. Yet in public spaces, their representation remained limited: monuments typically commemorated the fallen soldiers or, more symbolically, the unknown soldier. One notable exception is a monument located in Haparanda, a city at the northernmost edge of Sweden's coastline, near the Finnish border. During the First World War, the International Red Cross facilitated the exchange of more than 63,000 wounded and sick veterans between Russia and the Central Powers in neutral Sweden. The veterans suffered from various conditions, including gunshot wounds, tuberculosis, and mental illness. Around 200 of them died in transit and were buried in the churchyard where the monument now stands. The transport operation received considerable media coverage, as the "army of misery" provided many civilians with their first direct encounter with the horrors of war.

During the Second World War, people with disabilities—including those with mental illness or hereditary conditions—were among the first to fall victim to the dehumanising ideology of the Nazi regime. The principles of eugenics sought to "improve" the genetic quality of the population on the basis of racial superiority. This led to the systematic implementation of euthanasia programmes designed to eliminate those deemed "undesirable," most infamously through the Aktion T4 programme. Disabled people were, in fact, a test case for the mass killings later extended to Jewish people and other persecuted groups.

The hierarchies of remembrance often reflect the moral values of societies. Although people with disabilities were the first victims of the Holocaust, they were the last to be commemorated. Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, dedicated to Jewish victims, was inaugurated in 2005 and quickly became an iconic site. A memorial followed it to the LGBTQI+ community in 2008, and another to the Roma and Sinti victims in 2012. The T4 monument, situated in Berlin's Tiergarten district, from where the killings were administered, consists of a 24-metre-long structure made of translucent sky-blue plexiglass. The tone—known as Prussian blue—is identical to the pigment found in the chemical compounds of Zyklon B gas used in the gas chambers, traces of which can still be seen on their walls. This "murderous shade" has thus become a powerful symbol of remembrance.

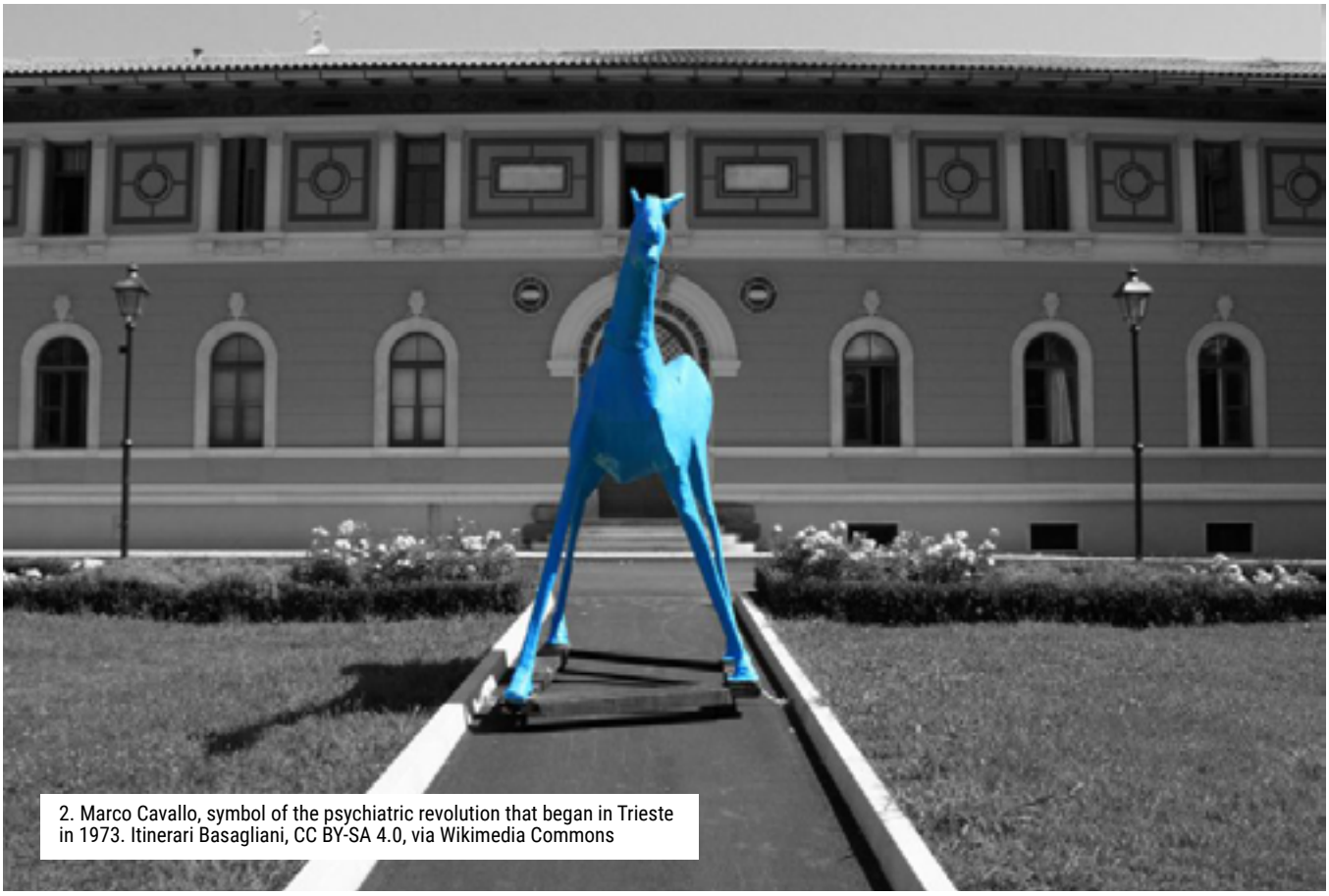
In the Netherlands, the Dovenshoah monument in Amsterdam, unveiled in 2010 on the former site of a school for the deaf and hard of hearing, commemorates Jewish deaf victims. Three words appear on the monument in sign language: *world*, *remain*, and *deaf*. The accompanying inscription reads: *The world remained deaf / In memory of the Jewish Deaf victims of the Nazi regime, 1940–1945*. The message is deeply symbolic. While the word deaf is often understood as implying absence or deficiency, its meaning is inverted: it is the hearing world that was "deaf" to the cries of the victims.

In contrast, another monument in Poland highlights active resistance. The Monument for Deaf Insurgents, located at the School for the Deaf in Warsaw, honours the school's alumni who fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising as members of the Home Army. The monument was unveiled by Karol Stefaniak, himself a deaf veteran, who participated in the uprising at the age of thirteen. Revealing more of these acts of resistance helps challenge the enduring stereotype of disabled people as passive victims.

Exceptional individuals: the legacy of Louis Braille in the twentieth century

Another form of remembrance centres on individuals of exceptional achievement. These figures are often able-bodied educators or advocates for people with disabilities, but one remarkable exception is Louis Braille (1809–1852), perhaps the most famous blind person in history. Born in the French village of Coupvray, Braille lost his eyesight at the age of three and later attended the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. There, he developed a tactile communication system for the visually impaired which now bears his name. The Braille system allows users to read and write the same texts as those printed in conventional fonts, transforming literacy and education for generations of visually impaired people.

The commemoration of Braille's legacy reflects a common feature of memory culture: anniversaries, particularly those marking a birth or death, often spark new initiatives. Initially buried beside his parents in his home village, Braille's remains were transferred to the Panthéon in Paris on 22 June 1952, the centenary of his death. This pantheonisation represented the highest civic honour France can bestow—an accolade shared with figures such as Voltaire and Victor Hugo. During the ceremony, the renowned American educator and disability advocate Helen Keller (1880–1968) compared Braille's contribution to Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press. His legacy continues to be celebrated annually on 4 January, designated by the United Nations as World Braille Day since 2019. The observance is part of the UN's commemorative days, weeks, years, and decades, aimed at promoting advocacy and raising awareness through governments, civil society, and educational institutions.



2. Marco Cavallo, symbol of the psychiatric revolution that began in Trieste in 1973. Itinerari Basagliani, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Remembering patients in psychiatric hospitals

For centuries, people experiencing mental distress were segregated from wider society and confined in residential institutions. Within these facilities, they often endured prison-like conditions, mistreatment, and neglect, rather than receiving proper care. In recent years, however, innovative forms of commemoration have emerged, including survivor-led walking tours and artistic performances held at former institutions. In the 1970s, reformist psychiatrists and anti-psychiatry movements called for radical change: they advocated the closure of asylums and the reintegration of patients into their communities. While professionals' roles in this process have been recognised, the contributions of patients themselves still deserve greater attention.

A particularly striking case of collective memory concerns the legacy of Franco Basaglia (1924–1980), the Italian pioneer of deinstitutionalisation, and his patients. While directing various asylums across Italy, Basaglia sought to improve conditions for both patients and staff. In 1973, at the San Giovanni psychiatric hospital in Trieste, a group of artists, doctors, and patients created a large blue sculpture known as *Marco Cavallo* ("Marco the Horse"). The statue commemorated a real horse once owned by the hospital, used to transport laundry and waste. Patients had befriended the animal, which—unlike them—was occasionally permitted to leave the hospital grounds. Standing over three metres tall, the sculpture could only be removed for its unveiling festival by cutting a hole in the hospital's perimeter wall, symbolising liberation and the breaking of barriers. The gesture also evoked the legend of the Trojan Horse, but in reverse: whereas the Greeks smuggled soldiers into Troy, *Marco Cavallo* symbolically carried freedom out of the asylum. This collaboration between doctors and patients challenged prevailing notions of antagonism and remains a powerful emblem of collective agency and transformation.

A contested monument to pharmaceutical abuse

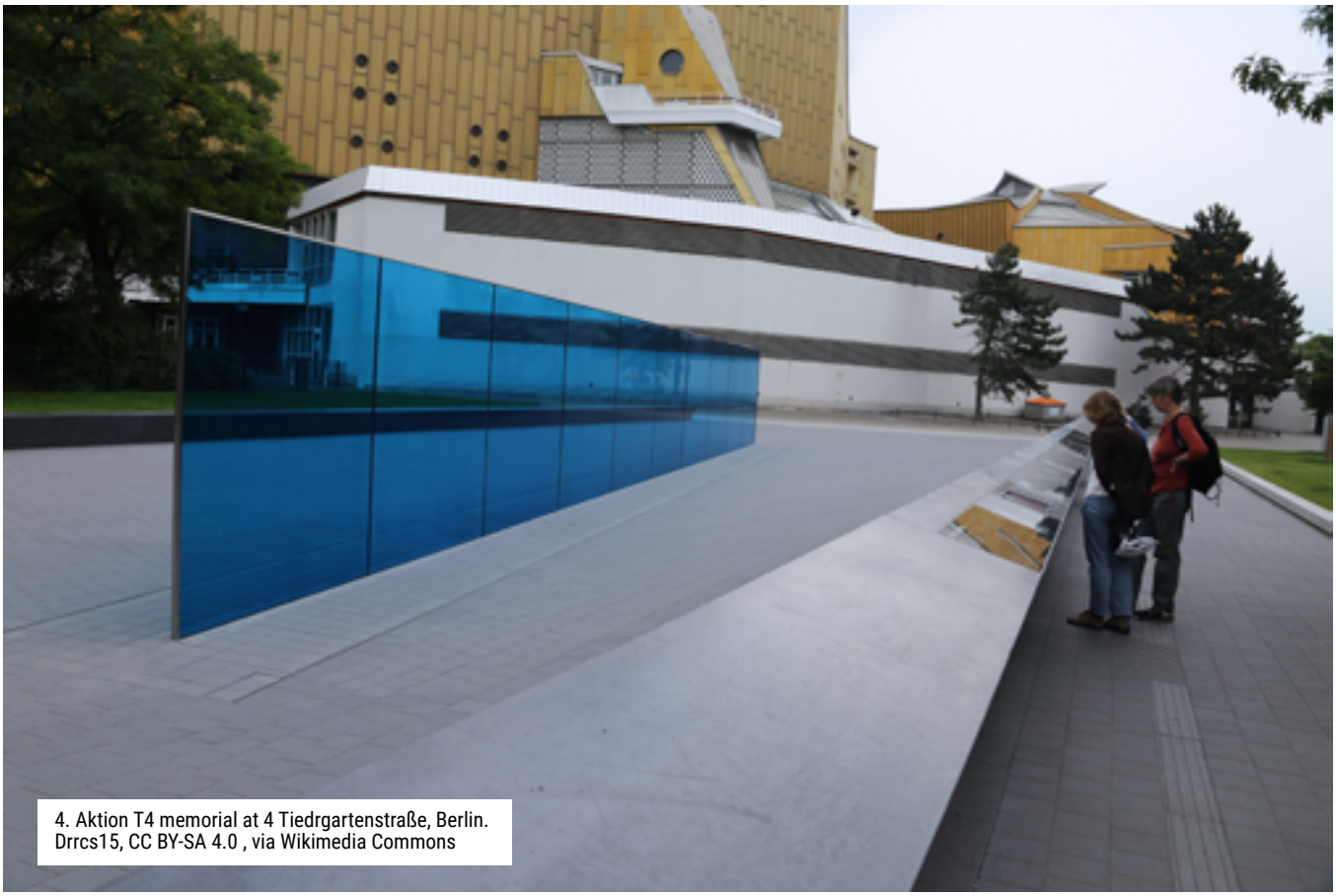
Monuments are rarely static or universally accepted; their meanings can be disputed, reinterpreted, or even overturned. A case in point is the *Contergan* monument, erected in 2012 in Stolberg, near Cologne, where the headquarters of the pharmaceutical company Grünenthal are located. Grünenthal manufactured Thalidomide, first marketed in 1953 under the trade name Contergan as a tranquilliser. It was widely prescribed to pregnant women for morning sickness and insomnia despite insufficient testing. By 1961, more than ten thousand children had been born with severe limb deformities, and thousands of miscarriages had occurred. The drug was withdrawn that same year. What were called the "Contergan children" faced not only lifelong physical disabilities, but also profound social prejudice. A criminal trial in 1968 ended without convictions, and the company eventually reached a financial settlement with the victims.

The *Contergan* monument features a bronze statue of a child without feet and with malformed arms. Its aesthetic value has been questioned, but the deeper controversy lies in its process: the victims of pharmaceutical abuse were never consulted about how their experiences should be commemorated—or whether they wished to be at all. Many saw the monument as a tokenistic gesture, a cheap substitute for genuine reparations. At the time of its unveiling, an estimated 5,000–6,000 people still lived with Thalidomide-related impairments. As they aged, their needs for carers, accessible housing, and mobility aids increased. Instead of providing additional compensation, the company's CEO issued an apology—an act widely condemned by survivors as too little, too late.

3. Poster produced in West Germany calling for buses and trains for all

The memory of social movements: the need for disability archives and museums

Commemoration involves much more than monuments. In addition to remembering sites of trauma and tragedy, it is crucial to commemorate the social movements of disabled people, including their struggles to frame their cause in the context of human rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted in 2006, was preceded by decades of activism. In this respect, there are various parallels with the social movements of women, LGBTQI+ people, and the civil rights movement in the United States. The most valuable objects that help us remember these struggles are those created by disabled people themselves—letters, photographs,

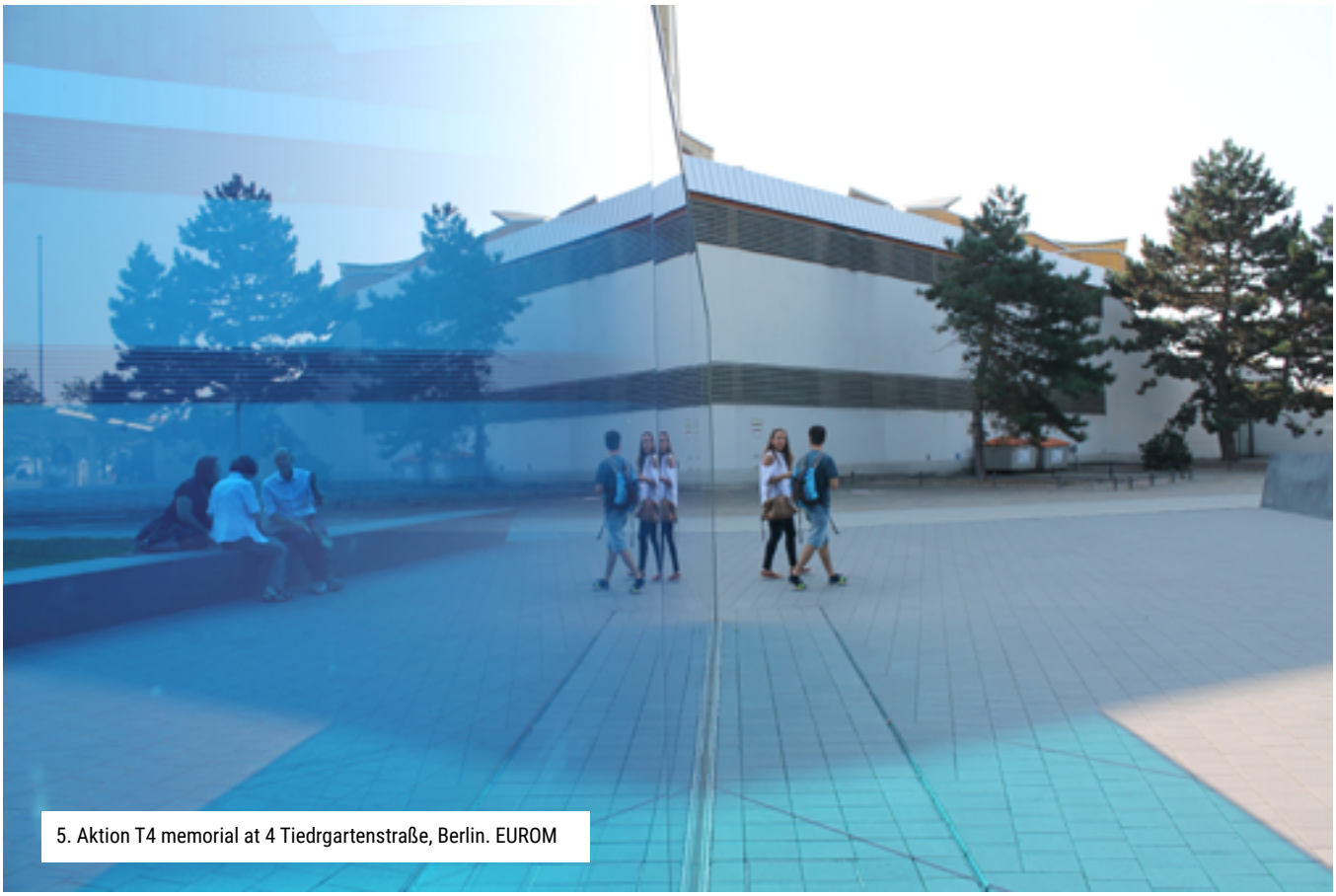


4. Aktion T4 memorial at 4 Tiedrgartenstraße, Berlin. Drrcs15, CC BY-SA 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons

posters, and diaries. These sources document campaigns for more accessible environments, education, and employment during a period when wheelchair users could scarcely leave their homes and were not only physically segregated from mainstream society but also marginalised by prejudice. Activists questioned this status quo and developed a new understanding of disability.

According to this new perspective, disability is not a medical defect or an individual problem to be fixed; rather, it is a condition caused by flaws in the way society is organised. For example, when a wheelchair user cannot enter a building with only stairs and no lift, the problem does not lie in the individual's impairment but in the lack of access. The solution is therefore to change social structures by making the built environment accessible. This approach, known as the social model of disability, focuses not on "fixing" the individual but on transforming society—its mentality and organisation.

Frustration, segregation, and humiliation drove disabled activists and their allies onto the streets. In Spain, for example, 1976 witnessed demonstrations in Madrid and Barcelona, including street protests and sit-ins held in administrative and religious buildings. In the wake of Franco's death, activists seized the moment to demand justice and full participation in the country's emerging democracy. Although the authorities initially resisted, the protesters embodied what Václav Havel later described as "the power of the powerless." Their efforts ultimately contributed to the inclusion in the 1978 Constitution of an article obliging public authorities to provide specialised support for people with disabilities and to guarantee them the same rights as all other citizens. This rich heritage of activism in the 1970s culminated in a landmark event in 1981—the International Year of Disabled Persons, organised by the United Nations. It marked the first time disability was placed on the global stage. Celebrations characterised the year, but also vigorous protests in several countries. The official rhetoric surrounding the event raised expectations that could not be met in a period coinciding with the first major financial crisis of the post-war era. The



5. Aktion T4 memorial at 4 Tiedrgartenstraße, Berlin. EUROM

vast gap between official discourse and everyday reality generated a creative tension from which a new paradigm began to emerge. The International Year encouraged disabled people to think about their status in new ways: to stop concealing their condition and take pride in it. They demanded accessible transport and housing, and one poster produced in West Germany called for "Buses and trains for everyone." At that time, wheelchair users in Germany could travel only in unheated goods compartments without toilet facilities.

It is essential to develop commemorative practices that highlight the creative, active, and transformative potential of activism. This shows that disability can be a source of social and cultural identity and community at local, national, international, and global levels. This requires greater attention to disability-related documents and objects in archives and museums, for instance, through searchable catalogues and temporary exhibitions. Equally important—though more difficult to achieve—is the establishment of dedicated archival and museum collections to preserve the experiences of disabled people. In the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany, such archives already exist, and one is currently being developed in the Netherlands. Alongside national initiatives, it is equally vital to ensure the preservation of archival material documenting international disability activism.

Typically, disability represents only one aspect of identity that intersects with others. The experiences of disabled women may differ from those of disabled men; those of Black disabled women may differ from those of White disabled men or women. Belonging to more than one marginalised group often leads to multiple forms of exclusion. Like any social movement, the activism of disabled people was shaped not only by solidarity but also by internal tensions and conflict. Remembering this complex and sometimes contentious heritage enables a deeper understanding of the movement's contribution to social change and encourages reflection on the kind of society we wish to build for the future.

Truth and Reconciliation *Process of the Deaf and Sign Language Community in Finland*

Hisayo Katsui
University of Helsinki

Background of the truth and reconciliation process

In June 2025, the Finnish government initiated a truth and reconciliation process with the deaf and sign language community and the Finnish Sign Language community. This type of process typically involves official apologies for past injustices committed by powerful institutions, such as the state, the church, or influential social and economic actors. One of the most well-known examples is the Truth and Reconciliation process addressing Apartheid in South Africa.

This initiative is the first of its kind globally, in which a government officially acknowledges and addresses historical injustices experienced by a disability community. This article explores this groundbreaking effort by first outlining the preparation phase of the process, followed by a review of the identified historical injustices, and concludes with reflections on possible future directions.

It is widely recognized that the disability community has faced—and continues to face—injustices both in Finland and around the world. For decades, disability communities locally and globally have responded by empowering their members, raising public awareness, and advocating for change among decision-makers. However, progress has been slow, and this lack of meaningful societal transformation has led many within the disability community to rethink their strategies for social change.

This truth and reconciliation process represents one such response—an effort by the deaf and sign language community in Finland to address these long-standing issues and seek a path toward justice and inclusion.

Two earlier truth and reconciliation processes in Finland helped pave the way for this development. One involved individuals who had been placed in foster care as children

1. In 1905, deaf people decided to establish the Finnish Association of the Deaf (Archive of the Finnish Deaf History Society)

and suffered mistreatment. In 2016, the then Minister of Social Affairs and Health issued an official apology. The second process began in 2021 and involved the Sámi people—the only officially recognized Indigenous people in Europe—who launched their own truth and reconciliation process with the Finnish government.

Discussions about a similar process for the deaf and sign language community began in 2016, particularly within the board meetings of the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD). In 2018, a seminar brought together several minority groups, including Roma people, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Finnish Sign Language users, and Sámi representatives. Following this event, a deaf panelist was invited by Member of Parliament Timo Harakka—who is himself the child of deaf parents—to attend a meeting of the parliamentary sign language network. Representatives from FAD also participated.

After that meeting, the parliamentary sign language network began working on an initiative for a truth and reconciliation process. Around the same time, in 2019, FAD published a press release calling for an investigation and an official apology for the injustices experienced by deaf people. The Finnish Deaf History Society also voiced similar demands that year. In response, Timo Harakka publicly stated on social media that this issue must be addressed at the governmental level.

Later in 2019, the Finnish government under Prime Minister Antti Rinne announced in its program a commitment to launch a national reconciliation process addressing the human rights violations historically experienced by the deaf in Finland.

In 2020–2021, the Finnish government commissioned our research team to carry out a study titled *Signed Memories*. The aim was to investigate the historical injustices faced by the deaf and sign language community in Finland from 1900 to the present day.

The following sections are based on the findings of that study.

2. Teaching and articulation lesson of sound at the School for the Deaf in Turku (Archive of the Finnish Deaf History Society)

Historical and present injustices

The Finnish sign language community emerged in the mid-1800s, when Carl Oscar Malm established the first school for deaf people in Finland in 1846. Malm had studied in Sweden, where he received an education in sign language, and brought those methods back to Finland. For a time, sign language education flourished. However, by the late 1800s, it began to decline due to the rise of eugenic ideology, which heavily influenced education and social policy.

This ideology promoted oralism—the belief that deaf people should only use spoken language—while sign language was actively suppressed. As a result, sign language was banned in schools for deaf students from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s. This prolonged period of prohibition left deep and lasting harm—not only to deaf individuals and the sign language community, but also to Finnish society as a whole. It reinforced the idea that sign language and deaf culture were inferior to spoken language and mainstream culture. These stigmas, rooted in eugenics, continue to shape societal attitudes and contribute to intergenerational pain within the community.

The harm extended beyond language suppression. The deaf were also subjected to state policies that restricted their reproductive rights. Between the 1920s and the 1970s, eugenics-based legislation was enacted and enforced, including the Marriage Act (1929–1969) and the Sterilization Act (1935–1970). These laws targeted people deemed "unfit for society," such as persons with disabilities and the deaf, based on the belief that they would pass on undesirable traits to their children.

For example, deaf women were sometimes required to consent to sterilization in order to receive permission to marry. In addition, many deaf children and adults were subjected to forced rehabilitation programs and experimental medical procedures, sometimes without

their informed consent. These policies caused not only psychological trauma, but also physical harm, leaving behind lasting, embodied scars.

The legacy of these national laws and policies continues to affect the deaf and sign language community, shaping collective memory, identity, and trust in public institutions.

Today, it is estimated that there are between 4,000 and 5,000 users of Finnish Sign Language, and around 90 users of Finnish-Swedish Sign Language. The number of users of both sign languages is steadily declining. In addition to the long history of injustice, recent technological and educational developments have also contributed to this trend.

One major factor is the widespread adoption of cochlear implants. These implants have become a standard medical procedure for children born deaf. However, parents often are not informed about the option of a bilingual approach that includes sign language alongside spoken language. Many children with cochlear implants are therefore not introduced to sign language and grow up without access to the sign language community.

Another significant change has been the closure or merging of schools for the deaf. Instead of attending specialized schools, most deaf children now go to local mainstream schools. Only a few schools still offer Finnish Sign Language classes or bilingual education, and even these programs are limited. The remaining sign language classes typically have very few deaf pupils and often include students with multiple disabilities and varied backgrounds. These schools generally do not actively recruit or encourage deaf pupils to enroll in their sign language programs.

In some municipalities, transportation services for deaf pupils have been cut. This has forced families to send their children to nearby schools that do not offer a sign language environment. Without accessible education in sign language, both the language and culture associated with it are further marginalized.

This situation poses a serious threat to the vitality of the sign language community. The lack of institutional support, combined with inadequate parental guidance and policy gaps, continues to weaken the linguistic and cultural foundation of the community.

Current status of the truth and reconciliation process

Our study, *Signed Memories*, confirmed the serious historical injustices experienced by the deaf and sign language community in Finland. These injustices

3. Girls' dormitory at the Porvoo school for the deaf around the 1900s (Archive of the Finnish Deaf History Society)

3. Oskar Wetzelliä's printing house in the 1920s. Vocational training was provided in the house. (Source: Finnish Museum of the Deaf)

primarily concerned violations of linguistic and cultural rights, as well as reproductive health rights. These violations, in turn, had widespread impacts on other fundamental rights, including the rights to education, employment, and participation in cultural and social life.

In 2015, Finland took an important step by enacting the Sign Language Act, which aimed to protect the linguistic and cultural rights of the sign language community. The country's sign language interpretation service is now considered one of the best in the world. However, despite these advancements, the legacy of eugenic ideology remains present in institutional structures and societal attitudes.

Following the publication of Signed Memories, the Finnish government commissioned a second study to assess the need for psychosocial support for the deaf and sign language community. This study aimed to help the community process past harms and move toward healing and justice. A working group was established to explore next steps. It included representatives from both community and government institutions.

As a result of this process and ongoing advocacy, the Finnish government officially acknowledged the injustices faced by the deaf and sign language community. In early June 2025, the government formally launched a truth and reconciliation process. This included the release of a mandate document and the appointment of a secretariat and steering group to oversee the process.

The secretariat, while housed under the Ministry of Justice, operates as an independent body. It has been tasked with establishing working groups, conducting further studies, and preparing a final report by the end of 2027. The steering group consists of representatives from five community organizations as well as a representative from the government.

To support the process, the government has allocated €1.8 million, with the process scheduled to run for two years. This marks a historic moment—not only for Finland but globally—as it is the first truth and reconciliation process in which a government officially addresses historical injustices against a disability community.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The success of the truth and reconciliation process requires more than just cooperation between the deaf and sign language community and the government—it also demands active engagement and genuine ownership of Finnish society as a whole. The ultimate goal is social transformation, ensuring that the injustices of the past are not repeated.

Globally, many governments have engaged in truth and reconciliation processes to address

historical wrongs and rebuild trust with marginalized communities. When examining these international efforts, we can identify three general patterns or focuses: 1) past-oriented, 2) present-oriented, and 3) future-oriented processes.

In **past-focused processes**, the emphasis is on establishing a shared understanding of historical injustices. These processes often begin with the collection of reliable evidence and testimonies, leading to official apologies grounded in truth agreed upon by both the affected community and the state. The experiences of individuals who directly suffered the injustices are placed at the center.

Present-focused processes build on the recognition that historical injustices are not isolated in the past, but continue to shape current conditions. These processes emphasize the connection between past and present, incorporating a multi-voiced narrative that spans generations. In this model, apologies often come later in the process, after thorough discussions of ongoing inequalities and structural barriers.

Future-focused processes aim to promote long-term societal transformation by addressing the continuing legacy of past injustices and working collaboratively toward systemic change. Rather than placing primary emphasis on apologies, these efforts prioritize joint initiatives, policy development, and shared visions for an inclusive future. This model extends ownership of the process beyond the directly affected community and government to the wider public, recognizing that social justice requires broad-based commitment.

It is important to note that these three models are not mutually exclusive. In practice, many truth and reconciliation processes combine elements of all three. The boundaries between them are fluid, and there is room for innovation and new approaches that do not fit neatly into any single model.

The key takeaway is that there is no one-size-fits-all formula. Each process must be carefully tailored to its unique context, with clear goals and a thoughtful balance between addressing the past, confronting present realities, and building a shared future. For Finland's process with the deaf and sign language community, this means identifying the most meaningful and transformative approach—one that acknowledges past harm, addresses current challenges, and paves the way for a more just and inclusive society.

A truth and reconciliation process is an official and weighty undertaking—one that typically occurs only once for each marginalized community within a country. Because of its unique and far-reaching nature, careful consideration must be given to every aspect of the process: the name, the terminology used, the definition and boundaries of the community involved, the scope of investigation, and the selection of participants and stakeholders, among others.

Transparency and accountability are essential. These principles are not only critical for building trust between the parties involved, but also for achieving the broader societal impact that such a process aims to generate. For the process to lead to real change, it must be seen as legitimate, inclusive, and just—not only by the community directly affected but also by the wider public.

If Finland and the deaf and sign language community succeed in building a meaningful and transformative truth and reconciliation process, it could serve as an inspiring example for other countries around the world. It would demonstrate that reconciliation with disability communities is both necessary and possible, and that historical injustices can be addressed with dignity, collaboration, and care.

As this process unfolds, we will be watching its development with great interest. It holds the potential to reshape how societies reckon with past harms and envision a more inclusive and equitable future.

Reference

Katsui, H., Koivisto, M. K., Rautiainen, P., Meriläinen, N., Tepora-Niemi, S-M., Tarvainen, M., Rainò, P. & Hiilamo, H. (2024) *Deaf People, Injustice and Reconciliation: Signed Memories*. Routledge. London.

Transforming Liverpool's Waterfront

Andrew Davies
University of Liverpool

Nick White
Liverpool John Moores University [1]

Liverpool's waterfront1 is currently undergoing major change as part of the Waterfront Transformation Project, a multi-million pound process coordinated by National Museums Liverpool with multiple funding bodies and significant community involvement.[2] This project seeks to reimagine the city's historic docks and port in the context of the legacies of colonialism which have shaped the city. The intention is partially to renovate some of the historic maritime architecture/facilities in Liverpool's city centre, but largely serves to better incorporate some of the histories and legacies of the docks into the visitor experience. This includes wider recognition of the historic diversity of Liverpool's population, including those communities who have been traditionally marginalised or excluded from official commemorations or museum displays. In addition, the reimagination project is about recognising the docks/waterfront as a space which connected Liverpool to other parts of the world – particularly West Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas during the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Whilst Liverpool's interconnected dock system stretched for miles along the Mersey estuary, the Waterfront Transformation Project seeks to make significant alterations to a small but significant set of buildings and structures which are in the heart of the city and are a major set of tourist attractions. Since the 1990s, the tourist sector has been a major part of Liverpool's economy and 'The Docks' as they are commonly called, are the site of museums (Tate Liverpool, the Maritime Museum, the International Slavery Museum and

1 Both Andy and Nick are the Co-Directors of the Centre for Port and Maritime History (CPMH), a collaborative academic initiative between the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University and National Museums Liverpool. CPMH runs regular seminars and events related to maritime history in and around Liverpool, and members have been involved in various aspects of the consultation process for the Waterfront Transformation Project.

2 https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/waterfront-transformation-project

1. Proposals for Liverpool's Canning Dock include a pedestrian bridge and contemplation space © Asif Khan Studio

the Museum of Liverpool) as well as the Liverpool Arena, Conference Centre and significant numbers of bars and restaurants. Nearby are the 'Three Graces' – the iconic Liver Building, Cunard Building and Port of Liverpool Building which are emblematic of the city's public representation as a maritime and financial centre. However, this landscape has traditionally made little explicit reference to the city's origins as a major imperial port.

Liverpool, Slavery and Empire

Liverpool's growth as a city was predicated on the growth of trade facilitated by the expanding docklands, of which the most significant in the city's early growth was the transatlantic slave trade. In the 1690s, Liverpool was little more than a fishing village, and its prodigious growth into a city of around 80,000 people by 1800 was largely financed by transatlantic slavery – by the 1740s it was the UK's (and probably Europe's) principal port involved in the transatlantic slave trade. By 1797, the abolitionist clergyman Reverend William Bagshaw Stevens

3. Double Lever Bridge raised. Proposals for Liverpool's Canning Dock © Asif Khan Studio

was able to claim that every brick in Liverpool was cemented by the 'blood and sweat' of the enslaved labour of black Africans.

However, even after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, and the 1833 abolition of slave-owning, the port and its associated trade connected Liverpool to the wider British Empire, as well as to goods produced by enslaved people in the Americas (for example, many merchants in Liverpool supported the Confederacy in the US Civil war). This ensured that Liverpool's population was more diverse than many other British cities. The city has some of the longest-established populations of Black, Chinese and South-East Asian residents in the UK, combined with earlier communities of seafarers from Russia, Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. Liverpool was, by the early-twentieth century, one of the British Empire's pre-eminent cities – historian and Director of London's V&A Museum Tristram Hunt listed it in his 2014 book as one of the ten cities which 'made' the British Empire.

Like many UK cities with diverse populations, Liverpool has a complex history of solidarity and community resilience punctuated by moments of violence and despair. These include, but are not limited to, the 1919 port city riots where thousands of the white-majority population attacked the black-minority community and murdered a Bermudan seafarer named Charles Wotten in the waters of the docks, as well as the forced deportation of around 2,000 Chinese men from the city in 1945-6, permanently splitting fathers from their wives and children and which was only acknowledged in 2022. Liverpool's twentieth-century economic decline is intertwined with these stories, and its public institutions have often ignored or marginalised these inconvenient imperial histories and the impacts they had on the various communities in the city. As such, many minority and working-class communities within the city are often sceptical of the intentions of local and national authorities.

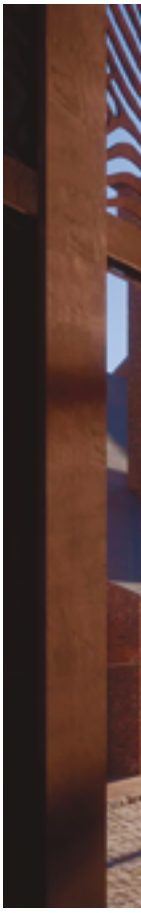
3. Proposals for Liverpool's Canning Dock © Asif Khan Studio

Museums, Memorials and Commemoration in the Docks

Attempts to redress these omissions from the city's public spaces have been long in the making. The importance of the city's historic collections means that its most significant museums are publicly owned and governed by National Museums, Liverpool (NML). As a result, unlike many municipal and provincial museums in the UK, they are sponsored and effectively governed by the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport rather than by local authorities. Whilst this means NML and its holdings are bound to national/ministerial conventions and therefore heightened scrutiny, it also means NML's museums are free to enter and have a degree of extra financial security compared to many municipal museums in the UK. The current Waterfront Transformation Project, led by NML, is closely tied to the buildings, collections and holdings of three of NML's museums - the Maritime Museum and the International Slavery Museum, and the Museum of Liverpool.

It is important to note here the intertwined history of the MM and the ISM. Merseyside Maritime Museum – as it was then known – housed in the Royal Albert Dock complex, was established in 1980 and fully opened

in 1984. In its initial years, like many maritime museums, it focused largely on displays of ships, boats and other maritime ephemera – but the museum was criticised for not including reference to Transatlantic Slavery. In 1994 a specific exhibition was created – Transatlantic Slavery Against Human Dignity – although this was also subject to criticism, especially for not consulting in its creation members of the Liverpool communities with historic ties to enslaved peoples. This fed into the establishment of the International Slavery Museum in 2007, symbolic as the bicentenary of the 1807 abolition of the Slave Trade. ISM is a separate museum but was housed within the Maritime Museum building on its 3rd floor. ISM was immediately the subject of extensive local, press and academic attention, not least because of its overt political stance. The initial ISM displays did involve much more community consultation than previously at the MM, but it was recognised that this process was imperfect and the limited space available in one floor of a different museum could not do justice to the full story of Liverpool's involvement with transatlantic slavery. ISM has expanded since opening to include an adjacent building – the Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Building (formerly the Albert Dock's historic Traffic Office) and is now a significant presence within the cultural landscape of the city. Both museums as well as NML, then, have been the subject of scrutiny and have been subject to rigorous critiques over their involvement of local communities in the design of their spaces.



4. Proposal for Double Lever Bridge Raised © Asif Khan Studio

5. Proposal for the South Dry Dock Access © Asif Khan Studio

Co-Producing a New Waterfront

It is in this setting that the Waterfront Transformation project is making its intervention, aiming to involve and include communities excluded from such processes in the past. The project is one of the largest attempts to reimagine the city's public spaces in living memory, and is significant as it is not primarily concerned with regeneration as a means of improving the economy of the city (although this is obviously an important corollary). The project also sits within a wider context of contentious urban planning decisions within the city in recent years - until 2021, the waterfront in and around the city centre was one of the core areas of the wider UNESCO World Heritage site of 'Liverpool - Maritime Mercantile City'. Wider urban redevelopment projects along the waterfront extending beyond the city centre – described as 'vandalism' in a major national newspaper[3] - saw the inscription being removed in 2021.

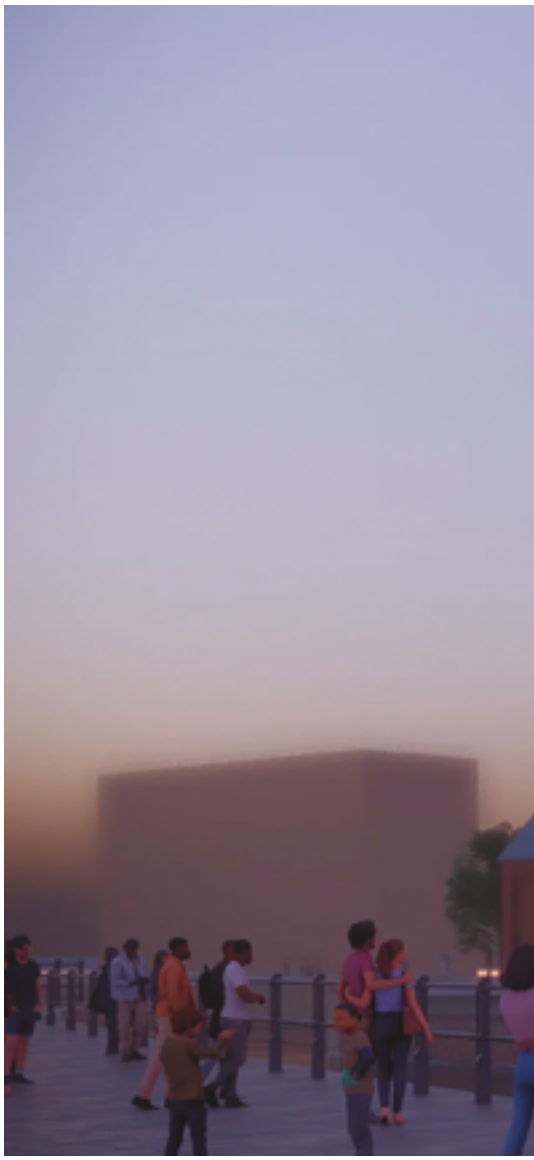
The remit of the Transformation Project, which was launched with a public competition in 2021,[4] included re-orienting the interiors of ISM and MM to improve the accessibility and interpretation spaces of the

3 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jul/21/liverpool-unesco-world-heritage-status-stripped?ref=livpost.co.uk

4 https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/design-contest-to-breathe-new-life-into-liverpool-waterfront/

museums, including a distinct entrance solely for ISM, but also to consider how to incorporate the docks and wider waterfront area into the story of Liverpool. Since the waterfront shifted towards a site of leisure in the 1980s, many areas remained shaped by their industrial past and were hard to access and little used as a result. The Canning Graving Docks, where ships (including slave ships) had been refitted and repaired since the 1700s, are large spaces which were either empty or contained decaying ships inaccessible to the public. Thus, improving the public's ability to visit and engage directly with these spaces was a key aim of the overall project.

From the beginning of the current project, clear processes were established with representatives from various communities to co-produce the outcomes. These include representatives from different ethnic communities, but also historic and maritime associations within the city. For example, since the opening of ISM in 2007, the RESPECT group[5] was established to improve the representation of historic and present-day inequalities in the museum's spaces. RESPECT now provides strategic advice and support across NML's activities and is an important advisory group for the Waterfront Transformation Project. Elsewhere, local creative organisations such as Writing on the Wall and 20 Stories High brought their expertise on storytelling and engaging with under-represented communities through the arts into dialogue with museum and planning professionals. Other expert groups include maritime historians (both professional/academic and independent scholars) and historians of transatlantic slavery. For instance, NML staff have been working with the Liverpool Black History Research Group to explore the history of who lived and worked the historic docks.[6] This approach has been important in ensuring co-production of the new waterfront feels genuine rather than tokenistic and involves communities throughout the entire process. As noted above, this has been an extended process which has taken decades since the first attempts to do justice to Liverpool's past.



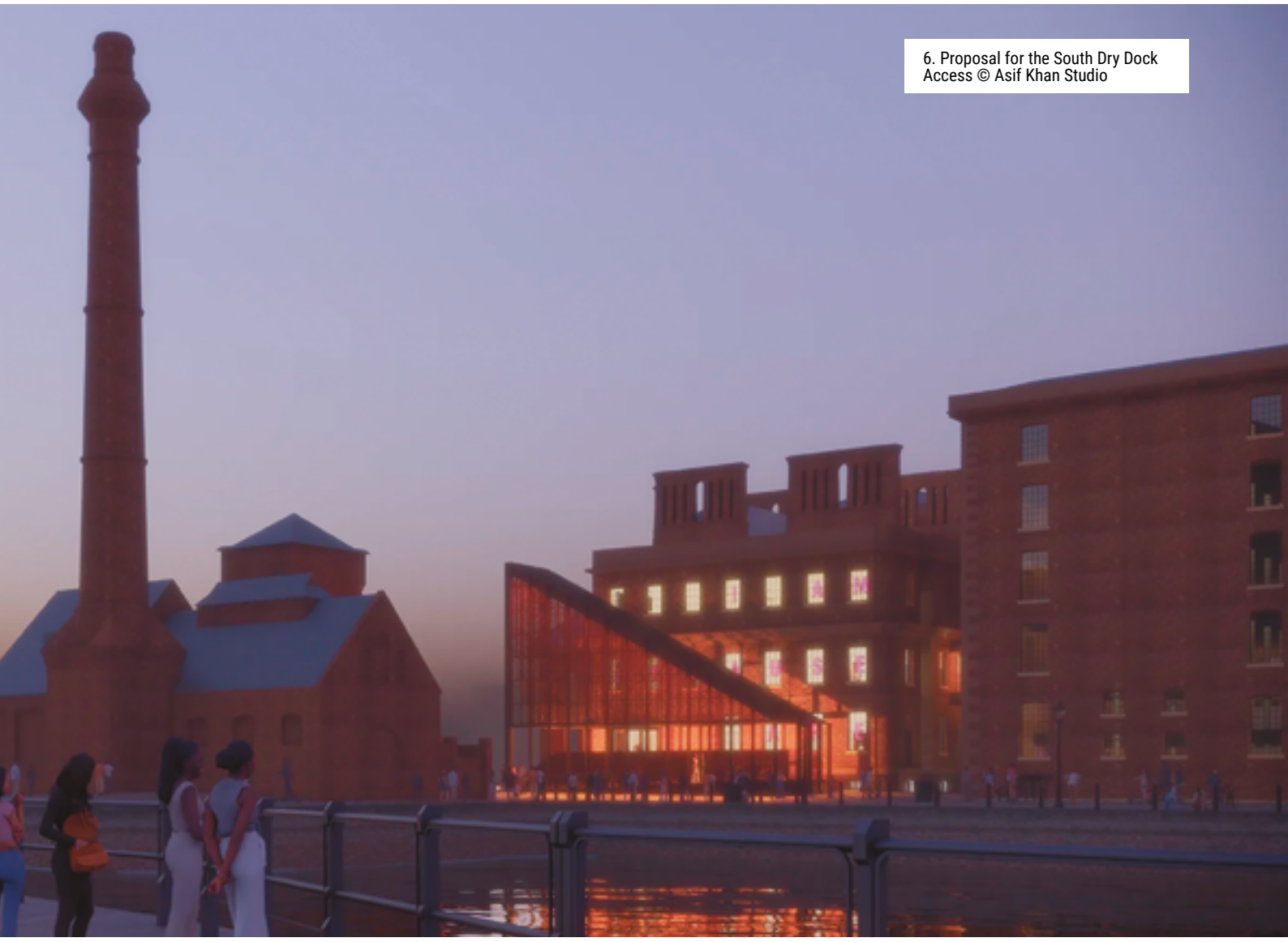
5 https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/about/respect-group

6 https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/news/of-people-and-place

Emerging Outcomes and Ongoing Developments

The Waterfront Transformation remains in progress as we write in 2025. With funding secured from the National Heritage Lottery Fund and the UK Government's Levelling Up Fund, work has started on the major redevelopment of the interiors of the Maritime Museum and International Slavery Museum. In the next phases, the Canning Graving Dock will form the centrepiece of the Waterfront's outdoor spaces. Architecture firm Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios and National Museums Liverpool are working with multiple partners to develop the Dr Martin Luther King Jr. building and the Hartley Pavilion. Inter alia, this will involve a prominent new entrance to ISM, improving visitor orientation and opportunities for reflection, while developing MM as a multifunctional space, facilitating community collaboration, events, and educational activity.

The collective nature of the Project is encapsulated by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, who are contracted to redesign MM's and ISM's exhibition spaces, when they state: "Together, we will honour Liverpool's Waterfront as a sacred ground – a place that reverberates with the sights, sounds and souls of all those connected to its global history." The significance of such an endeavour for building an inclusive story of the colonial pasts of major European cities like Liverpool means that many should be interested in the Waterfront Transformation Project's eventual outcomes.



6. Proposal for the South Dry Dock Access © Asif Khan Studio

A Vibrant Place: *The Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes*

Krystel Gualdé
Nantes History Museum

In Nantes, there is a place where silence speaks, where footsteps slow, caught by the weight of a long-buried history. A vibrant place, on the riverbank, where memory takes form: the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery. Its very existence, at the heart of this port city, stands as a powerful and dizzying dissonance. For between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Nantes was France's principal centre of the Atlantic slave trade — a commercial crossroads from which more than 1,800 expeditions set sail, tearing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children from their homelands to deliver them to Europe's colonial plantations in the Americas.

More than 555,000 people were deported under the flag of Nantes — in the name of a prosperity built on inhumanity. Although other cities, such as Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Le Havre, also participated in this trade in human lives, Nantes dominated. Its fortune was rooted in this globalised economy of violence: in the slave trade, the refining of sugar, the weaving of cotton, commercial alliances with Asia, and the beginnings of an incipient industrialisation. A network of powerful interests bound Europe, Africa and America together in a relentless and particularly brutal web.

The paradox is even starker when one considers Nantes was far from an abolitionist stronghold; it was, in fact, an avowed opponent. In 1794, the city fiercely resisted the first abolition of slavery proclaimed by the French Revolution. It celebrated Napoleon Bonaparte's reinstatement of slavery in 1802 and continued illegal trading until 1831. For a long time, memory chose oblivion.

Today, that buried history has resurfaced. The Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, inaugurated on 25 March 2012 — a highly symbolic date marking Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 — embodies the return of a past long accepted, yet repressed after the Second World War and during the era of decolonisation.

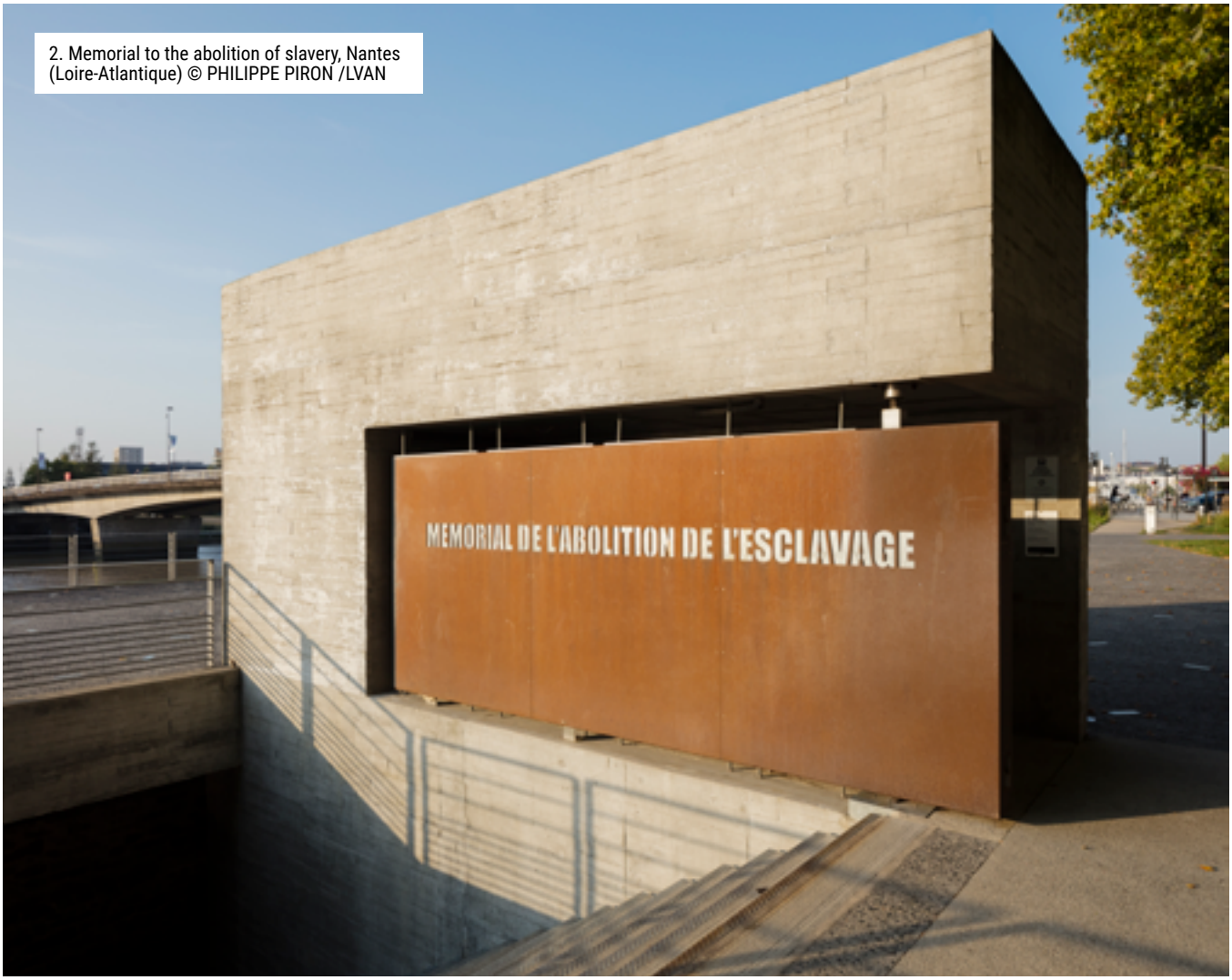
1. Memorial to the abolition of slavery, Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) © PHILIPPE PIRON /LVAN

A joint creation by artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and architect Julian Bonder, the monument is the result of a long process shaped by debate, silent resistance and legitimate questioning.

From its inception, the project divided opinion. It was supported by associations representing people from France's overseas territories, and politically backed by Jean-Marc Ayrault, then the city's mayor, yet it also aroused unease and tension. Some considered its cost excessive; others felt the recently renovated Nantes History Museum was sufficient. More profoundly, the very idea of a memorial — unique in Europe — devoted entirely to this dark chapter of colonial history was unsettling. For remembrance demands confrontation with what we would rather silence, and in this case, it means bearing the weight of a profoundly shameful past.

Yet despite all this, the monument came into being — as a necessity, a response to accumulated silences, an obligation.

Built on the banks of the Loire, the Memorial unfolds as a space for reflection — a place of passage and awareness. It begins with a broad promenade bordered by glass plaques set into the ground. Each bears the name of a ship, a date, an African port of departure, and a number of captives. Together, they form a murmured litany that accompanies the rhythm of one's steps, an invisible map etched into the riverside. Some names stand out: *La Diane, Les Trois Frères, Le Père de Famille…* and later, after 1789, *La Liberté, L'Égalité, Le Ça ira* — so many paradoxes that leave no one indifferent. In the very banality of these names, nothing betrays



2. Memorial to the abolition of slavery, Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) © PHILIPPE PIRON /LVAN

the unspeakable horror of the voyages they mark. It is here that confusion begins.

Then comes the descent. The visitor moves beneath the quay, into a concrete chamber both austere and luminous in its simplicity, yet dark, almost sepulchral, in its intent. The murmur of the river can be heard and light filters through like that in the hold of a slave ship. A faint soundtrack whispers. The space closes in; time seems suspended. To one side, an opening faces the Loire; to the other, a glass wall engraved with the word *Freedom* in forty-seven languages. A polyphonic chorus of voices rises, solemn and resonant, along this wall. They speak the unspeakable — of struggle, of hope, of revolt. From the words of enslaved insurgents to the speeches of abolitionists; from Enlightenment philosophers to twentieth-century poets; from the calls of past resisters to the appeals of today's activists.

3. Memorial to the abolition of slavery, Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) © PHILIPPE PIRON /LVAN

Olaudah Equiano, once enslaved and later a writer, bears witness: "Today I am a free man, and I will never forget that my freedom was won at the price of unspeakable suffering." Nearby, the voice of Toussaint Louverture, captured and imprisoned, still prophesies: "In overthrowing me, you have only cut down the trunk of the tree of Black liberty in Saint-Domingue. It will grow again from the roots, for they are deep and numerous." Then come the words of Victor Schoelcher — "Slavery is a violent and permanent negation of humanity" — followed by those of Martin Luther King, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Nelson Mandela. Each, in their own way, anchors memory in the present and reminds us that dignity is never a given right but a perpetual act of struggle.

This procession of voices functions as both a ritual and a call. It is not only about remembrance but about recognising that memory itself is action.

For the Memorial does not close upon the past; it opens onto the urgencies of the present. Far from being a mausoleum, it confronts us with the intolerable persistence of slavery in new forms. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, more than fifty million people worldwide still live under the yoke of forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage or human trafficking. Women, children, and the most vulnerable continue to bear the cost of an unequal world.

What the Memorial tells us — silently yet with profound force — is that the memory of the slave trade is not a page turned, but a light cast upon contemporary realities we would rather ignore. It is not about guilt but about responsibility: to act, to prevent repetition, and to name the new chains, even if they are no longer made of iron.

Because it links past and present, the personal and the universal, the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery is not merely a place of remembrance. It is a mirror held up to our age, a threshold towards ethical engagement. It reminds us that forgetting is complicity — and that only an active, living, and shared memory can prevent the return of the worst. Freedom, that fragile conquest, must always be defended, reclaimed, and passed on.

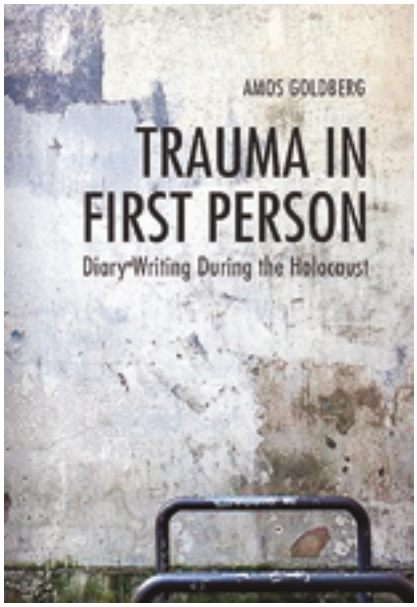
4. Memorial to the abolition of slavery, Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) © PHILIPPE PIRON /LVAN

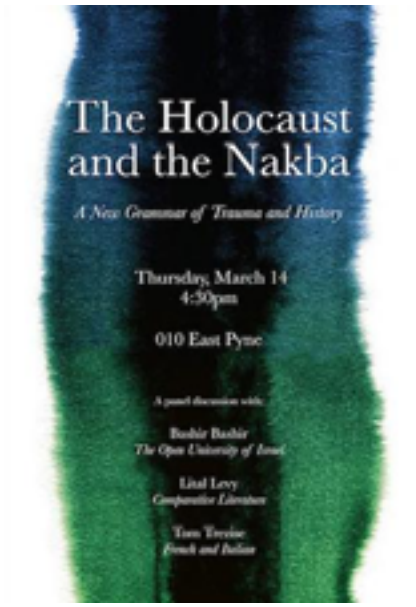
Interview with Amos Goldberg

1. Portrait of Amos Goldberg.

"Memory itself doesn't seem sacred to me, not even Holocaust memory."

Amos Goldberg (Jerusalem, 1966) is a professor in the Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.





2. Cover of some of the books by Amos Goldberg.

Goldberg has held research fellowships at international institutions such as Cornell University, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, CUNY and the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden in Hamburg. His work focuses on the cultural history of the Holocaust, testimonial literature and studies of memory and trauma.

Among his most influential publications are the award-winning Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust (Indiana University Press, 2017); The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History (Columbia University Press, 2018, co-edited with Bashir Bashir) and his recent Hebrew book: You Shall Remember: Five Critical Readings in Holocaust Memory (2024). In his writings he established himself as an international authority in the critical study of the Holocaust and its memory, and their contemporary resonances. In April 2024 Goldberg published an article on Gaza in the Hebrew online magazine Local Call, "Yes, It is Genocide" which was the first in Hebrew to acknowledge the genocide and which was translated into multiple languages.

The set of interview questions was forwarded to the interviewee in June 2025, with the responses subsequently submitted in September 2025.

1. The Holocaust remains as a central reference point for the study of genocide and mass violence. How does it help explain or interpret crimes and atrocities taking place today?

There is an inherent contradiction or at least tension in the question itself. For it assumes a special feature that the Holocaust possesses which makes it an important reference point for understanding other cases of mass violence. But if the Holocaust can be compared to other cases of genocide and mass violence, then what is fundamentally different about it? And why should it specifically serve as such an ultimate reference point? The contradiction/tension can also be formulated in a slightly different way. On one hand, it is customary to argue that one should engage with the Holocaust on the grounds that it is a paradigmatic case of genocide because it contains in extreme form all the components of the phenomenon. But on the other hand, precisely

as such, many argue that it is a unique case which no other case truly resembles, and therefore one cannot really learn from it about other cases. Such is, for example, the position of Saul Friedländer. The belief in the specialness and uniqueness of the Holocaust has become among many an unnegotiated fundamental that makes it difficult to learn from it analogically about other cases, and analogies are often received in one of two ways. On one hand, in any comparison one must emphasize how much the case does not reach the level of cruelty and extremity that characterized the Holocaust, which in practice allows for the normalization of those other events—they are, after all, not "like the Holocaust." And on the other hand, in cases that are politically sensitive to Western, Israeli, or Jewish ears (e.g. regarding Israel), the comparison is completely forbidden since it is perceived as banalization of the Holocaust or even as antisemitism. Therefore, I think that

the use of the Holocaust – despite it being a very radical case of genocide – as a special and unique reference point is in fact very problematic historically, and very harmful morally and politically. Such a hierarchy does not exist in any other comparative field—is there in nationalism studies one case that is a paradigmatic case in light of which all other cases are studied? Does it exist in the study of empires or revolutions? Is there one case of a revolution or historical empire that receives such a central and almost theological status? Comparative research assumes fundamental equality of all members in the comparison group. And this is how it should be with regard to the Holocaust as well despite it being one of the most extreme cases of genocide.

2. While Holocaust memory has long shaped EU remembrance politics, the eastward enlargement in the early 2000s introduced post-communist perspectives that often equate Nazism and Stalinism. What are the implications of integrating these narratives into a shared European memory?

In September 2019, the European Parliament adopted by a large majority a resolution calling for the commemoration of the crimes of both the communist regimes and the Nazi regime, and even established August 23 as a day for commemorating the victims of crimes by all totalitarian regimes. In many respects, this resolution revives the conceptual world of Hannah Arendt from the early 1950s during the Cold War, who spoke, at least ostensibly, in her book "The Origins of Totalitarianism", of both: the Nazis and the Stalinist Soviet regime as two forms of totalitarian regimes. Since then, the concept has largely lost the appeal it had during the Cold War. The resolution itself has several aspects in my view. On one hand, it expresses the current situation in Europe where nationalism and even ultra-nationalism are rising again. Often the memory of suffering from the communist era expresses these tendencies. On the other hand, the suffering of Eastern European peoples under communist rule, which was at times, especially during the Stalin era, extremely murderous, receives recognition and this is a blessed matter and might also somewhat calm the "memory wars." But this begins to be particularly problematic in my view when the memory of the crimes of communist regimes is intended to obscure the horrors of the Nazi regime and its partners and collaborators in many countries in Eastern Europe such as Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, etc. The hope is that the extension and inclusion of memories will enable more recognition and more political responsibility and not the opposite. Nonetheless, I have a concern that this is primarily an expression of the growing exclusionary ethnic-nationalism of Eastern European peoples who place their national suffering as victims at the center of their identity and wash away the more

2. UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

problematic aspects of their histories of wrongdoing and collaboration. We see how destructive Holocaust memory was when it serves ultra/ethnic exclusionary national identities (for Israel and in other forms also for other nations in Europe), and there is a concern that expanding the memory paradigm will only deepen those same tendencies in Europe and beyond.

3. In light of the evident lack of credibility in Holocaust denial, the fight against its distortion seems to have gained greater importance. From your perspective, what do you consider to be the main threats today in terms of Holocaust distortion?

I usually tell my students that despite all the paranoia that is maintained for political reasons, the phenomenon of "Holocaust denial" has become extremely marginal, while the more interesting phenomenon historically and culturally is precisely Holocaust memory that has become so dominant even in places like the USA, South Africa, and Australia that have almost no direct connection to the Holocaust. But memory itself doesn't seem

sacred to me, not even Holocaust memory. At the end of Imre Kertész's (a Hungarian Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize laureate in literature) book "Fatelessness," the protagonist, a young Holocaust survivor, raises the possibility that he too will forget the horrors of Auschwitz. In 1988, the Israeli intellectual and Holocaust survivor Yehuda Elkana wrote a long article called "In Praise of Forgetting" because he thought that Holocaust memory was politically and morally corrupting Jewish society in Israel. The more important question then, in my view, is what values and forms of identity do memory or its distortion establish?

So there are three types of Holocaust distortions that frighten me particularly because they embody a distorted historical understanding of the past that is intended to support anti-democratic conceptions in the present. In the past, nationalists and fascists simply denied the Holocaust because it cast a heavy shadow over the history of their peoples. Today the trend is different: many recognize the Holocaust and honor the memory of the Jews, but "we" (Hungarians, Poles, Bulgarians, Dutch, etc.) they claim, had no part in it. We were on the good side of history. In Germany, the AfD tells a different story. The Nazi period was just a comma within Germany's glorious history. And in the Israeli context, the argument about "the uniqueness of the Holocaust" is a dangerous distortion of it, which serves today the genocidal nationalist narratives of the State of Israel and its supporters and has enabled the Western world to support the occupation, apartheid, and now genocide in Gaza. I think that

any memory that does not examine the political and historic foundations of mass violence in order to better understand it and prevent it, but focuses only on suffering and victimization, is a distortion.

4. In the context of the current conflict in Gaza, comparisons have been made between the actions of the State of Israel and the Holocaust—both by those who condemn them and by those who justify them in the name of preventing future existential threats. How do you interpret these tensions in the use of Holocaust memory in such opposing discourses?

I don't think there is symmetry and I also don't think one should always think in symmetrical terms. There is no comparison between Hamas and the Nazis, and between Israel's situation and that of the Jews in Europe in the thirties and forties. Hamas is a local and relatively weak organization in one of the poorest places on earth, that managed to strike Israel heinously, criminally and unprecedently on October 7 with extremely meager means. Some of its ideological manifestos like the 1988 charter contains clear antisemitic elements (though it was amended in 2017 and those antisemitic notions were not included). Nazi Germany was a huge empire who ruled over almost of all of Europe and beyond. The Jews in Europe were powerless. Israel is one of the strongest military powers in the world, even if it suffered a huge and very traumatic blow. Without justifying Hamas' criminal attack, it can and should be explained politically. It was launched because Israel had almost succeeded in eliminating the Palestinian people politically with the Abraham Accords, the change of status at Haram al-Sharif (The Temple Mount), because of the siege on Gaza, the apartheid, and the annexation. We should also remember that some 70% of the population in Gaza are refugees from the 1948 ethnic cleansing (the Nakba). The Nazis murdered the Jews because they were Jews and had all sorts of insane conceptions about them, among other things that they were the most dangerous enemy to Germany. There is no comparison. Those who make this comparison do it in order to defend Israel's genocidal response and to dehumanize the Palestinians. I should note that I do not include in this critique those victims of the October 7 who described their experiences in the first days following the attack by using Holocaust related

language in order to express their radical trauma. This rhetoric was the most culturally available to them to describe their trauma. On the other hand, Israel is committing genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza. It also commits a slow pace ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and operates there and perhaps also within Israel an apartheid regime. All of this has already been determined by countless reports and studies. I will mention only the latest among them—the UN committee headed by Navi Pillay who was a judge in the Rwanda tribunal. This committee reached an unequivocal conclusion that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. So as Daniel Blatman and I wrote in January 2025 in the newspaper *Haaretz*: there is no Auschwitz and Treblinka in Gaza, but Israel is committing a crime from the same family—the crime of genocide.

5. Some thinkers, like Enzo Traverso, argue that invoking the memory of the Holocaust to justify acts of war can distort its true meaning and undermine the core values of modern democracies. In your view, to what extent can the political use of the Holocaust harm democracy and public debate today?

Unfortunately, I agree with Traverso. Holocaust memory and what is called "the fight against antisemitism" have been transformed from a tool that educates for human rights, emancipation, and equality into a tool that enables systematic violation of human rights, ethnic-nationalism, and today also genocide. In the study of mass violence, one always distinguishes between the causes that led to mass violence and the factors that enabled it. To my great horror and sorrow, Holocaust memory and "the fight against antisemitism" have become factors that enable the genocide in Gaza and its continuation. Holocaust memory that began as an emancipatory project of the left in the 1960s gradually migrated to the liberal center in the 1990s, and during the 2000s it positioned itself on the right and even the radical right. One dreadful outcome is that it enables genocide and prevents effective protest against it. Though I should also mention that some of the most vocal voices against the genocide come from the field of Holocaust studies.

6. The current situation in Gaza has sparked significant debate among genocide scholars, with divergent views on whether it constitutes genocide. What is the prevailing expert view, and what are the main points of disagreement? What criteria should be used to assess such cases rigorously?

I want to dispute again the symmetry inherent in the question. A genocide is currently taking place in Gaza. There are scholars who have recognized the genocide and those who are trying to deny it. Exactly like regarding the Armenian genocide and regarding the Holocaust. At Ariel University, which is located in the occupied West Bank, there is a "Center for Genocide Studies," so its head of course denies that genocide is taking place in Gaza, but they themselves violate international law every day and are partners in the apartheid regime in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is a matter of denial, not opinion. Almost all genocide scholars who expressed any opinion (and did not prefer to remain silent), including the International Association of Genocide Scholars itself, have recognized that genocide is taking place in Gaza. There are some Holocaust scholars, some of them very prominent, who joined the denialist camp for unclear reasons. And I want to clarify that by "denial" I am not referring to everyone who doesn't use the term “genocide” but rather to all those who minimize the magnitude of the horror and try to deny, justify or belittle Israel's crimes.

Now, there is a legal question. The Genocide Convention establishes that legally there must be an "intent" to destroy in whole **or in part** a racial, national, ethnic, or religious group as such. Proof of special intent to destroy (and not an intent, for example, to solely harm a legitimate enemy even if causing collateral damage to many civilians) is very difficult, and international tribunals raised the standard of proof even higher in the 1990s. Among legal scholars there is disagreement whether it is possible to prove Israel's intent to destroy the

Palestinians in Gaza in whole or in part in a way that would satisfy the legal high bar. But even those who are not certain about this (but also not certain that not), for example like Philippe Sands, mostly argue that substantively genocide is taking place in Gaza because there is intentional destruction of a national collective even if there is no intent to murder each of its individual members and even if the legal proof for this intent might not satisfy the very high bar that the courts set. However, recently there has been a change. Even cautious voices like that of William Schabas, who is perhaps the most significant legal scholar of this topic and hesitated greatly for long months to decide on the issue, recently argued that in his opinion this is the strongest and most well-founded case brought before international tribunals on charges of genocide. The unequivocal determination of the UN committee headed by Navi Pillay that I mentioned only strengthens this argument. This adds to the more than ten lengthy reports by various serious organizations (including two Israeli Human Rights organizations) and many dozens of scholars that a genocide is taking place in Gaza.

And I wish to add one more comment. Genocide does not need to look like the Holocaust in order to be genocide. If one reads the writings of Raphael Lemkin, one understands that what he conceived as genocide is the erasure of a collective through various means including mass murder but also destruction of the physical infrastructures and social, cultural, and political frameworks that create a collective from a collection of individuals. He also believed it is a process that can take decades. This is what is happening today in Gaza and this is the point for example Philippe Sands makes. Destruction of an entire collective not only physically but of all the physical, medical, religious, social, and political infrastructures, including destruction of the elites (journalists, officials, doctors, lecturers, etc.) and including systematic destruction of all the buildings that created the personal and collective lives of 2.2 million people. The intention is evident in endless genocidal utterances made by the highest officials, army officers and regular soldiers. It can also be discerned from what courts call "the pattern of conduct" including systematic and overwhelming acts of humiliation and countless incidents of sexual crimes. Those indicate that the Palestinians were stripped off their humanity in Israeli eyes. Anyone who does not see that there is a full destruction here is denying the horror. They are not interpreting the reality or the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide differently. In Turkey there are historical institutes that produce endless "knowledge" of Armenian genocide denial. This does not make what they write historically legitimate or equivalent to the true history written about the Armenian genocide.

7. From your dual perspective as an Israeli citizen and a genocide scholar, do you perceive this as a historical moment that could mark a turning point both in the history of the country and in the broader understanding of mass atrocities?

It is still too early to know how the events we are witnessing will unfold, but I have no doubt that they will fundamentally stain and haunt Israeli history and also Jewish history for generations to come. I write this in enormous pain. From here on, we will all need to examine retroactively what in Jewish culture, religion, and history—especially in the way they were interpreted and understood in Israel and by its unconditional supporters—brought about and enabled the genocide. But this is not only a matter of Israel. The Jewish world is very divided in its relation to the genocide in Gaza, which is also spilling over, meanwhile at low intensity and in the form of slow but steady ethnic cleansing, to the West Bank. Many Jews, mainly abroad but also in Israel,

4. Forced displacement of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip devastated by Israeli bombing, January 29, 2025. Jaber Jehad Badwan, CC BY-SA 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons

are at the forefront of the struggle against Israel's actions. But the vast majority of mainstream institutional Jewish world stands almost entirely alongside the State of Israel and pushed for the suppression of global protest against it. As historian David Myers wrote on the eve of Tisha B'Av this year, the day on which Jews have marked for thousands of years with fasting and mourning the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish institutional world will need to perform very deep soul-searching about its unconditional support for Israel at this time.

Regarding the impact on the study of "mass violence," here too it is still early to say what the impact will be, but it will certainly have a very significant impact. I think that this field suffers from an increasingly acute split to the point that different groups within the field will not have a common language and certainly not a common moral framework with one another. Each group will create its own research frameworks, institutions and discourses. But beyond this, because of the focus on the legal definition of genocide in the context of Gaza and the centrality of the question of intent in the political debates, I fear there will be a very problematic return of the research and academic field to focusing on understanding mass violence through the question of intent, which from a historical, sociological, and other scholarly perspectives is not necessarily the most important. When examining the causes and the enabling factors of any historical event (events of genocide and mass violence included), direct intent is not necessarily the most important. One can think of structural, cultural, economic, political, psychological, sociological etc. elements and contexts that are just as important

and many times are even more important for understanding the event. This "return" might take the whole field of Holocaust and Genocide studies decades back to a crude form of "intentionalism". I wrote about this in an article in the *Journal of Genocide Research* called "The problematic return of intent."

8. At a time when Europe is increasingly confronting its colonial past, do you think there has been insufficient attention to the idea of Israel's creation as a potentially colonizing project—one that was, in part, supported or promoted by certain European nations in the aftermath of the Holocaust?

In Zionism and in Israel, and as some of the big figures of Zionism acknowledged, foremost among them Ze'ev Jabotinsky ("The Iron Wall 1923"), there is a central component of settler colonialism. This concept cannot exhaust the understanding of Zionism, which is a very complex phenomenon, but it is necessary in my opinion for any true understanding of it. Understanding Israel only from the European-Christian and Jewish perspectives of the people of the Bible returning to their land, and of a safe haven for Holocaust victims who found refuge and a place where they could recover, suppresses the understanding that Israel is a political project that has a very strong component of settler colonialism. Part of the terrible violence of Zionism—whose two peaks are the Nakba of 1948 and the unfolding genocide in Gaza whose end is not yet in sight—stems at least partially from this as settler colonial projects contain an inherent eliminatory impulse within them. They want to replace the native population, not to integrate into it. Understanding the State of Israel only as a "response" to the Holocaust and as a refuge for many of its victims (which is of course true) gave Israel an aura of sanctity which was translated into destructive political policy (for example the notorious German "Staatsräson") that did not allow and still does not allow seeing these inherent violent aspects in Israel and in Zionism. This is part of the reasons for what is happening now in Palestine-Israel.

I want to imagine an emancipatory memory that integrates the story of the Holocaust and the story of the Nakba-now-becoming-a-genocide within its colonial context, despite the differences between them, into one entangled narrative. This narrative will support an emancipatory political project of full equality of rights—personal, civil, and national—for Jews and Palestinians "from the river to the sea". Together with the Palestinian political theorist Bashir Bashir, I have been deeply engaged for more than ten years in this "entangled memory" project. It is about narrating the two national stories in what Bashir calls an "egalitarian binational" way which should also lead to an egalitarian binational political solution and perhaps even an historical reconciliation in the future. This is a painful process of decolonization that includes the dismantling of all forms of Jewish supremacy in Palestine/Israel, mutual recognition, self-determination for both peoples, and establishing mechanisms of compensation, accountability and justice. This vision could be implemented in various political settings of one state, two states, federation, confederation etc. Together with other scholars we developed this thought in our book *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*.

I must admit though that I am not sure whether and in what ways these ideas are still relevant following October 7 and in the midst of the genocide in Gaza. They seem now more remote from reality than science fiction. Sometimes I think that it is immoral to even talk about such ideas when dozens of children are dying of bombs and hunger every day in Gaza. But on the other hand, one hears also such voices coming now from Gaza itself.

9. In 2025, we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, whose recognition as a genocide has involved a long and complex process marked by legal and political tensions. What lessons can we draw from the case of Srebrenica today?

There are several things one can learn from the case of Srebrenica. But I would like to focus on two. First, the case of Srebrenica teaches how important the legal and international recognition that genocide took place is. It is not correct to say "genocide" is just a word and what difference does it make if we call the crimes this way or another (for example war crimes or crimes against humanity). The fact that Srebrenica was recognized as genocide forces us to think about the entire asymmetrical war between the Bosnian Serbs (with Serbia's military support) and the Bosniak Muslims in Bosnia in a clearer way. And although all sides committed terrible crimes, there is ultimately one side that committed genocide. Had the tribunal not issued its ruling, I think the entire image of violence in Bosnia would have been different. And the second thing that can be learned from Srebrenica is that often even after the end of the genocide and reaching some kind of arrangement, destructive ultra-nationalist tendencies do not stop operating. And to this day the Serbs of Republika Srpska under the leadership of Milorad Dodik continue to undermine the stability of Bosnia and strive to separate and join Serbia. Genocide continues to operate its destructive effect many years after its physical end.

10. According to a European Commission statement from November 2023, recorded levels of antisemitism in Europe reached extraordinary levels—a context that seems to have solidified since then. Beyond the obvious connection to the events of October 7, 2023, how do you interpret this increase? What strategies should be implemented to combat it?

According to all the data, there has been an increase in antisemitic incidents around the world since October 7. Some of the reported incidents are truly frightening. Israel has not only become the most unsafe place for Jews around the world, it also endangers Jews all over the world. However, the extent of the increase and its features are unclear. The bodies monitoring the phenomenon very often consider anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist criticism as antisemitic. In most (not all; sometimes they indeed overlap) such cases I do not see those utterances and acts as such, and therefore, these reports are not credible in my view. A very important monitoring body in Germany considered, for example, a speech by Professor Moshe Zimmermann, an Israeli professor of German Jewish history and an expert on antisemitism and the Holocaust from

the Hebrew University, as an antisemitic incident. And by the way, according to many surveys, a significant part of the increase in antisemitism following October 7 comes precisely from the far right. At the same time, there are also studies that show that, for example, among German students with leftist views critical of Israel, the level of antisemitism is the lowest of all other groups in the population.

I also want to note that it is interesting that the question directed to me deals only with antisemitism and does not deal at all with racism toward other groups—Muslim, Arab, Palestinians, immigrants. And certainly, it does not deal with the ways Jews and Jewish institutions or Israel express racism and hatred toward those same groups. As if the only important problem is antisemitism and not the racism against non-white people and particularly Palestinians, which is apparently much more violent and also more widespread and harmful. There is no very strong political lobby supporting the victims of these manifestations of racism.

I will now try to answer the question more directly.

First, there is no "one-size-fits-all" treatment for all cases of antisemitism in all places and in all times. And second, one must deal with both of these problems—racism and antisemitism—and not only with the problem of antisemitism. A significant part of any strategy should be combating antisemitism and anti-Palestinian/Arab/Muslim/immigrant racism together. The way to deal with antisemitism and racism in these contexts is first and foremost through interpersonal and intercommunal dialogue and mutual education—as long-term processes. These are not quick processes and also not easy ones. Because often there are conflicting memories, different perceptions of reality, etc. But this is in my view the only way to deal with both problems together.

In general, I would also add that the most correct and natural way to reduce levels of antisemitism and racism is through joint struggles of Jews, Arabs, and others against dictatorial or autocratic and anti-democratic forces, against racism, antisemitism and discrimination, against occupation, apartheid, and genocide, and for shared and equal life in Palestine/Israel and everywhere. Such groups exist in Israel/Palestine, in the USA and elsewhere and present models of shared—even if at times tensely—struggle. I think that the first time a Holocaust exhibition was presented in a Palestinian village in the West Bank was in the village of Na'alin in 2009, where Israelis joined Palestinians in their nonviolent struggle against the apartheid wall of separation. It emerged from the joint struggle.

With the racist right there is nothing to talk about because there is no shared value base and hence they must be dealt with through legal means dealing with hate crimes and racism and through social delegitimization. I have nothing to say to those who shout "Jews will not replace us".

In any case, the worst way in my view to treat antisemitism is through frozen and one-sided definitions that do not suit the complex and changing reality. And certainly not through the IHRA definition of antisemitism that deliberately conflates anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel with antisemitism and whose entire purpose is to protect Israel from sharp and justified criticism—what the Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir called "a discursive Iron Dome" against any criticism of Israel and of Zionism. This confusion for which Israel and its staunch supporters are responsible is extremely dangerous because it fuels antisemitism—following this logic Jews are accused for Israel's crimes.

11. Are you familiar with the strategic framework developed in Europe regarding memory policies? Do you believe their approach is effective in the current context of democratic backsliding and the rise of far-right movements across the continent?

I am familiar but only superficially with this strategic program and in general I see it as a blessing because first it recognizes the plurality of memories that exist today in Europe which include, as the program explicitly notes, the Sinti and Roma and groups subject to racial discrimination as well as antisemitism. And at the same time, to the best of my understanding, the program does not provide adequate guidance for the main problem of memory culture: what happens when there are conflicting memories?

And perhaps I will conclude the whole interview and in reference also to this strategy, with an argument by a historian I greatly admire, Charles Maier. Already in 1993 he argued in an article called *A Surfeit of Memory?* that the excessive turn to memory—that is, to the past—is an expression of a deep political crisis in which we have difficulty building functioning political institutions that are based not on looking at the past but on turning toward the future. Perhaps it is time to invest a bit less energy in memory and a bit more energy in a future-oriented emancipatory political project.

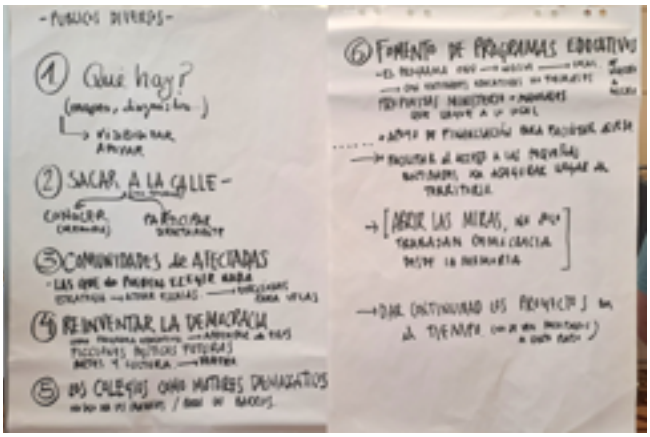
1975–2025, Fifty Years On: Celebrating by thinking and thinking by celebrating

Carmina Gustrán Loscos
Commissioner for the Commemoration of "Spain in Freedom: 50 years"

20 November 2025 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Francisco Franco's death. At the Commission of "Spain in Freedom: 50 years", we focus on the possibilities that his passing created, on the long and difficult journey towards regaining freedom and democracy. In 2025, we remember the beginning of that collective achievement; we celebrate the prosperous, diverse and democratic nation that we have become. Also, we would like to invite all citizens to join us in reflecting on the future, on what kind of country and what kind of democracy we aspire to build together.

Commemorating 1975 is not about looking at the dictator, but rather looking at ordinary citizens, at the women and men who held strikes when they were forbidden, who turned parishes and neighbourhood associations into spaces of liberty, who opened classrooms and workshops in a country that wanted to live in freedom. It is to remember the thousands who died during and after the end of the dictatorship, victims of political violence — in prisons and summary executions, in demonstrations and violent attacks, in police custody and victims of terrorism. Fifty years later, the best tribute to that civic energy is not a complacent elegy, but an invitation to celebrate by thinking and to think by celebrating.

1. Working Group on Education and Democracy



2. Working Group on Education and Democracy

3. Participants of the 5th Edition of Route to Exile were joined by Carmina Gustrán Loscos, Commissioner of *Spain in Freedom. 50 Years*; Ángel Víctor Torres Pérez, Minister of Territorial Policy and Democratic Memory; and Sira Abed Rego, Minister of Youth and Childhood during their visit to Argelès-Sur-Mer

We commemorate the year 1975 because that is when a window opens — a window of risks and opportunities, of fears and courage, which cannot be understood without the struggles that came before or the transformations that followed. If we focused on the first democratic elections after Franco's death in June 1977, or on the promulgation of the Spanish Constitution in December 1978—if we looked only at major laws and great men—citizens would be reduced to background figures. And democracy, which is a collective task, would become the story of a few heroes. That is neither the memory we want nor the memory we need.

The commemoration we propose is both critical and grateful. Critical, because it acknowledges silences and debts: victims without mourning, repressions rarely discussed, inequalities that persist. Grateful, because it recognizes that, with all its limits, democracy expanded rights and horizons. It is not about choosing one or the other but about holding both at once. Democratic maturity means precisely this: celebrating without denying and revisiting without demolishing. We understand democracy as an open, ongoing process, one that

4. Group photo from the Youth and Memory Engagement meeting at the University of Barcelona

calls for knowledge and for spaces where dialogue and reflection can flourish.

For all these reasons, our goals are threefold. Firstly, to understand and bring to light Spain's recent past, particularly the years of dictatorship and the transition to democracy. Secondly, to celebrate the progress that our country has made over the last five decades and to honour the countless anonymous citizens who made it possible. And thirdly, to foster dialogue and create spaces for reflection and discussion—spaces to learn and to debate, to nurture critical thinking at a time when simplistic slogans, provocative ideas, and even hatred too often dominate.

Achieving this objective requires the advancement of Public History, that is, the practice of applying historical research, methods, and interpretation beyond the academic setting, engaging diverse publics in the understanding, preservation, and use of the past. We must bring the university into the streets and the streets into the classroom: open archives, organize walks through sites of memory, debate with documents and with art, listen to testimonies without turning pain into spectacle. Public History is not an academic trend; it is a democratic necessity.

And it is along these lines that we have been working over the past few months. We have four strategic areas of work:

1) Official ceremonies and commemorations to remember, to repair — as far as possible — and to celebrate. To remember the deprivation of rights under Francoism and the struggle of so many anonymous individuals for freedom and democracy; to repair the harm done to the victims of the Franco dictatorship; and to celebrate how far we have come as a country over the past five decades. Commemorations, tributes, acts of remembrance and reparation, the initiation of proceedings to declare Sites of Democratic Memory, celebrations... Spaces, ultimately, for remembrance and education, for dignity and encounter.

2) Youth and democracy, to open spaces for dialogue with new generations — with those born in democracy, with the youngest among us. To speak about the past, the present, and the future, and above all, to use this commemoration as an opportunity to strengthen and reaffirm democratic values, respect for others, and peaceful coexistence.

3) Unsettling pasts, possible futures; to share with the wider public many of the findings from scholars and experts on Spain's recent past, particularly concerning the Franco dictatorship and the Transition. We aim to learn from international experiences, to reinterpret spaces associated with the dictatorship through collective reflection, to analyze the past as a site of trauma, and to reflect on the role of art as a tool of resistance and transformation.

And **4) Popular memory/memories**, to make popular memory visible beyond official narratives, and to recognize both collective and individual memory as part of a plural perspective on memory. Within the framework of Public History's standards of rigour, we seek to highlight collective memory as a tool to open a dialogue with the events that led to democracy between 1975 and 2025, to analyze the current context and to imagine the new problems and dilemmas that will shape democracy in the next fifty years.

We have programmed the film season *Images for a Country in Freedom* at the Filmoteca Española, launched the roundtable series *The Conquest of Freedom of Expression* (Club Siglo XXI), inaugurated exhibitions such as *Of choruses, dances and oblivion* (National Anthropology Museum), *Eroding Franco* and *Inquietud. Libertad y Democracia*, and advanced in the recognition of Places of Democratic Memory — from Madrid's El abrazo monument and Vitoria's San Francisco de Asís church to sites of exile like Argelès-sur-Mer and the tombs of Antonio Machado and Manuel Azaña in France. We have taken part in international commemorations at Auschwitz and Mauthausen, supported the youth summer camp Route to Exile with youth institutions, and curated homages, concerts, and debates from León and Seville to Salamanca, Córdoba, and Barcelona. The events that followed — from the Festival du Cinéma Espagnol in Nantes to the SSIFF program, from Europalia season in Brussels to civic routes and neighbourhood archives — gave this commemoration reach and European context.

Memory demands proximity. It does not reside only in capitals or major museums; it lives in towns and neighbourhoods, in old factories and railway lines, in humble plaques and unmarked graves, in stories of exile and return. If commemoration is not local and decentralized, it reproduces the very inequalities it claims to challenge. That is why we value local networks — libraries, civic centres, memory associations, schools. There lies the real citizenry we want to reach out to.

And it demands comparison. Portugal, Greece, and Spain share rhythms, repertoires, and dilemmas. When we look at ourselves in that Iberian and Mediterranean mirror, domestic noise lowers and the quality of argument rises. Memory, when opened to the European context, becomes de-provincialized and more useful: we learn with and from others, we recognize affinities and differences and we find new answers for old questions.

Let us not idealize things: polarization exists. Memory touches nerves, which should not be sedated. But we must propose *informed disagreement*: plurality of voices, attention to evidence, care for those who suffered, and clear rules of engagement. Democracy is not unanimity; it is the art of turning enemies into adversaries. That must be learned and practiced. A well-curated exhibition, an urban route, a contextualized screening can do more for public conversation than a hundred social media trenches.

Technology is part of the challenge. Synthetic recreations and disinformation trivialize, distort, and divide. The answer cannot be fear or blind rejection; it must be curation. We seek to label what is recreated, explain contexts, provide students with tools to identify fake news, release reliable materials for teachers and communicators. The goal is not to replace experience with a screen, but to widen access responsibly.

Finally, there is one symbol that speaks to us all: Cuelgamuros. Its re-signification cannot be solved with quick gestures. It requires history, ethics, and listening. We do not want to replace one symbol with another; we want to turn a difficult place into a civic classroom. That means public deliberation, participation of victims and experts, and pedagogical mediation that dignifies the visit. Doing it right will take time. Doing it wrong will cost us dearly.

Today, fifty years after Franco was buried in Cuelgamuros, this anniversary aims at two simple but demanding things. First, we have to make space for everyone, even for those who think differently, because democracy is precisely that: the art of living in difference. Secondly, we have to leave a useful trace —

5. Working session during the Youth and Memory Engagement meeting at the University of Barcelona

ensuring that every act, every event, every debate leaves reusable materials, open archives, and tools for schools and communities. This commemoration should not be a peak of programming, but a capacity built for the future.

In short, commemorating 1975 is remembering that freedom was not a given. It was built from below and sustained from above; debated in institutions and fought for in the streets; it was sung, written, filmed, suffered and celebrated. Let us honour that complexity. Let us do it with rigour and joy, with memory and vision. Because democracy is not a trophy in a display case but rather it is a daily practice that must be learned, taught, cared for and, above all, exercised.

The Restless Anniversary: Reflecting on Dictatorship, Transition, and Democracy without Heroics

Kostis Kornetis
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
Academic Advisor of the Commissioner for the Commemoration of "Spain in Freedom: 50 years"

The word 'restless' in this article's title echoes *Inquietud. Libertad y democracia*, the exhibition that recently opened at La Casa Encendida in Madrid. That show refuses the comfort of a tidy timeline. Instead, it stages a conversation across the Peninsula: Portugal's April 25 glances at Spain's post-Franco dusk; the memory of colonial war unsettles Spanish silences; documentary photography and essay film turn commemoration into debate. This piece adopts the same stance—less celebration, more friction.

Fifty years on, the task is not to refurbish a heroic tale of the transitions. It is to ask how to narrate them without shortcuts: how to hold together rupture and continuity, elite bargains and pressure from below, official ceremony and lived memory. Setting close histories side by side restores complexity and reminds us that democracy—like the memory that sustains it—is not an ending but a practice.

From templates to texture

For years we leaned on a convenient template: Portugal as rupture tipping toward revolution; Greece as abrupt collapse followed by the trials of the Colonels; Spain as negotiated reform anchored in consensus. Useful as scaffolding—but flattening in effect. Over the last two decades, historians have moved beyond transitology's chessboard of leaders and "pacts," recovering the social underlay and cultural tempos that institutional accounts compressed. We've shifted from tidy typologies to thick description.

1. Diada de Andalucía. Barcelona, 4 diciembre 1977 © Carlos Bosch, Fototeca ARGRA.

At the fortieth anniversary, one influential project reframed "transition" as a *chronotope*: a lived weave of politics, culture, and everyday life. That lens redirected attention from constitutional milestones to the workshop of daily practice—neighborhood assemblies, women's groups, print collectives, parish halls, underground cinema—where expectations and languages were rewired. Soon after, another current treated 1974–75 as a charged *moment*: a hinge condensing earlier processes and radiating forward. Between those poles—time-space and moment—recent work prefers to map fields of inquiry rather than police periodization.

Look beneath the constitutional summary and a dense ecosystem appears: youth sociabilities, music and aesthetics, self-organized neighborhoods, second-wave feminism, emerging LGBTQ collectives inventing spaces and vocabularies, cinema and photography testing new ways of seeing. In this register, transition ceases to be a string of back-room deals and becomes a laboratory of ways of life. Change the vantage point and the timeline shifts: what seemed swift institutionally was, culturally, a slow layering in which authoritarian reflexes did not vanish overnight but reassembled themselves in law, habit, and feeling.

Two historiographical turns matter. First, the social-movements turn: rather than treating protest as background noise or elite leverage, historians show how collective action eroded legitimacy, raised the cost of repression, trained people in democratic claims, and signaled preferences to would-be reformers. Second, the local turn: micro-histories of cities, neighborhoods, and workplaces replace pressure-cooker myths with patient reconstructions of how identities formed and coalitions held—women organizing a water tap with the parish, student circles becoming community organizers, shop-floor experiments in representation. The result is richer and bumpier—harder to generalize, closer to life.

Using Greece to rethink the Iberian triangle

Greece offers a clarifying counterpoint. Two dates coexist: July 24 as the institutional reset in 1974 and November 17 as insurgent memory of the Athens Polytechnic uprising that shook the Junta to its foundation in 1973. Greek experience suggests that democratic legitimacy is rooted both in the rule of law and in street memory. Early on, public pedagogy made the exposure of torture, the conversion of sites of repression into places of memory, and the junta trials part of the country's civic grammar—not moral add-ons but constitutive choices. For all their limits, they left a durable mark: even today's quarrels unfold over a basic consensus about the dictatorship's illegitimacy.

Portugal stages a different story, visible in the intensity of 1974–76. The epic of April 25 still radiates civic energy, yet it coexists with the hard reckoning over the colonial wars and the mass return of *retornados*. Public history has been stitching those edges into the larger tapestry, avoiding both celebratory complacency and strategic amnesia. The memorial landscape—prisons turned museums, archives opened to communities—makes remembrance tangible and teachable.

Spain, perhaps because of its symbolic weight, remains the most contested ground. The "myth of moderation," invaluable for stabilizing institutions, served for decades as a password of belonging. When civil society pressed for truth, justice, and reparation in the twenty-first century, a cognitive dissonance emerged: what had been presented as universal virtue looked to many like a shield against unequal access to memory. The current democratic-memory agenda does not deny the value of the pact; it removes its aura of untouchability. That does not weaken democracy; it matures it. Pluralizing the story is not vandalism. It is democratization.

Zoomed out, path-dependent legacies come into view. Portugal's revolutionary rupture arguably widened participatory repertoires and left deeper everyday democratic reflexes than Spain's elite-brokered reform; Greece sits somewhere in between, with early judicialization and a strong didactic memory culture. None of this is fate, but each route cut grooves—in commemoration, conflict management, archival openness—that still guide debate.

Exhibiting complexity: Madrid and Athens as method

A serious commemoration cannot stop at institutional filigree. The essential question—how to transmit the history of dictatorship and transition to people born half a century later—forces a rethink of pedagogy, exhibition design, and language. Madrid's commitment has a mirror in Athens. The National Gallery's *Democracy* (July 2024–February 2025) was the first major comparative show on artistic responses to the dictatorships of Greece, Portugal, and Spain in the 1960s–70s. Its sections—"Facing the Enemy," "Resistance," "Uprising," "Arousal"—undid the storybook arc of transition, restoring texture: violated bodies and bodies that resist; graphic collectives, posters, performance, and archive; the Polytechnic and April 25 in conversation with Spain's post-Franco years. In Madrid, *Inquietud* likewise rejects textbook chronology to propose an Iberian montage where Vieira da Silva, Equipo Crónica, and Paula Rego cross paths with contemporary practices. The aim is not to "teach" a single storyline but to converse about productive friction.

What matters in both *Democracy* and *Inquietud* is its capacity to de-center national narratives without dissolving them. The imagery of repression and desire—from grieving mothers to occupied squares, from militant printmaking to essay video—reminds us that the transitions do not belong in a cabinet of political curios. They were also cultural experimentation, a rehearsal of citizenship, a choreography of bodies in public space. If these shows teach us anything, it is that the fiftieth anniversary settles nothing. But it opens questions: how to narrate without heroics and how to sustain, today, an ethic of transmission that resists banalization and distortion.

Today's media ecosystem adds a new challenge. Algorithmic circulation—micro-targeting that builds bubbles and an attention economy that rewards hatred and outrage—erodes minimal common ground about the past. Ironizing pain, fabricating "historical" scenes with synthetic imagery, trivial edits of testimony: all of this adds noise where care is needed. The answer is not censorship but smart defenses—archival

1

accessibility, document traceability, media literacy, verification protocols—and, above all, a curatorial ethics that remembers that there are lives and losses behind every single document.

What the anniversary asks of us

The half-century reminds us that democracy was not inevitable. Contingency, fear, commitments, errors, courage—all were present. To recall contingency is to return agency to those who struggled and to inoculate ourselves against complacency. Democracy is not an end in itself; it is a daily practice. Memory, then, is not an album for anniversary browsing but a civic instrument that updates our questions: What do we do with the invisible continuities of authoritarianism? How do we handle sensitive archives without violating rights? How do we bring territorial, social, and cultural peripheries into the center of the story?

Historians have a double task. First, to keep complicating comparisons—not to blur differences but to illuminate them without caricature: the Portuguese revolution and its reversals; Greek judicialization and its public pedagogy; Spanish reform and its shadowed zones. Second, to write history that speaks to the public without submitting to it: a history that explains and de-idealizes, connects structures with experiences, and can say "we don't know yet" without apology. That quiet honesty is, paradoxically, the firmest commitment.

There is also a material register: monuments and street names, audiovisual archives and civil cemeteries, popular sociabilities and city rhythms. Democracy lives not only in texts, but in material remains. Fifty years is long enough for marks to fade—or for silences to deepen. Redrawing the map—signposting, contextualizing, preserving—is not a minor symbolic act. It is memory policy in the strict sense.

These three stories have spoken to one another from the start. Exiles crossed borders; solidarity networks enabled resistance and learning; foundations circulated resources and know-how; intellectuals imagined comparisons before academia ratified them. Keeping that transnational thread alive—through method, not cosmetics—may be the best defense against today's inward turns. The Ibero-Hellenic-Mediterranean conversation is

not conference nostalgia; it is a commitment to a European citizenship able to face the past without losing sight of the present storm.

To commemorate, in this key, is not to repeat a story we already know but to try new ways of telling it. Institutions do their part when they open archives, protect victims' voices, nurture a culture of rights, and sponsor informed disagreement. Academia helps when it offers rigorous, porous narratives attentive to peripheries and cultural tempos. And art keeps circulating questions that don't fit in regulations, reminding us—something the seventies already knew—that freedom is also a sensibility.

Half a century on, for us at the Comisionado "España en Libertad. 50 años" the simplest lesson remains the hardest (and hence the restlessness): we do not celebrate democracy to fall asleep; we celebrate to stay awake.

1 | 2 | 3. Screenshots from the video of the campaign Democracy Is Your Power, presented as the closing highlight of the Spain in Freedom commemoration.

Contested European Memory: Nationalism, Identity, and the Politics of Remembrance

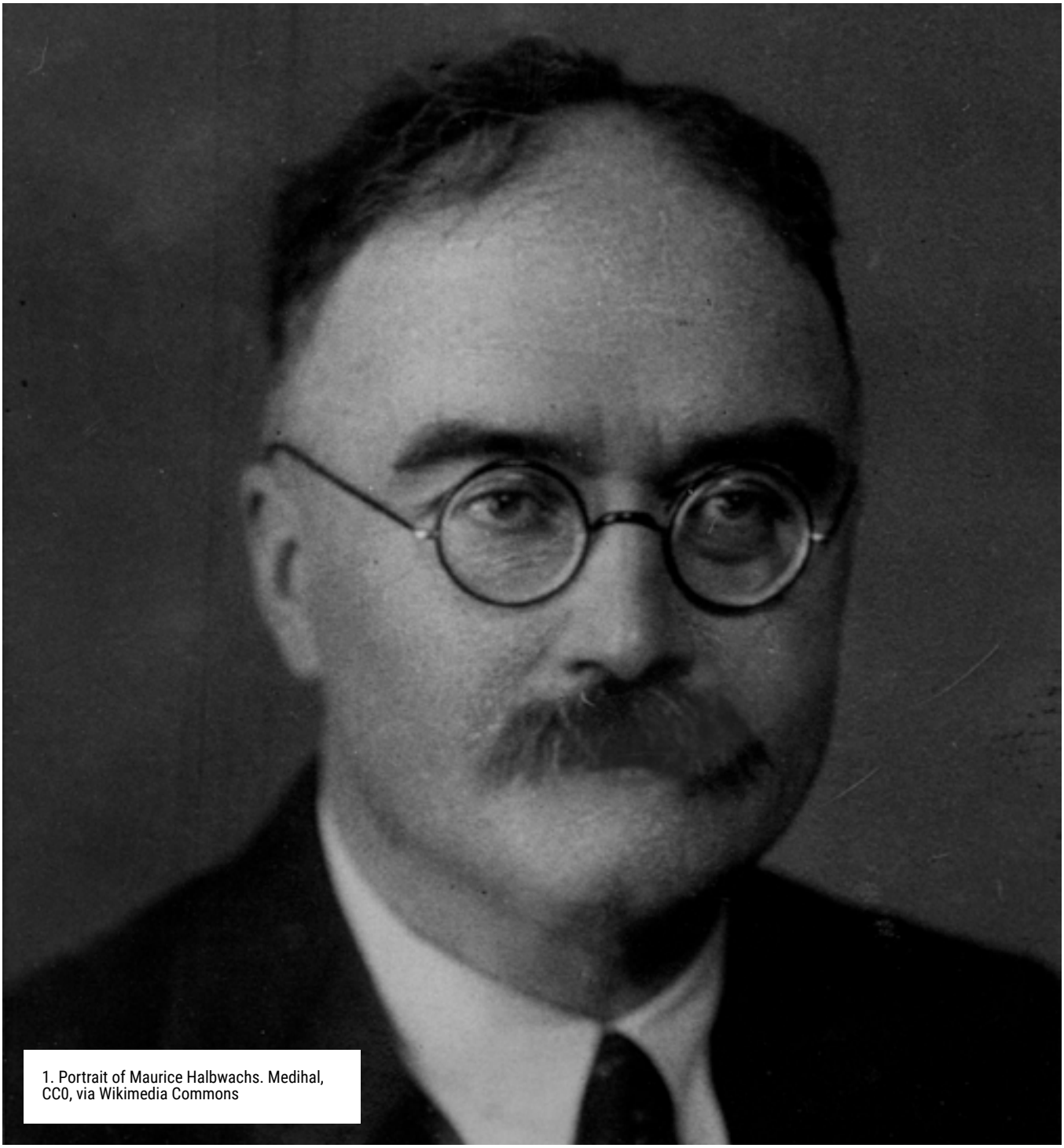
Dietmar J. Wetzel
MSH Medical School, Hamburg & University of Basel

1. Introduction – Memory in a fragmented Europe[1]

In an era of resurgent nationalism and democratic backsliding, the notion of shared European memory appears both essential and paradoxical. As I recently demonstrated (Wetzel 2025), European memory is not a monolithic entity, but rather a dynamic and layered cultural construct, shaped by diverse social actors and institutions. Against the backdrop of post-war integration, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and current geopolitical tensions, including the war in Ukraine and Brexit, Europe's memory culture faces renewed fragmentation. Right-wing populist parties across Europe are using memory to mobilise support, reinforce exclusionary narratives, and challenge supranational institutions such as the European Union (EU).

European collective memory is deeply embedded in the politics of identity. It mediates between historical experiences, emotional investments, and normative orientations. Although the EU has sought to foster a shared memory rooted in anti-fascism and reconciliation, member states persist in emphasising their own national myths, heroes, and victimhood. This fragmentation challenges the vision of a cohesive European identity based on solidarity and dialogical remembrance (Assmann 2007).

1. This contribution is based on my article "Das europäische Gedächtnis im Spannungsfeld national gerahmter Erinnerungsdiskurse", in: Dimbath, Oliver und Gerd Sebald (2025), Vergangenheitsbezüge. Bilanz und Perspektiven sozialwissenschaftlicher Gedächtnisforschung. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 291-312.



1. Portrait of Maurice Halbwachs. Medihal, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

2. Theoretical Foundations: From Halbwachs to the Assmanns

Maurice Halbwachs established the sociological basis of collective memory, proposing that memory is shaped by social factors and adapted to the requirements of contemporary groups (Wetzel 2023). He distinguished between autobiographical and collective memory, emphasising that individuals remember individually as members of social groups, such as families, religious communities or nations.

2. Jan and Aleida Assmann, the winners of the 2018 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, at a press conference during the 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair. Martin Kraft, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Memory is therefore neither fixed nor purely personal. Jan and Aleida Assmann expanded on this concept by introducing the distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory. The former is embedded in everyday social interaction and has a limited time span of three to four generations, while the latter is formalised, ritualised and stabilised across centuries through institutions, symbols and texts. Cultural memory shapes long-term identity and historical continuity.

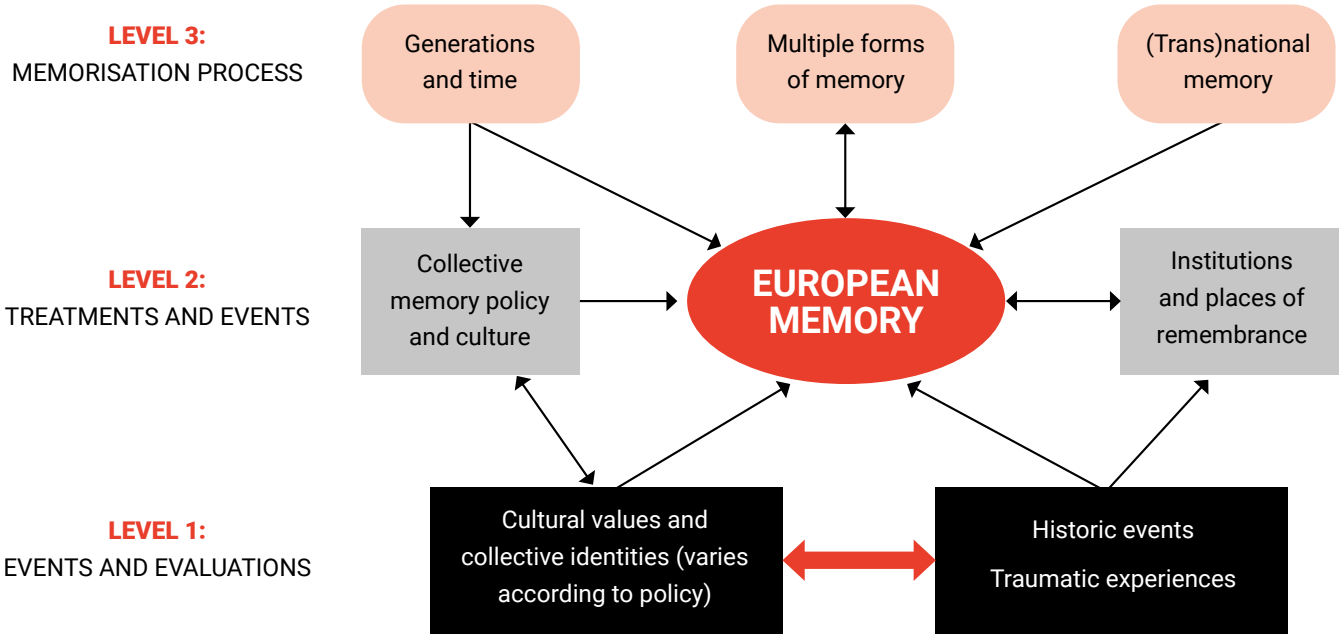
Alongside these theoretical pillars, Nina Leonhard (2017) provides a useful typology for understanding memory in political contexts. "Politics of Memory Frameworks" (Gedächtnispolitik) refers to institutional structures that regulate public memory through archives, education systems, and legal norms. "Politics of Remembrance" (Erinnerungspolitik) concerns the symbolic and often contested political shaping of memory through commemorations, discourses, and public rituals. "Politics of the Past" (Vergangenheitspolitik) addresses the legal and institutional redress of historical injustices, including reparations, trials, and truth commissions. "Politics of History" (Geschichtspolitik) involves the strategic appropriation of history to serve contemporary ideological and political goals. Together, these concepts demonstrate that memory is a powerful and governance-related resource, intertwined with ideologies, institutions, and identity constructions.

3. Functions of European Memory

Six interrelated functions of European memory can be identified, each of which contributes to the formation of identity, legitimacy and cohesion. (1) *Spatial constitution:* Memory shapes the symbolic geography of Europe, defining its borders and core values. Shared memories of the Holocaust, totalitarianism and war form the basis of European integration as a peace project. (2) *Symbolic capital:* Memory is a resource in political struggles over belonging and legitimacy. Competing actors use historical narratives to advance claims to identity, rights or exclusion. (3) *Ideological contestation:* Memory is a battleground where different interpretations of history support different political projects. While some narratives promote liberal cosmopolitanism, others legitimise nationalist retrenchment. (4) *Heterogeneity management:* Memory mediates between diverse national experiences. Europe's history of wars, empires and resistance movements requires plural and context-sensitive memory politics. (5) *Institutionalisation:* The EU supports memory sites through programmes such as the European Heritage Label. Institutions such as museums, commemorations and school curricula play a pivotal role in embedding memory. (6) *Normative paradigms:* Post-WWII memory fosters a normative ethos of ''Never again!'' — rejection of war, fascism and genocide. While this serves as a moral anchor, historical revisionism increasingly challenges it and populist instrumentalisation (Wetzel 2025). Among others, Aleida Assmann emphasised the importance of dialogical memory, which enables mutual recognition while respecting national specificities and building transnational connections. Only a dialogical approach can transform competing memories into a shared European narrative.

4. Structures of Memory: The Three-Level Model

In my recent contribution to the study of European collective memory, I propose a three-level model that offers a multi-scalar view of how collective memory operates.



Level One: Events and Evaluations – This foundational layer encompasses significant historical events, such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the legacy of colonialism, the Cold War and the establishment of the EU. These events serve as anchors for memory and identity.

Level Two: Manifestations and Institutionalisation – This layer comprises material expressions of memory, such as monuments, museums, commemorations and policy frameworks. These embed historical meaning in public spaces and institutional practices.

Level Three: Remembering communities: This includes the various actors involved in memory production, from families and generations to national governments and transnational NGOs. These communities interpret and contest historical narratives, shaping how memory is transmitted.

This model helps us understand the layered complexity of memory and its symbolic, institutional and agentic dimensions.

5. Post-Nationalism or Re-Nationalisation?

According to Jürgen Habermas, the concept of a "post-national constellation" emerged, in which the significance of national borders would be diminished in favour of global governance and the establishment of cosmopolitan democracy. Nevertheless, contemporary political developments indicate a re-nationalisation of memory and identity. From Brexit to the rise of authoritarian populism in Hungary and Poland, nationalist narratives observe the reclaiming of public space. Memory serves as a tool for the establishment of boundaries – between "us" and "them", between the nation and the EU, and between insiders and outsiders. This shift is evident in the manner in which states commemorate history: national victories are emphasised, while shared traumas such as colonialism or the Holocaust are relativised or sidelined.

The concept of "imagined communities", as proposed by Benedict Anderson, remains a seminal one in this field. Nations, according to this theory, are constructed through shared symbols, rituals and historical myths. In the context of re-nationalisation processes, memory is a dynamic entity actively reconstructed to validate prevailing ideologies and to marginalise dissenting voices. It can be argued that national identity is inextricably linked to exclusive memories. The argument is made that collective identities depend on a shared past that is inaccessible to external observers. In contemporary Europe, this exclusivity is a brake on the formation of a genuinely inclusive memory culture.

6. Case Study: Rassemblement National in France and Memory Politics

The French Rassemblement National (RN), formerly known as the Front National, offers a compelling example of how political actors can utilise collective memory for nationalist ends. It is evident that under the leadership of Marine Le Pen and, more recently, Jordan Bardella, the National Rally (RN) has pursued a strategy of "de-demonisation", which involves the normalisation of extremist ideas through the strategic utilisation of memory.

Europe as Symbol and Threat: The RN's narrative differentiates between a cultural Europe, embodying Christian roots and Western civilisation, and the political structure of the EU, which is depicted as elitist,

3. Salvador Allende Square, Paris (7th Arrondissement), November 12, 2023, March against anti-Semitism. National Rally elected officials, Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella surrounded by journalists. Siren-Com, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

technocratic, and anti-national. This enables the RN to claim European legitimacy while rejecting EU authority (Loritimer, 2020). We can characterise this as an ambivalent Europeanism: Europe is regarded as a civilisational concept, but it is met with rejection as a political entity. This enables the RN to weaponise European identity against immigrants, Muslims, and the political left.

Jeanne d'Arc and the Myth of National Purity: A fundamental aspect of RN's memory politics is the cult of Jeanne d'Arc. Depicted as a figure of purity, heroism and self-sacrifice, Jeanne 'd'Arc is mobilised as a symbol of French resistance to both foreign enemies and domestic betrayal. The annual homage paid by Le Pen to her in Orléans has been interpreted as a ritual of national purification. Pierre Nora (and his thinking of "Lieux de Mémoire")

advanced the argument that France has historically engaged in the sacralisation of its history, effectively transforming it into a form of civic religion. The RN draws upon this tradition, reviving mythical figures and events to construct a narrative of French uniqueness, victimhood, and resilience (Soffer 2022).

A comparative analysis of the political ideologies of the National Front (FN) in France and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) reveals a shared commitment to challenging established European memory culture. Both parties engage in the rehabilitation of national myths and the minimisation of historical guilt, strategies that underscore their respective political agendas. However, a divergence in strategy is evident between the two parties. While the Republican Party has sought to ameliorate its public image, Alternative for Germany continues to adopt a confrontational stance. As one can argue, both parties employ victimisation narratives, portraying the native population as imperilled by liberal elites and foreign influences. This perspective positions the EU not as a peace initiative, but rather as a potential threat to national survival. Many critics have observed that the RN's "normalisation" has enabled it to gain parliamentary strength, while the AfD faces institutional pushback. Nevertheless, both seek to establish a "counter-memory" that redefines history in line with nationalist agendas.

7. Toward a Plural and Reflexive Memory Culture

The following five theses offer a conclusion of the current state and future prospects of European memory: 1. Memory is Processual – Memory must remain flexible and subject to renegotiation, avoiding canonisation or dogmatism. 2. National Memory Supersedes European Solidarity – The rise of nationalism undermines shared memory practices and transnational identities. 3. Populist Risk – If nationalist parties further consolidate power, memory cultures may be reshaped to support authoritarianism. 4. Utopian Potential – Despite its challenges, European memory can be a space of solidarity and dialogue if it embraces plurality. 5. Participatory Imperative – Citizens must actively shape memory cultures through education, civil society, and intercultural dialogue.
These theses emphasise the necessity of safeguarding democratic and pluralistic memory cultures against the threat of instrumentalisation and exclusion.

Conclusion: The European memory system currently finds itself at a critical juncture. As demonstrated in this essay, memory is not merely a passive reflection of the past, but an active process of identity construction, political legitimation and cultural negotiation. The notion of unified European memory is eroded by nationalist retrenchment, populist rhetoric, and fragmented historical narratives. However, the necessity for a shared, dialogical memory culture has never been more pressing. The politics of memory frameworks, remembrance, the past, and history demonstrate the profound interconnection between historical interpretation and power.

Whilst actors such as the Rassemblement National seek to manipulate memory to consolidate ethnonationalist ideologies, other initiatives – including academic, civic and institutional bodies – continue to advocate for inclusive, pluralistic approaches. Dialogical memory, as proposed by Aleida Assmann, provides a normative framework that does not eliminate difference, but rather establishes a foundation for coexistence based on mutual recognition and respect.

In order to maintain democratic cohesion in Europe, it is imperative that memory is not ceded to nationalist factions. Instead, it must be reclaimed as a common good, embedded in critical education, public discourse, and institutional practice. European memory must remain flexible, open to plurality, and guided by the principles of justice, solidarity, and historical responsibility. It is only in this manner that Europe's past can serve as a foundation – rather than a battleground – for its future.

References

ASSMANN, A. (2007). *Europe: A community of memory?* GHI Bulletin, 40, 11–25.

LEONHARD, N. (2017). *Integration und Gedächtnis: NVA-Offiziere im vereinigten Deutschland*. Köln: Halem.

LORITIMER, M. (2020). *Europe as ideological resource: The case of the Rassemblement National*. London School of Economics. https://personal.lse.ac.uk/lorimer/documents/legitimacy_through_europe_preprint.pdf

SOFFER, D. (2022). The use of collective memory in the populist messaging of Marine Le Pen. *Journal of European Studies*, 52(1), 69–78.

WETZEL, D. J. (2023): "Contested Memories – Aspects of collective remembering and forgetting". In: Perret, Noëlle-Laetitia und Schmidt, Hans-Joachim, Memories lost in the Middle Ages. Belgium: Brepols, 61–73.

4. Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch, 1 May National Front rally in honour of Joan of Arc, Paris. Marie-Lan Nguyen, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Castuera Concentration Camp: the distinctive feature of a site of memory

Guillermo León Cáceres
National Distance Education University (UNED)

A Brief History of Castuera Concentration Camp

In March 1939, as the Spanish Civil War drew to a close, the Francoist military authorities built a concentration camp for prisoners on the outskirts of Castuera (Badajoz). During the single year it remained operational, between 9,000 and 15,000 prisoners are estimated by historians to have passed through its gates. Those detained there were not only soldiers belonging to Republican units stationed on the Extremadura Front at the end of the war, but also civilians with political or trade-union ties to the Republican cause. The camp occupied an irregular seven-hectare plot, surrounded by a ditch and double barbed-wire fence. Within it stood eighty prefabricated wooden barracks aligned along cobbled streets, a central square dominated by a cross on a concrete plinth where prisoners were assembled, a washhouse, latrines, and an area for isolated detainees.

Within the broader Francoist repressive system, the camp served three main functions: classification, re-education, and repression. Prisoners were classified into four categories:

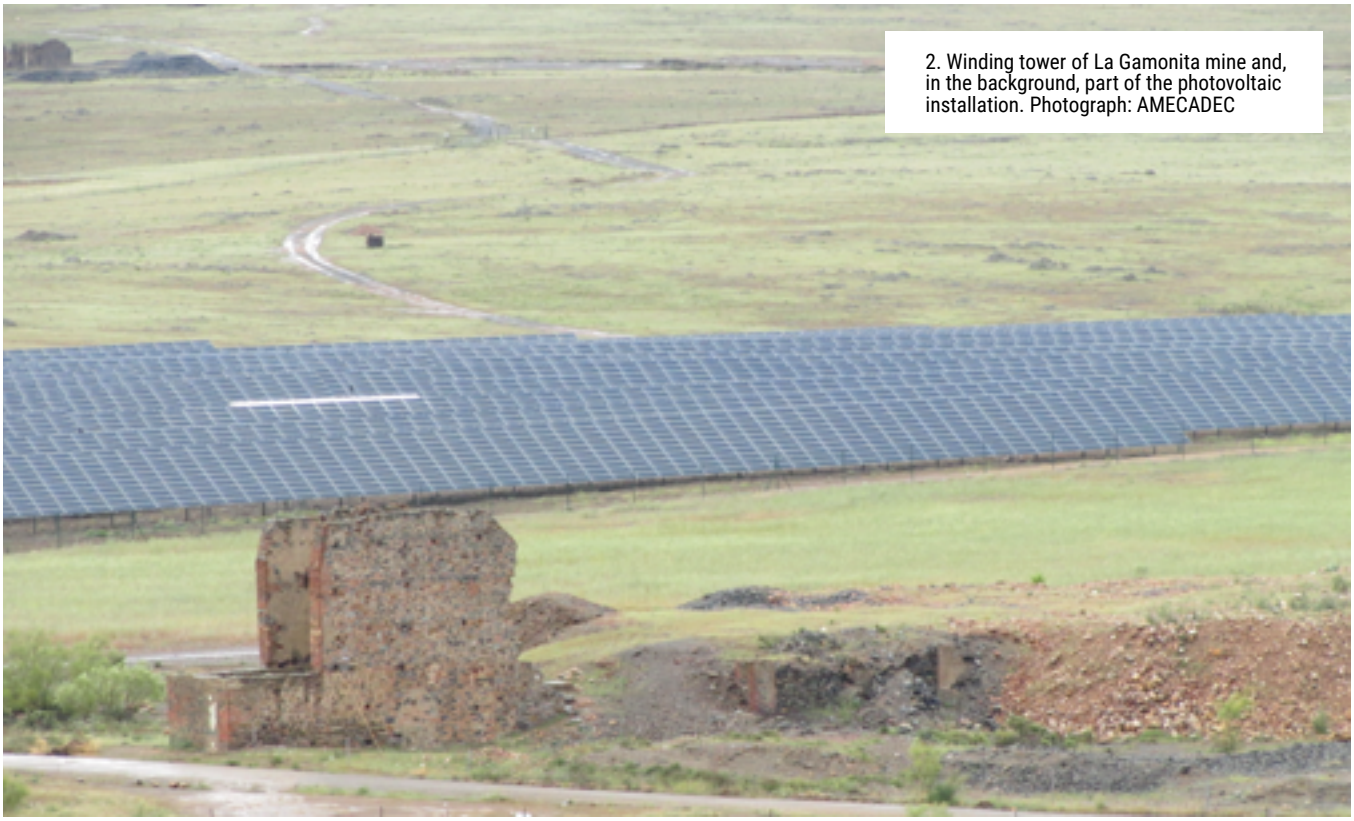
- **A:** those not considered enemies of the state;
- **B:** those disaffected with the regime but without political or social responsibility;
- **C:** Republican leaders and high-ranking officers;
- **D:** common criminals.

Those assigned to category C were handed over to the Military Justice system, which, through summary courts-martial devoid of even the most basic legal guarantees, routinely sentenced them to death or long prison terms.

1. A Travelling Seminar with the EUROM Team and AMECADEC (2024).Photograph: EUROM

"Re-education" consisted largely of crude military and religious harangues designed to break the prisoners' will. Repression took multiple forms: extrajudicial removal of detainees for execution, beatings, severe deprivation, and a generalised, arbitrary exercise of violence within the barbed-wire enclosure.

Daily life was marked by misery. The diet consisted of a watery soup, a piece of bread, and a tin of sardines shared between two people. This inadequate sustenance led to widespread malnutrition, which, compounded by poor hygiene, caused illness and death among many prisoners. They slept crammed into the wooden barracks, each 15.5 metres long and 4.5 metres wide, holding several dozen inmates.



2. Winding tower of La Gamonita mine and, in the background, part of the photovoltaic installation. Photograph: AMECADEC

The camp's first commandant was Ernesto Navarrate Alcal, who remained in charge until June 1939. Known for his cruelty during the war, Navarrate facilitated repression by Falangist groups. Numerous testimonies describe how Falangists from different towns would visit the camp to remove left-wing leaders from their own localities, taking them away illegally. Many of these prisoners were never seen again. The best-known case is that of José González Barrero, socialist mayor of Zafra during the Second Republic.

However, these illegal extractions were not random acts of violence but were orchestrated by the Servicio de Información y Policía Militar (SIPM) — the Military Information and Police Service — which played a central role in repression during and immediately after the war. Acting on SIPM orders, political and trade-union leaders from the Popular Front, along with Republican army officers, were placed in the isolation area of the camp — the final stop before execution.

Material evidence of these killings came to light in 2011, when the Asociación Memorial Campo de Concentración de Castuera (AMECADEC) located and exhumed a mass grave in the town cemetery. Although today the grave lies within the cemetery grounds, in 1939 it was just behind it, beside the path leading to the camp. Twenty-three victims were exhumed, and personal belongings confirmed that they had come from the concentration camp.

Nearby stood La Gamonita mine, a disused lead mine since the early twentieth century, at whose foot the camp had been built. The mine contained a deep vertical shaft, and survivor testimony tells of a brutal execution method known as *"la cuerda india"* — "the Indian rope." Prisoners, bound together in a line, were led to the edge of the mine, which was covered by a trapdoor. The door was opened, the prisoners plunged into the shaft, and a hand grenade was then thrown after them.

The memory of Castuera Concentration Camp: actors, achievements and horizon

Castuera camp was symbolically "liberated" in April 2005 during the first tribute to its victims — an event organised by local citizens, some linked to the *Izquierda Unida* political group. Several of these organisers later became founding members of AMECADEC, established in 2006. These "memory entrepreneurs" contacted victims' families and surviving prisoners, and, drawing on the research published in the 2006 monograph *Cruz, bandera y caudillo. El campo de concentración de Castuera*, succeeded in placing the camp's significance as a *Site of Memory* firmly in the public sphere.

The memorial importance of Castuera camp lies in the fact that the fate of many detainees remains unknown. It is certain that they entered the camp, yet their subsequent whereabouts are lost. For families of the disappeared, the site itself has become a symbolic grave: they bring flowers to the ruins because it is the last physical point of reference they have for their loved ones.

Since its founding, AMECADEC has pursued three main lines of work, with the camp as its focal site and human rights as its overarching theme:

1. Providing support to victims of Francoist repression, especially those linked to the camp;
2. Paying tribute to the victims through commemorative acts; and
3. Protecting, preserving, and promoting knowledge of the site and its history.

The land on which the camp stood is privately owned. In 2008, the owner announced plans to build a photovoltaic solar plant that would have destroyed the remaining material traces of the camp. Upon

3. March to the Concentration Camp during a Tribute to the victims. Photograph: AMECADEC

4. The pedestal of the cross with flowers after a Tribute to the victims. Photograph: AMECADEC

learning of the project, AMECADEC alerted the regional authorities and mobilised civil society and historians to denounce the threat. The plan was eventually modified, and the solar installation now encircles part of the camp's perimeter rather than covering it.

In response to these public demands, the Regional Government of Extremadura declared the site a Property of Cultural Interest (Bien de Interés Cultural) in May 2009, under the legal category of *Historic Site*. This designation, regulated by heritage legislation, obliges the regional administration to ensure the protection and conservation of such sites.

The decree published in the *Official Gazette of Extremadura* on 13 May 2009 stated:
"Castuera concentration camp is a reference point for historical memory and a place of remembrance for many individuals and groups. Its historical significance within the framework of Francoist repression, linked to the Civil War and its aftermath, makes it a regional symbol deserving of the highest recognition and protection, which is hereby granted by this decree."

Among AMECADEC's most emblematic commemorative activities is the March to the Concentration Camp, held annually since 2006. The event is scheduled for a weekend in early April, close to the anniversary of the proclamation of the Second Republic on 14 April 1931. It combines educational and memorial activities: lectures on memory, history and human rights, and a collective walk from the town centre to the camp site.

This march — undertaken on foot — represents a form of "pilgrim memory", retracing in reverse the route prisoners once followed when taken from the camp to give statements in town. It ends at the former camp square, beside the concrete plinth where the cross once stood. During the ceremony, a mast is raised, and the Republican flag is hoisted. Flowers are laid in remembrance, the AMECADEC Manifesto is read aloud, and citizens, relatives, poets and musicians are invited to speak or perform.

The association's third line of work focuses on the dissemination of the camp's history and memory. AMECADEC has produced a range of educational and outreach materials for public use. The exhibition *The System of Francoist Concentration Camps: Castuera Camp* has travelled across Extremadura, and a dedicated teaching unit has been distributed to schools. These initiatives are complemented by guided visits,

5. A Travelling Seminar with the EUROM Team and AMECADEC (2024). Photograph: EUROM

both for local and international visitors, though the majority of participants are secondary-school students from across the region.

The memorial narrative surrounding Castuera camp has thus been shaped primarily by civil society, led by AMECADEC, since public institutions have yet to implement a consistent policy of dissemination or education. Although a musealisation project has been proposed by the regional government, it remains unfulfilled to this day.

The site's enduring relevance as a *place of memory* lies in its embodiment of the four pillars of historical justice: truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

Bibliographical references

Guillermo LEÓN CÁCERES (2022), "La memoria de las víctimas del franquismo en Extremadura. Una introducción a sus orígenes, configuración y activismo", in José Ignacio URQUIJO, José Antonio PÉREZ and Marcelo SÁNCHEZ-ORO (Coords.), La sociedad extremeña desde la Sociología. Claves para entender una realidad social en transformación, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres, pp. 107-136.

Guillermo LEÓN CÁCERES, Antonio D. LÓPEZ RODRÍGUEZ and José Ramón GONZÁLEZ CORTÉS (2011), "El campo de concentración de Castuera: del olvido forzado forzado a lugar de memoria y recurso didáctico", *Revista de Estudios Extremeños*, volume LXVII, number II, pp. 527-594.

Antonio D. LÓPEZ RODRÍGUEZ (2006), *Cruz, bandera y caudillo. El Campo de concentración de Castuera*, CEDER La Serena, Badajoz.

Antonio D. LÓPEZ RODRÍGUEZ (2022), *La guerra civil en el Partido Judicial de Castuera (1936-1939)*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Extremadura.

REVIEW

CINEMA

Marco (2024).
Wounded Memory: Enric Marco and the Distortion of Testimony

David González
European Observatory on Memories (EUROM)

Marco (2024), directed by Aitor Arregi and Jon Garaño, is a drama that delves into the complex figure of Enric Marco Batlle (1921–2022), portrayed with great intensity by Eduard Fernández. For many years, Marco was regarded as a survivor of the Nazi camps—a false identity that he himself constructed and maintained publicly until it was revealed he had never been deported. The film, based on real events, explores this imposture and its ethical, social, and political implications, while also engaging with the human dimension of the character.

The cast also includes Nathalie Poza and Chani Martín alongside Eduard Fernández, with cinematography by Javier Agirre Erauso and music by Aránzazu Calleja. Its world premiere took place at the Venice Film Festival, followed by screenings in San Sebastián, before reaching Spanish cinemas in November 2024. The film was warmly received by critics and earned five Goya Award nominations, including Best Actor, which Fernández went on to win. It also received recognition at the Feroz Awards, and, although it was shortlisted to

1. Poster of the movie

represent Spain at the 2025 Oscars, it was ultimately not selected. The story of Enric Marco, which forms the basis of the screenplay, is as fascinating as it is controversial. Marco claimed to have joined the anarchist militias during the first weeks of the Spanish Civil War, while still a teenager, although many of his accounts remain unverified. During the Second World War, he voluntarily travelled to Germany as a labourer, where he was briefly imprisoned, but never deported to a concentration camp, as he later falsely asserted. During the Spanish Transition, he became actively involved in the revival of the anarcho-syndicalist movement, serving as secretary general of the CNT between 1978 and 1979. He later participated in the parents' associations movement during his daughters' schooling, and in 2003, he was appointed president of the Amical de Mauthausen, the principal memorial association dedicated to Spanish deportees in Nazi camps.

His charisma, eloquence, and ability to connect emotionally with audiences earned him unprecedented media visibility. For years, he was accepted as a direct witness of the Holocaust, and his narrative became a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting memory and remembrance.

All that symbolic capital collapsed in 2005, when historian Benito Bermejo revealed Marco had fabricated his past as a deportee. Although Marco himself admitted the deception and resigned from his posts, he defended his lie as an attempt to keep historical memory alive. He died in 2022 at the age of 101, leaving behind a life marked by tension between truth, fiction, and the human need for recognition.

The life of Enric Marco is, without doubt, worthy of a film. Without attempting to encompass every episode of his trajectory, the film captures the character's constant contradictions, and Eduard Fernández's performance is outstanding. The symbiosis between actor and character is so complete that, when archival footage is interspersed, viewers may find themselves questioning who is actually on screen.

Particularly revealing is the film's final section, where, after the deception has been exposed, Marco's deepest contradictions unfold, along with his determination to continue presenting himself as a tireless fighter. The overlap between the fictionalised Marco and archival images intensifies the narrative, drawing the viewer into the last controversies surrounding his figure, especially his relationship with the media-savvy writer Javier Cercas. The revelation of Enric Marco's imposture in 2005 had a profound impact on Spanish society—not only because of the deceit itself, but also because of the way it was used to discredit the broader memory movement. Conservative sectors exploited the scandal to question the legitimacy of efforts to seek justice for victims of deportation and the Holocaust, and, by extension, for those of Francoism. From liberal circles, the case also created distance from the memorialist movement, and it was from this perspective that Javier Cercas later portrayed Marco in his non-fiction novel *El Impostor* (2014). Cercas's work revived the case and brought it back to the centre of public debate. Although praised for its literary quality, it was also criticised for its inquisitorial tone and for a problematic equidistance between conflicting memories. For many, the book simplified the memorialist phenomenon and discredited it from a position of moral and intellectual superiority.

The scandal affected not only Marco's personal reputation but also dealt a severe blow to the Spanish memory movement. The revelation that one of its main spokespeople was an impostor undermined public trust and gave ammunition to those who already doubted the legitimacy of such initiatives. The association Marco had presided over, the Amical de Mauthausen, was particularly affected. Rosa Torán, who later served as president of the Amical, reflected on the complexity of addressing an issue that went far beyond an individual act of deception. As a historian, she herself consulted the Flossenbürg archive, but could only access prisoner records up to the letter F, since many documents were dispersed after the camps' liberation. Moreover, although

2. Enric Marco receives the honorific title "Creu de Sant Jordi" in 2001. Generalitat de Catalunya, via Wikimedia Commons

exhaustive studies exist on Spanish deportees in Nazi camps, there is almost no information about those deported from within Germany itself—the group Marco falsely claimed to represent. In fact, not a single documentary proof could ever be provided to demonstrate that he had not been in Flossenbürg. It was the persistent research of Benito Bermejo that ultimately forced the truth into the open. The case of Enric Marco represents a paradigmatic "glitch in the matrix" of the Spanish memorialist movement. His imposture opened a deep fissure in the credibility of a movement that had spent decades striving to recover the silenced voices of the deported. Although Marco claimed to have acted with good intentions, the damage he caused was profound and lasting. His life—oscillating between truth and fiction—remains an uncomfortable mirror of the tensions between history and memory, and of the deeply human contradictions of someone driven by an overwhelming need for recognition.

REVIEW

BOOKS

Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain

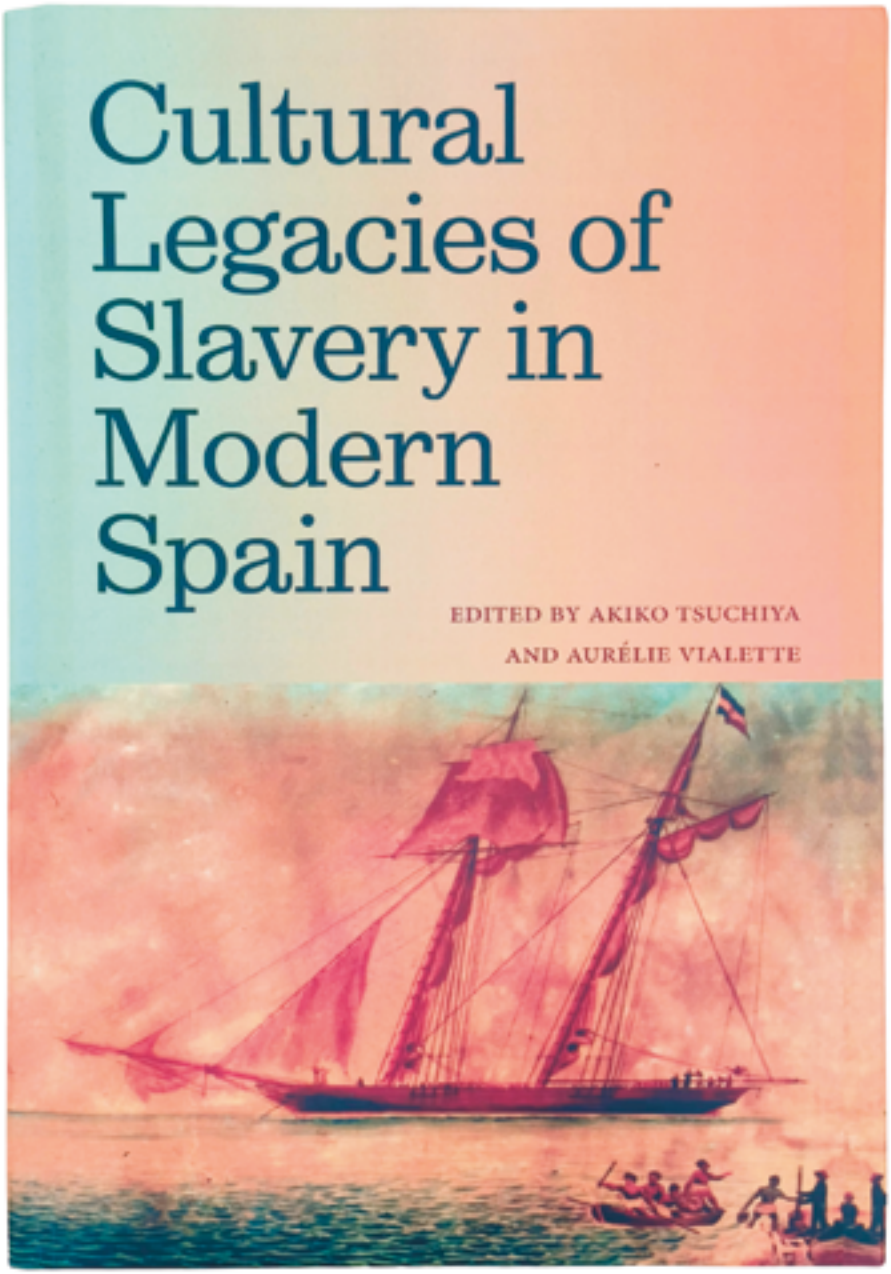
Akiko Tsuchiya and Aurélie Vialette (eds.)
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2025. 320 pp.
ISBN 9798855800845 (hardback)

Jo Labanyi
New York University

As the editors of this volume note, Spain has been slow to recognize the human rights abuses, including slavery, resulting from its former empire, in part because of the urgent need to memorialize the victims of the Francoist repression in and after the Spanish Civil War. As Tsuchiya and Vialette remark in their introduction, Spain's Democratic Memory Law makes no mention of empire. This book—unlike previous studies of slavery in colonial Spanish America—focuses on its legacies (in the plural) in Spain from the nineteenth century to the present. The mix of scholarly essays and interviews aims to reach beyond academic circles.

The editors' introduction notes that the height of Spain's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade (principally to Cuba) was the mid-nineteenth century, when slave trading (but not slavery) had been declared illegal. As Vialette comments in her own essay, the banning of the slave trade raised the price of slaves, making slave trading more profitable. Those profits, the introduction notes, underpinned industrialization in Catalonia. While Catalonia features prominently in the book, the geographical coverage is broad. Part 1, based on archival sources, discusses Spanish colonial West Africa and the Philippines, the links with slavery of Spanish families based in Britain, and Catalonia. Part 2 explores today's memorialization of slavery in Catalonia, Madrid, Cádiz, and the Canaries. Part 3 examines the legacies of Spain's involvement in slavery in literature, visual culture, and music, including interviews with Afro-descendant cultural workers.

Benita Sampedro's first chapter, "The *Houseboys* of Fernando Poo," reads two African personal narratives—the semi-fictional *Una lanza por el Boabí* (1962) by Daniel Jones Mathama, son of the wealthy African plantation-owner on whom the protagonist is based, and the 1961-2 notebook and diaries of Nigerian Linus N. Gheme, houseboy to a Portuguese settler family in Fernando Poo—to show how houseboys resisted, and in the second case



legally challenged, their exploitation. The semi-servitude of houseboys in elite African as well as white settler households shows the complexity of colonial structures.

Kirsty Hooper's second chapter examines the links to slavery of three Spanish families (from Cádiz, Havanna, and Puerto Rico) living in London during the nineteenth century, after Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Her research shows the ploys adopted by these slave-trading or slave-owning families to mask the source of their wealth. The chapter's fascinating historical detail reminds us of the repression of slaves in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 1840s by Spanish liberal politicians General O'Donnell and General Prim, respectively.

Aurélie Vialette's third chapter explores the role of the major Spanish slave trader Antonio López y López (knighted as Marquis of Comillas by Alfonso XII) as founder of the Philippine General Tobacco Company. Her focus is on how the company's archive whitewashes its

links to the slave trade, in keeping with a sanitized official discourse that allowed the capture and enslavement of Muslims in the Philippines. Like Hooper in Chapter 2, Vialette reveals the intricate networks of kinship that consolidated slavery as a global business enterprise.

In Part 1's final chapter, Martín Rodrigo-Alharilla and Juliana Nalerio argue that the decisive factor in the shift from Spain's early modern blood purity statutes, which targeted religious others (Jews and Muslims), to modern racism, based on skin color, was the Atlantic slave trade's equation of slaves with Blacks. They note that, in slave-owning eighteenth-century colonial Spanish America, blood purity laws started to be used to bolster white privileges. Examining the links between nineteenth-century Catalonia and Cuba, they show how the equation of the terms "negro" and "slave" persisted even when referring to free people of African origin in Barcelona.

Part 2 opens with Akiko Tsuchiya's chapter on the monuments in Barcelona to the previously mentioned slave trader Antonio López y López and to Columbus. She notes the Franco dictatorship's restoration of the monument to López in 1944, after its demolition by anarchists at the start of the Spanish Civil War, and that its removal in 2018 left standing its pedestal, which celebrates López's transnational business enterprises. She shows how the erection of the monument to Columbus in 1888, for the Barcelona Universal Exposition, coopted him to celebrate Catalonia's medieval empire, contributing to the reluctance, still today, towards removing it. Particularly interesting is Tsuchiya's account of art activists' interventions which have given both monuments new meanings.

Ulrike Schmieder's Chapter 6 is a mine of information about the extensive links to slavery of Cádiz and Madrid, none of them commemorated in either city. Cádiz's museums and tourist spots celebrate the city's past as the hub of Atlantic trade and it still has a monument to Antonio López's son Claudio, who continued his father's business ventures (the Catholic Church considered canonizing him). The monument to the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz says nothing about its exclusion of Afro-descendants from citizenship; local abolitionists are not honored. The account of Madrid details the many statues and street names honoring enslavers, and stresses the Spanish royal family's involvement in slavery, notably Carlos III (who owned 20,000 slaves) and Queen Regent María Cristina (whose husband was involved in the slave trade).

Chapter 7, by Jeffrey K. Coleman, is a fascinating critique of the Museo Atlántico off the coast of Lanzarote, whose underwater sculpture garden, comprising over 300 human statues, calls attention to Africans drowned in the middle passage as well as in trying to reach Spain in recent decades. While conceptually interesting, the installation repeats the invisibility of those it honors (the statues can be seen only by those with scuba-diving training) and condemns them to a second death.

Part 2 ends with the editors' interview with the coordinator of the European Observatory on Memories (EUROM), Oriol López Badell, and historian Celeste Muñoz Martínez, who heads EUROM's colonial memories section and the Spanish branch of the Trans-Atlantic Redress Network. They outline the successive stages of EUROM's investigations into colonial memory, noting that the impulse has come from Afro-descendants and activists, with institutional recognition lagging behind. Despite the Catalan Generalitat's 2021 apology for the crimes of colonialism, they feel that Spaniards still largely view empire as a positive feature of Spain's past.

Part 3 starts with Gustau Nerín's analysis of literary and cinematic representations of early nineteenth-century slave trafficker Pedro Blanco, owner of a vast slave factory in today's Sierra Leone. Nerín shows how the many novels about him from 1860 on depicted him as a heroic adventurer, until David Pesci's 1987 English-language novel *Amistad*, followed by Steven Spielberg's 1997 film version, spawned a succession of literary representations in English, Spanish, and Catalan that damned Spain's involvement in global slavery networks.

In Chapter 10, Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego explores artistic and literary representations of the Black child Luz adopted by the 13th Duchess of

Alba, the possible model for Goya's *La maja desnuda*. She sets Goya's painting and drawing of Luz in the context of a European vogue for portraits of Black children as luxury possessions, and notes the stress on the Duchess's magnanimity in Enlightenment poet Quintana's poem to the child. Carmen Posadas' 2016 novel *La hija de Cayetana* is seen as parodying the white savior narrative but ultimately buying into the myth of a benevolent Spanish colonialism.

Chapters 11 and 12 comprise interviews with Afro-descendant cultural workers. In the first, Tania Safura Adam, director of Radio Africa and curator of many exhibitions on the African diaspora, rejects the term "activist" and expresses skepticism about use of the term "decolonial". Her focus is on showcasing the musical scene across the African continent, creating awareness of African cultural creativity rather than on redressing victimization. In the second, Black British flamenco practitioner Yinka Esi Graves, of Ghanaian and Jamaican descent and since 2013 resident in Seville, describes how flamenco has helped her articulate the erasure of Black women.

The final chapter continues this stress on Black creativity with the exploration of Africans' contribution to flamenco by Miguel Ángel Rosales, director of the 2016 documentary *Gurumbé. Canciones de tu memoria negra.* Rosales rejects prevailing assumptions that flamenco's African elements derive from the late nineteenth-century Hispano-tropicalist assimilation of Caribbean rhythms, arguing that such assumptions erase the centuries-old Afro-descendant presence in Spain thanks to slavery. He traces the history of Black Andalusian performers in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, suggesting similarities with (but not origins in) musical expressions of the Afro-American diaspora.

The book offers a wealth of information about Spain's involvement in slavery as well as about present-day Spanish attitudes towards it. Its structure—leading from stories of abuse to accounts of Black creativity—has been well thought out. The overall message is that much work remains to be done in Spain to produce public awareness of the country's slave-owning and slave-trading past. It is good to know that the volume will appear in Spanish translation.

1. Columbus monument, Barcelona, July 2023. Source: RayAdvait, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

REVIEW

EXHIBITION

The "Negre de la Riba": History, Controversy and Reinterpretation

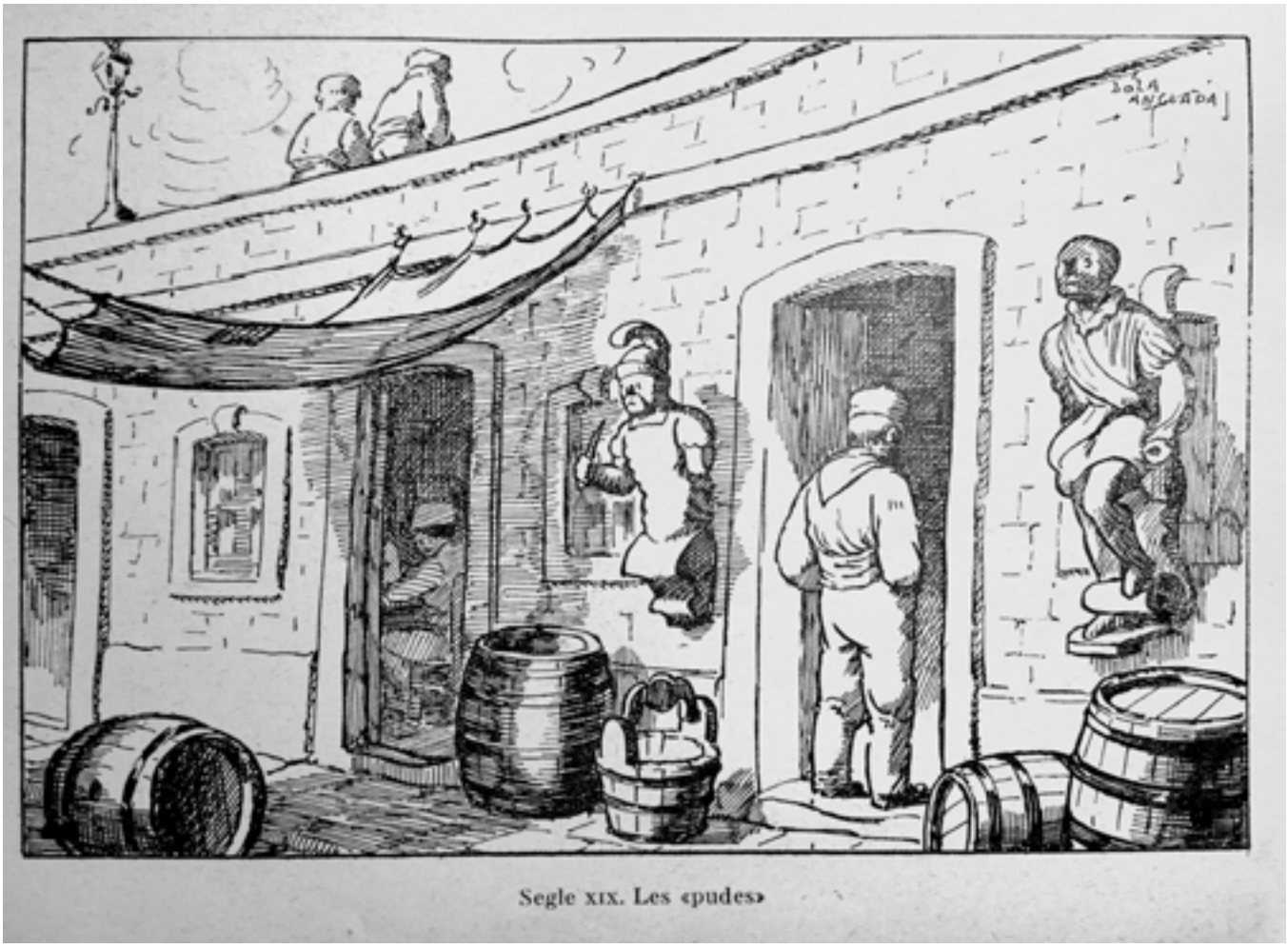
Oriol López Badell
European Observatory on Memories (EUROM)

The misnamed *Negre de la Riba* was, for decades, one of Barcelona's most popular figures. Its origins date back to the 18th century, when it adorned the prow of a ship engaged in trade between Europe and the Americas. The figurehead, thought at the time to represent an African warrior, would go on to become a well-known character in Barcelona's collective memory.

When the ship was scrapped in the 19th century, the figure was purchased by Francesc Bonjoch, a maker of wooden barrels and nautical tools, who placed it on the façade of his shop on the Riba dock. Between 1860 and 1870, the figurehead was a commercial attraction and soon became a local curiosity for passersby. At that time, the dock—in the heart of the Barceloneta neighbourhood—was a lively place, a meeting point for residents and visitors who came to watch the bustle of the port or greet the mysterious *Negre de la Riba*.

During the second half of the 19th century, the figurehead became a genuine popular icon. It appeared in satirical and literary publications and even inspired theatrical parodies. Its fame, shrouded in legend, gave it an air of mystery: many magazines reported the belief that the *Negre de la Riba* would carry off disobedient children, and chronicles tell us that more than one parent took advantage of this superstition to scare youngsters into good behaviour.

Around 1900, with the redevelopment of the Riba dock, the figure changed hands several times and began a journey through the city's neighbourhoods, until in 1934 it was finally donated to the Maritime Museum of Barcelona. It was successfully exhibited for a few years, but its memory gradually faded during the 20th century, kept alive only by a few local scholars and history books.



1. Illustration of the misnamed *Negre de la Riba* at the pier, published in *Visions barcelonines, 1760–1860. Els barris de la Ciutat* by Francesc Curet and Lola Anglada, 1953.

The True Identity of the Figurehead

In 1996, restoration work carried out at the Maritime Museum revealed a surprising fact: analysis of the clothing and hairstyle showed that the figure did not represent an African man, as had long been believed, but rather an Iroquois Native American from the northeast of North America. This reinterpretation exposed the misreading and racialised lens through which the piece had been viewed for more than a century.

The dark colouring of the figure—caused either by age or, according to some sources, by a fire aboard its ship—and its damaged appearance had fuelled a vision full of stereotypes. For years, the figurehead had been associated with a dehumanised image of "the other", frightening children as a symbol of the unknown. During an earlier restoration, a raised arm holding a knife—never part of the original design—had even been added, reinforcing this distorted reading. Today, the restored figurehead, with its original colours recovered, can be admired at the Maritime Museum.

Over time, interest in the figure was rekindled, and in 2003, coinciding with the 250th anniversary of the neighbourhood's founding, the artisan workshop *Constructors de Fantasies*, with support from Barcelona City Council and local residents, created a fibreglass

2. The figurehead with an inaccurately restored right arm and dagger. Photo by the Maritime Museum of Barcelona.

3. The figurehead restored in 1996 and currently on display at the Maritime Museum of Barcelona. Photo by the Maritime Museum of Barcelona.

4. Fibreglass copy of the figurehead made in 2003. Photo by the author.

replica. This new version, installed on the façade of a building near the market square, helped recover the symbol and fully reintegrate it into the neighbourhood's festive heritage, where it has featured prominently in celebrations and parades over the last two decades.

An Exhibition that Sparked Controversy

In 2024, I had the opportunity to curate an exhibition[1] dedicated to this local figure with the aim of presenting it through a critical lens. The exhibition was arranged around three main themes: reconstructing the figurehead's history through archival documentation; creating dialogue with other objects at the Ethnological Museum of Barcelona representing popular myths used to instil fear in children; and offering a decolonial interpretation of the piece. After months of work and with the active participation of Barceloneta residents, the opening day arrived with a parade led by the figurehead. The procession travelled from the Museum of Ethnology and World Cultures to the *Casa de la Barceloneta 1761*, a small municipal facility devoted to preserving the history and memory of this seaside neighbourhood where the exhibition was hosted.

Two days later, a digital magazine published an article entitled "*Barcelona Exhibits a Monument to Racism,*"[2] sharply criticising the presence of the figurehead in the museum, the role of the Museum of Ethnology and the exhibition's overall approach. The author, however, had not visited it; her piece was based on a temporary sign placed at the museum entrance announcing the exhibition with a short description and its dates. This explains why neither that article nor subsequent social media posts mentioned the section of the exhibition which took a critical look at Barcelona's colonial past and the role of fortunes derived from the colonies

1. The exhibition is available to view online at: https://memoriabcn.cat/en/the-dark-one-form-the-dock/

2. You can read the article online: https://zonaestrategia.net/barcelona-exhibe-un-monumento-al-racismo/

in the city's economic and urban development. In hindsight, it is fair to acknowledge that this section could have benefited from more space and resources to better convey its critical message and prevent misunderstandings or discomfort.

An Open Debate: Rethinking the *"Negre de la Riba"*

The controversy surrounding the exhibition prompted the organisation of two public debates in February 2025, bringing together residents, associations and professionals from the cultural and social inclusion sectors. The goal was to reflect on how cultural institutions—and society at large—represent diversity and to reconsider the role of the misnamed *Negre de la Riba* in collective memory.

The first roundtable gathered specialists and anti-racist activists to discuss the exhibition's historical and artistic approach. The second gave voice to members of the public and representatives of organisations such as *Fedelatina* (the Federation of Latin American Associations of Catalonia), along with historians, anthropologists and artists from diverse backgrounds. The debates underscored the need to reinterpret certain popular figures to ensure more inclusive and respectful representations.

Some participants pointed out that the exhibition's critical approach to colonial history and the transatlantic slave trade did not go deep enough, suggesting that these aspects could have been explored further. The opening parade through the old city was also criticised by some as potentially insensitive toward racialised communities. The Museum of Ethnology acknowledged these concerns, admitting that some traditions may perpetuate racist messages without conscious intent.

At the same time, other participants—such as *Fedelatina*'s representative—noted that the exhibition was a positive example of decolonial practice in the Barceloneta neighbourhood, stressing that institutions must confront colonial legacies, reflect on their myths and decide whether some should be dismantled. Meanwhile, some local residents felt that the controversy had been blown out of proportion and that the celebrations involving the figurehead had always been positive, though they agreed that certain aspects should now be reconsidered.

Overall, the two sessions generated valuable discussions and led to three specific recommendations[3] for reinterpreting the *Negre de la Riba*: reviewing its name; critically contextualising it; and involving racialised communities in decisions about its representation.

The Neighbourhood Leads a Process of Reinterpretation

The controversy surrounding the figurehead and the accusations of racism directed at residents provoked a strong emotional response in Barceloneta—a traditionally working-class neighbourhood that has welcomed diverse cultures since its creation in the 18th century. The area has long suffered from tourism pressure and gentrification, which have displaced many locals. Consequently, numerous residents involved in the *Negre de la Riba's* festivities see themselves as defenders of popular, grassroots culture.

For locals, the parades featuring the figurehead are a form of community expression that brings the symbol closer to the public while also offering a way to reflect on the city's colonial past. They acknowledge, however, that the traditional 19th-century name may now be considered offensive by some. Significantly, the song written years ago to accompany the figurehead explicitly references Barcelona's colonial and slave-trading past.

Today, a group of residents—led by the *Constructors de Fantasies* workshop that built the replica in 2003—are engaged in a process of reflection aimed at resignifying the figure and turning it into a critical symbol of popular struggle. They recognise that they had not previously

3. A downloadable file containing the conclusions of the two debates is available on the online exhibition website: https://memoriabcn.cat/en/the-dark-one-form-the-dock/

perceived the figure's potential racial implications and are now working to address them. Recently, they installed a plaque beneath the figurehead reading: "The misnamed *Negre de la Riba* is much more than a maritime sculpture. It is the legendary figurehead of Barceloneta, a nightmare for slave traders, brought to life by the people."

They have also published a manifesto proposing to rename the figure, removing the word *negre*, and use it as a tool to explain and acknowledge the city's colonial and slave-trading history. The group has reached out to organisations such as *Top Manta*—the Barcelona street vendors' union made up mostly of migrants—to involve them in the discussion about the figurehead's reinterpretation.

This process shows how a controversial figure is being transformed into an instrument for critical reflection and memory, testing the community's ability to create participatory spaces and involve diverse social actors in recognising the past and building a more inclusive representation of the neighbourhood. What remains to be seen is how these efforts will take shape in practice.

5. Open debate with local residents, cultural and community organisations, 2025. Photo by the author.

Dissonant Heritage and War. Conservation and Communication of a Difficult Legacy

Emanuele Morezzi
Politecnico di Torino
Chiara Mariotti
Università Politecnica delle Marche
Leila Signorelli
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Alessia Zampini
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna

The project *Dissonant Heritage and War. Conservation and Communication of a Difficult Legacy* (Co.Co.War) is conceived as a critical reflection and systematic framework for addressing theoretical issues and exemplary cases concerning interventions on Dissonant Heritage. The research focuses on the social, political, ethnic, and cultural processes that emerge in situations where heritage is marked by a divisive charge generated by either military or interpretative conflict, or by manipulations of the message or cultural content associated with the asset. Such dynamics lead communities to adopt attitudes of neglect or denigration, ultimately expressed through acts of abandonment, transfiguration, or destruction. It is funded by a national grant (Progetti di Ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale – PRIN, 2022) and began in October 2023. It will conclude in February 2026, with the opening of a travelling exhibition in Turin, at the Castello del Valentino, and a final conference. The project is grounded in the analysis of a significant sample of heritage cases undergoing different processes – including re-signification, rejection, or damage – and provides a robust matrix – the backbone of the project, also integrated into an open-access geoapp in which they are catalogued according to a shared glossary. The matrix enabled the research units to observe the phenomenon from a broad large transnational perspective, recognising patterns in the origins of dissonance, and enabling advancement in the understanding of this field. Within these processes, the communication of values and disvalues – beyond stigma – is part of a new way for the community to engage with this complex heritage. The case studies are examined to identify strategies – direct and indirect – useful in opening a path towards the conservation of Dissonant Heritage: the project considered not only heritage traditionally associated with difficult or contested memory,

but also cultural assets that are acquiring dissonance through a communication that manipulates stratified memory, with the aim of transforming them into a divisive element within the community. The project, now in its final phase, aims to explore innovative tools for identifying and managing this new way dissonance takes shape by mapping situations in which tensions emerge through manipulated communication, and analysing virtuous cases of re-signification of Dissonant Heritage. The goal is to outline targeted value-oriented strategies for the preservation and communication of these architectures.

1. Experimental lab at the former House of the Fascist Party (Predappio, Italy).

Questioning the Role of Heritage Conservation

Wars and conflicts leave behind rubble to be removed, cities and societies to be rebuilt, and traumas to be overcome. Beyond these material and social wounds – often impossible to heal – conflicts also bequeath to the future another kind of difficult heritage: seats of power, military structures, headquarters of political institutions, and even monuments burdened with uncomfortable identity meanings. These structures, imbued with new semantics, often become symbols of new perceptions among local populations, leading to forms of cultural heritage repudiation and new attempts at post-conflict identity reconfiguration. Historic architectural heritage, normally the object of protection and preservation, thus becomes an instrument not of social unification and democracy, but of division and amplified tension among still-divided factions. Within this framework, the discipline of architectural restoration has drawn upon the words of Roberto Pane in

his essay *Jung e i due poli della psiche* (1987), which theorised the concept of psychological attitude, underlining how the perception of heritage in conflict by the population should be linked to Cesare Brandi's reflections on historical and aesthetic standpoints. The innovative scope of these concepts is even more relevant today, in light of international phenomena such as cancel culture and protest movements against the monumentalisation of disowned heritage or heritage at the centre of interpretative conflicts. At the European level, such themes have been central to Lowenthal's research on Heritage Studies (1996), focusing on interpretative conflict arising from war or semantic misinterpretation of heritage, and to Assmann's work (2015) on the management of traumatic memory. In Tunbridge and Ashworth's typology of dissonance origins (1996), the Dissonant Heritage addressed by this project overlaps their second and third categories: heritage located at the centre of communities with separated memories and discordant meanings, and heritage where dissonance arises historically due to societal changes causing value and message inversions. Sharon Macdonald, in *Is 'Difficult Heritage' Still 'Difficult'?* (2015), questioned whether addressing difficult heritage can today be seen not only as possible, but also as producing positive effects, rather than as an act of *damnatio memoriae*. Yet it remains challenging to achieve shared interpretations of those heritages, whose dissonance, as in recent conflicts, stems from deliberate manipulation of historical stratifications and values to legitimise ethnic, political, or religious supremacy. Cultural heritage thus becomes central to 'identity politics' (Graham & Howard 2008), and its narration plays a crucial role in hybrid warfare strategies, where the control of information (infowar) becomes a genuine weapon for military success – especially when disseminated via platforms that easily escape verification of objectivity and truth (Facebook, Tripadvisor, X, Telegram, Wikipedia). Unsurprisingly, the NATO report on Identity Wars (2017) emphasises the systemic nature of these threats in contemporary conflicts. The effect is to embody, as in well-known cases such as regime-associated rationalist heritage, concentration camps, intentional monuments, tangible markers of a divisive past, which societies may seek to erase through renewed mechanisms of *damnatio memoriae* and iconoclasm. The communication of the values of Dissonant Heritage is crucial to its preservation, as demonstrated by cases such as ATRIUM Association and Cultural Route – *Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in European Urban Memories* – (Battilani et al. 2024; Leech 2018), a renowned international network of sites that has provided a turning point in the recognition and management of the architectural legacy related to undemocratic regimes. Similarly, the role of architecture in processes of misinterpretation can contribute to the search for shared truths, as shown by the work of the research centre Forensic Architecture (University of London).

Conservation Strategies

The project outlines a method for theorising and operationalising the conservation of monuments that, in our contemporary context, have become divisive, where the "dark side of histories" highlights primarily disvalues within the system of meanings attributed to the heritage. Identifying conservation strategies for uncomfortable heritage (dissonant, difficult, contested, tabooed, etc.) is essential to ensure that in the future, under a different cultural climate – based on a renewed *Kunstwollen* (Riegl 1903) – such inheritance can still be narrated, analysed, and re-signified with updated tools. The transmission of heritage to the future remains the primary objective of restoration, grounded in a method that, by revealing all material and memorial layers, enables cultural awareness and critical oversight throughout the intervention process. If the role of architectural conservation as a discipline has been to unveil meanings, stratifications, and highlight the power of interpretation for the purposes of valorisation, protection, and preservation, then the same critical

and cultural engagement can only be beneficial in treating the relationship between heritage, identity, and the values of 'new forms' of Dissonant Heritage. In this perspective, the role of architectural conservation is not limited to the material conservation of heritage, but extends to cultural supervision aimed at enhancing and communicating its meaning to the community. The management of such delicate communication policies represents an innovative challenge, not only for safeguarding structures and memory of the past, but also for redefining the significance of architectures at the centre of interpretative and semantic conflicts. Indeed, it is this interpretative conflict that poses a new risk to heritage preservation, requiring urgent attention from scientific research to define tactics that can counteract propagandistic communication and defuse emerging tensions surrounding the value of heritage. The Co.Co.War project has so far explored the development and implementation of value-oriented strategies capable of reversing the processes that have attributed negative value to cultural heritage, compromising its conservation through distorted communication. The research aims to work precisely on the characteristics that manipulative communication has exploited by retracing a kind of reverse trajectory that ultimately transforms these sites into platforms for dialogue, promoting diversity and multiplying the benefits from heritage to territory in a systemic approach that involves culture, society, economy, and environment (Europa Nostra 2015). The idea is to transmit the history of these heritages in a way that considers their tangible (material) and intangible (meaning-based) stratifications, thereby highlighting their complexity (Architects' Council of Europe et al. 2018).

Understanding as a key tool for future actions

To achieve effectiveness in the field of dissonant heritage, it is necessary to study the state of the art, investigate restoration theory and the related cultural debate, and involve experts and stakeholders in establishing dialogue with local communities, launching participatory projects to explore community perceptions of such heritage. Co.Co.War is rooted in an evidence-based method that seeks to bring closer together the two actions of "assessment" and "understanding": starting from a deep knowledge of the state of the art, among the case studies analysed in the matrix, three were selected using a scaled approach that considered both the types of heritage assets under investigation and their location (national, European, and extra-European), taking into account different origins of dissonance. The former House of the Fascist Party (Italy), the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the Armenian heritage across the borders were at the centre of the Experimental Labs conducted between May and July 2025, nurturing the research findings with feedback from real world contexts.

The Italian experimental lab, held at the former House of the Fascist Party in Predappio from 9 to 15 June 2025, was coordinated by the research unit of the Università Politecnica delle Marche, with support from the University of Bologna and Politecnico di Torino. The initiative aimed to critically engage with the Fascist legacy by operating within a site of profound symbolic significance – Predappio, the birthplace of Benito Mussolini – where Fascist propaganda once materialised the myth of the Dux through urban and architectural

forms, and where latent tensions between cancel culture and polarised narratives persist. The lab was an intensive inter-university workshop involving master's students from the three universities, highlighting that dealing with dissonant heritage requires not only conservation, but also ethical and educational challenges. The event was held on the centenary of Predappio's foundation (1925-2025), in collaboration with the Municipality of Predappio, the ATRIUM Cultural Route, and SERINAR – the company currently managing the Rocca delle Caminate, a medieval fortress transformed in the 1920s into Dux's castle through a restoration that itself served as an instrument of propaganda. Although the lab focused on the House of the Fascist Party, its scope extended to the town's wider urban context, conceptualised as Mussolini's 'urban biography'. Designed by the architect Arnaldo Fuzzi, the House is a paradigmatic example of Fascist ideology and a manifesto of twentieth-century architecture in Italy [Fig. 1]. Its dissonance emerged after the Second World War with the fall of Fascism and the discrediting of its symbols: after its decommissioning, it suffered decades of neglect, which exacerbated its fragile condition. Since 2011, a process of heritage recognition and enhancement has been shaped by negotiations over the building's difficult past and potential reuse. The workshop aimed to contribute to this process of re-signification, fostering the transformation of the site from a neglected or divisive place into one of mediation and critical reflection. Adopting a design-thinking approach and guided by the teaching team, students investigated this pilot case through fieldwork, lectures, and focus groups, in dialogue with architects from Studio Valle in Rome, responsible for the structural project and a preliminary reuse proposal that includes a museum section. The key task was to focus on the museum concept and exhibition design through a sensitive inquiry into how architecture, as physical space, can evoke emotions, memories meanings, while emphasising the role of artistic reflection in the culture of remembrance. The results were presented in a public forum attended by local authorities, experts, and community members, fostering an open discussion on the building's future within the broader European contemporary discourse on the legacy of totalitarian regimes.

Between 12 and 14 June 2025, an experimental lab was conducted in Mostar by the research unit of the Politecnico di Torino, in close collaboration with the Nansen Dialogue Center (NDC). Conceived as an operative and reflective platform, the lab explored innovative methods for analysing and representing perceptions of dissonant heritage, focusing on the Partisan Memorial Cemetery [Fig. 2]. Combining fieldwork, interviews, and visual experimentation, it sought to investigate how local stakeholders – experts, institutional representatives, and young citizens – perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with this complex cultural site, and how these perceptions intertwine with the social and political transformations that have marked Mostar since the end of the Second

2. Experimental lab at the Partisan Memorial Cemetery (Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

World War. The Partisan Memorial Cemetery – locally known as Partiza – is a paradigmatic example of dissonant heritage. Commissioned by the Yugoslav government and designed by the architect Bogdan Bogdanović in the 1960s, it was conceived as a monumental tribute to the anti-fascist resistance and the ideals of brotherhood and unity among the peoples of Yugoslavia. During the socialist period, it was one of the most significant civic and commemorative spaces of the city, embodying the state's official narrative of collective heroism and national cohesion. The Bosnian War in the 1990s radically altered its meaning, and it became a symbol of division: the monument suffered damage and neglect, became the target of repeated vandalism, and progressively lost its civic function. Today, it remains a powerful but ambivalent site, oscillating between abandonment and attempts at symbolic reappropriation. The Mostar lab focused on perception through a dual methodological approach, integrating verbal and visual testimonies. On one hand, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with selected experts – professors, researchers, architects, and directors of government institutions – to capture professional and personal interpretations of the cemetery's

3. Experimental lab on forgotten Armenian architectures.

history, transformation, present condition, and future reactivations. On the other hand, with the support of NDC, a diverse group of young adults from Mostar participated in field and desk activities, encouraging them to express their perceptions through creative and visual tools. This integration of different methodological perspectives allowed for a comprehensive understanding of perception as a cognitive, emotional, and representational process. Expert accounts highlighted divergent narratives regarding the cemetery's legitimacy and symbolism, while participatory outputs revealed intimate, sensorial engagement. The combined materials enabled the team to trace a complex cartography of perceptions – from estrangement to empathy, and from indifference to renewed curiosity – reflecting the multiplicity of ways the local community relates to this contested site. Thus, the lab encourages reflection on the epistemological role of perception in the conservation and communication of dissonant heritage, proposing a model of understanding that links memory, emotion, and representation in the collective construction of meaning around sites marked by conflict and ideological transformation.

The experimental lab led by the research unit of the University of Bologna in Armenia was part of the "Restoring the past – shaping the future" summer camp organised by the Center for the Study, Preservation and Enhancement of Armenian Cultural Heritage (SIREH) in collaboration with the National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia (NUACA), Yerevan State University and the Academy of Fine Arts (TBC).

From 2 to 9 July 2025, a series of activities and experiences were carried out with students and experts from different fields to have a multi-perspective and multi-disciplinary view of the architectural and artistic heritage of the country [Fig. 3]. The aim was to understand heritagisation processes, especially in contested or forgotten areas. With a focus on the existing interactions between monuments, the landscape, and local communities, the experimental lab explored strategies for transmitting cultural heritage to new generations. To better frame and understand the importance of conserving artworks, it was necessary to have students work on recognising the values and disvalues of forgotten Armenian architecture, also including the intangible qualities that contribute to shaping the perception of the place. Analysis activities and work on the identity of places were crucial in laying solid foundations for hypothetical enhancement projects that the students of Architecture, Fine Arts and Anthropology were called to carry out by working together. Moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of the real needs of the actors working in these contexts, the team attended the "Heritage Organizations Agora" organised by SIREH in July, conducting interviews with local associations, NGOs and institutions working in the fields of cultural heritage, discerning its role characterised by ongoing conflicts and tensions.

Drawing on hands-on experience in experimental labs and extensive mapping of dissonances in heritage across Europe and beyond, Co.Co.War seeks to rethink approaches to the past, and engage with the diversity of cultures, nations, communities, classes, genders, and generations, while addressing the challenges of digital transition and supporting heritage communities. In this context, it emphasises the crucial role of culture and heritage in overcoming symbolic violence and fostering understanding of the 'Other'.

References

Assmann A. (2015). *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Battilani P., Belcastro M.G., Kowalski K., Nicolosi T. (2024). *Dissonant Heritage. Concepts, Critiques, Cases*, Bologna, University of Bologna.

Europa Nostra (2015). Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe, Full Report, Krakow, CHCfE.

Graham B., Howard P. (2008). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, Aldershot, Burlington, Ashgate.

Leech J.P. (2018). *The anxieties of dissonant heritage: ATRIUM and the architectural legacy of regimes in local and European perspective*, in H. Hökerberg (Ed.), *Architecture as propaganda in twentieth-century totalitarian regimes*, Firenze, Edizioni Polistampa, pp. 245-260.

Architects' Council of Europe, EFFORT, ERIH, Europa Nostra and FRH, 2018. Leeuwarden Declaration. Adaptive re-use of the built heritage: preserving and enhancing the values of our built heritage for future generations, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands.

Lowenthal D. (1996). *Possessed by the past. The heritage crusade and the spoils of history*, New York, Free Press.

Macdonald, S. (2015). *Is 'Difficult Heritage' Still 'Difficult'? Why Public Acknowledgment of Past Perpetration May No Longer Be So Unsettling to Collective Identities*, in "Museum International", vol. 67, Issue 1-4 Museums Managing the Tensions of Change, pp. 6-22.

NATO (2017). *NATO and Cultural Property. Embracing new challenges in the Era of Identity Wars*, Copenhagen, CHAC

Pane R. (1987). *Carl Gustav Jung e i due poli della psiche*, in "Attualità e dialettica del restauro", Chieti, Solfanelli, pp. 299-306.

Riegl A. (1903). *Der moderne Denkmalkultus. Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung, Wien-Leipzig, W. Braumüller.*

Tunbridge J., Ashworth G.J. (1996). *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons.

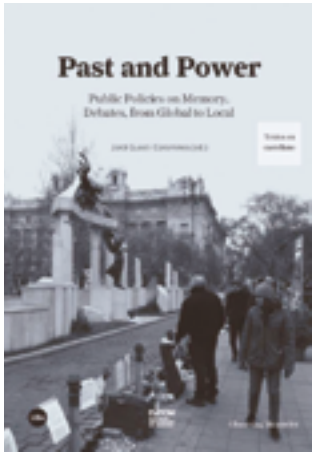
Co.Co.War Official Web Site: https://cocowar.com/

Other EUROM Publications:

The heritage of conflict. David González and Jordi Guixé (Eds.)[Catarata, 2024]

Sarajevo, amor meu. Jovan Divjak. Entrevistes (amb Florence La Bruère) [Bellaterra Edicions, 2022]

Diez años de leyes y políticas públicas de memoria. Jordi Guixé, Jesús Alonso Carballés, Ricard Conesa (Eds.) [Catarata, 2019]



Past and power. Public Policies of memory. Jordi Guixé (Ed.) [Edicions UB, 2016]

Commemorative books

Ventotene 80. 80th Anniversary of the Ventotene Manifesto. [EUROM, 2021]

Schuman 70. 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration. [EUROM, 2020]

Elections 10. A history of the European Parliament at the ballot box (1979-2024). [EUROM, 2024]

The Yugoslav Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: History and Cultural Memory. Vjeran Pavlakovic and Oriol López Badell (Eds.) [2020]

EUROM

EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY ON MEMORIES

www.europeanmemories.net
www.europeanmemories.net/magazine

Instagram/Threads @euromemories
Bluesky @euromemories.bsky.social
FB @europeanobservatoryonmemories

Address:
c/ Melcior de Palau, 140
08014 – Barcelona
observatori.memories@ub.edu

Commemoration of the 5th anniversary of the memorial and information site for the victims of the National Socialist euthanasia murders—the T4 Memorial—in Berlin (August, 2019). Picture: © Marko Priske

Fundació Solidaritat UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA
UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA
Co-funded by the European Union