



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS MONUMENT

La Paz, Bolivia

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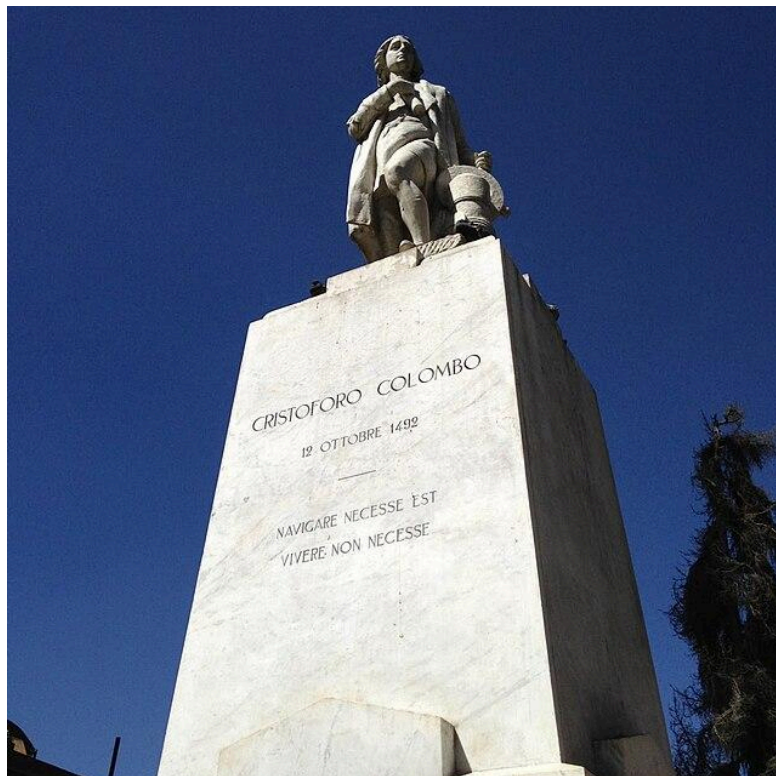


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Executive Summary

In August 2021, a group of Indigenous activists from La Paz climbed the Columbus statue in an attempt to tear it down. Although the statue still stands, protesters painted his face black and hammered off his nose. The National Police responded quickly and took five of them into custody. The statue, located in the heart of the city, was a gift from the Italian Bolivian community in 1925, on the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This is not the first time the statue has been targeted. However, after this last attempt, it was surrounded by a metal wire fence while the City Council decided what to do with it. This case study analyses how Columbus's contestations have evolved in Bolivia, particularly with the emergence of Indigenous movements.

Introduction

In August 2021, demonstrators in La Paz, Bolivia, toppled the statue of Christopher Columbus during a protest commemorating the Day of Indigenous Rurality. The protesters, many of whom wore traditional indigenous clothing, were clear in their criticism of Columbus as a symbol of colonisation and oppression. One protester climbed the monument, smashed its nose with a hammer, painted its face black, and attempted to pull it down using a rope. Consequently, the police intervened quickly, arresting several individuals, including the young man who vandalised the statue, who later publicly declared that he did not recognise Bolivia's ordinary justice system and instead wanted to be judged by his Aymara community by rejecting official legal proceedings. The authorities estimated that repairing the damaged statue would cost around 7,500 euros. This act of vandalism is part of a broader movement in Bolivia and other countries where colonial-era monuments are being questioned and defaced. The Columbus statue in La Paz had already been targeted in the past, highlighting ongoing debates about historical memory, indigenous rights, and the representation of controversial figures in public spaces. Moreover, local officials have expressed their concern about these incidents and have announced measures to protect cultural heritage while discussions continue on the role of such monuments in modern society.

Background

The Removal of Columbus Statues Around the World

The monument was inaugurated in 1926 on the Paseo del Prado in La Paz. It was a gift from the Italian community in Bolivia, presented as part of the celebration of Bolivia's centenary. It was sculpted by the Italian artist Giuseppe Graciosa in white marble and measures two metres¹.

The widespread removal and defacement of Christopher Columbus statues around the world reflect shifting historical perspectives on colonialism and its legacy.² Once celebrated as the 'discoverer of America,' Columbus has increasingly become a controversial figure, associated with the exploitation and violence suffered by Indigenous populations.³ This re-evaluation has led to numerous acts of protest, including the removal and destruction of statues dedicated to him in countries such as the United States,⁴ Bolivia,⁵ Colombia,⁶ and Spain.⁷

Similarly, other protests, such as the one in Bolivia, have taken place in other parts of the world. In Colombia, demonstrators toppled a century-old Columbus statue in Barranquilla during anti-government protests, linking their discontent with contemporary political struggles.⁸ In the

¹ Adrián Paredes, "Una breve historia de la "llegada" de Colón", *La Razón*, August 9, 2021

² Jesús Carrilo, "Derribar las estatuas de Colón", *CTXT*, March 25, 2021

³ Vargas, S. (2021). "No sólo caerán estatuas". Cuestionamiento y resignificación del pasado en coyunturas de lucha social. *Boletín OPCA*, 20, 18-27.

⁴ Lateshia Beachum, Laura Vozzella and Derek Hawkins, "Christopher Columbus statues toppled in Minnesota, beheaded in Boston, attacked in Richmond", *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020

⁵ Sebastián Ochoa, "Desnarigado y pintarrajeado, Cristóbal Colón tiene un futuro incierto en La Paz", *Sputnik Mundo*, August 5, 2021

⁶ 20 Minutos "Derriban una estatua de Cristóbal Colón en Colombia al grito de "Colón asesino", *20 Minutos*, June 29, 2021

⁷ Marina Velasco, "Por qué Franco sí y Colón no", *HuffPost*, June 23, 2020

⁸ 20 Minutos "Derriban una estatua de Cristóbal Colón en Colombia al grito de "Colón asesino", *20 Minutos*, June 29, 2021

United States, statues of Columbus have been repeatedly targeted, with activists arguing that his glorification perpetuates a false and harmful narrative about history.⁹

Academics and activists argue that these actions are not merely acts of vandalism but rather part of a broader movement to decolonise public spaces and rethink historical narratives.¹⁰ The removal of Columbus statues reflects an effort to acknowledge the perspectives of Indigenous communities and to challenge symbols that have long been associated with oppression and imperialism.¹¹

While some governments have responded by removing controversial monuments, others have resisted, viewing the destruction of statues as an erasure of history. This ongoing debate highlights the tensions between preserving historical memory and reinterpreting the past through a more inclusive and critical lens.¹²

The Legacy of Columbus in Latin America

The legacy of Christopher Columbus in Latin America remains a subject of intense debate, reflecting the complexities of colonial history and its enduring consequences.¹³ As a result of Columbus's voyages in 1492, European colonisation of the Americas led to profound social, economic, and political transformations. While some view his arrival as the beginning of a new era of globalisation, others argue that it marked the start of Indigenous oppression, forced labour, and cultural erasure.¹⁴ Both admiration and condemnation have shaped his legacy, depending on the historical perspective and national narrative.

Among the most significant consequences of Columbus's arrival was the introduction of European diseases, such as smallpox, that devastated Indigenous populations. The spread of these illnesses, against which Native Americans had no immunity, led to demographic collapse, drastically altering the social fabric of the continent.¹⁵ This biological impact facilitated European conquest and domination, as Indigenous societies struggled to recover from the massive loss of life. The demographic disaster that followed Columbus's expeditions is often cited as one of the most tragic aspects of his legacy in Latin America.¹⁶

The conquest and colonisation initiated by Columbus also laid the foundations for the Spanish Empire in the Americas, which implemented an extractive economic model based on the Encomienda system. Under this system, Indigenous people were forced to work in mines and plantations under brutal conditions, enriching European colonisers at the cost of Indigenous lives

⁹ Jesús Carrilo, "Derribar las estatuas de Colón", *CTXT*, March 25, 2021

¹⁰ Vargas, S. (2021). "No sólo caerán estatuas". Cuestionamiento y resignificación del pasado en coyunturas de lucha social. *Boletín OPCA*, 20, 18-27.

¹¹ Lucila Svampa (2021). "De íconos en decadencia y estatuas derribadas: sobre los restos de un pasado que incomoda". *ArtCultura Uberlândia*, v. 23, n. 43, p. 67-81.

¹² Marina Velasco, "Por qué Franco sí y Colón no", *HuffPost*, June 23, 2020.

¹³ David Alire García, "Columbus holiday in Latin America revives centuries-old historical debate", *Reuters*, October 13, 2024.

¹⁴ Teófilo Ruiz, "Review of The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire, by E. Bartosik-Vélez", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 46(1), (2015) 121-123.

¹⁵ Jared Diamond (1997). *Armas, Gérmenes y Acero: Los destinos de los Pueblos Humanos (Chapter 11)*. Editorial Debate.

¹⁶ David Alire García, "Columbus holiday in Latin America revives centuries-old historical debate", *Reuters*, October 13, 2024.

and cultures.¹⁷ While some argue that Columbus's voyages paved the way for economic and technological advancements, others emphasise the lasting socioeconomic inequalities originating from this exploitative colonial structure.¹⁸

Beyond economic and demographic consequences, Columbus's legacy remains deeply embedded in Latin American cultural identities. Many countries in the region commemorate his arrival through holidays such as *Día de la Raza* (Day of the Race) or *Día de la Resistencia Indígena* (Day of Indigenous Resistance), reflecting differing interpretations of his impact.¹⁹ For some, Columbus symbolises European heritage and the merging of cultures, while for others, he represents the violence and displacement suffered by Indigenous and African-descended communities. The duality of his legacy continues to fuel discussions about historical memory and decolonisation efforts in the region.²⁰

Recent discoveries and historical research have further complicated the legacy of Columbus. DNA analysis has confirmed the authenticity of his remains, reigniting debates about his role in history and how he should be remembered.²¹ As statues of Columbus are torn down or removed from public spaces across the Americas, discussions about his impact remain highly relevant. His legacy extends not only to the past but also to how contemporary societies choose to interpret and acknowledge historical injustices.

History of the Contestation

The Origins of #ColumbusMustFall

While resistance to Columbus began almost as early as his first voyage in 1492, in recent years, a growing movement has emerged to reevaluate his legacy, resulting in the creation of various hashtags and social media campaigns. #ColumbusMustFall, inspired by South Africa's #RhodesMustFall movement, this hashtag has been used by activists demanding the removal of Columbus statues in the Americas and Europe.

The #ColumbusMustFall movement is part of a broader global effort to reevaluate historical narratives and address symbols of colonialism and oppression. This movement seeks to remove monuments and symbols honouring Christopher Columbus, whose expeditions to the Americas initiated centuries of indigenous exploitation and suffering.²²

In the early 1990s, significant protests targeted a Columbus Monument in Syracuse, New York. Critics challenged the monument's iconography and inscriptions that celebrated Columbus's colonial ambitions, while supporters considered it a symbol of Italian-American heritage that

¹⁷ Roger Pita Pico. (2018). Las condiciones laborales de las comunidades indígenas del nororiente neogranadino, siglo XVII. *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia*, 19(1), 130-157.

¹⁸ VOA, "¿Por qué la figura de Cristóbal Colón se volvió controversial en EE. UU. y Latinoamérica?", *Impacto Media*, October 14, 2024.

¹⁹ David Alire García, "Columbus holiday in Latin America revives centuries-old historical debate", *Reuters*, October 13, 2024.

²⁰ Teofilo Ruiz, "Review of The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire, by E. Bartosik-Vélez", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 46(1), (2015) 121-123. .

²¹ Anabel Bate, "COLUMBUS BREAKTHROUGH 500-year-old mystery of human bones found in Spain finally solved as DNA confirms remains belong to Christopher Columbus", *Sun*, October 11, 2024

²² Guardian, "Activists target removal of statues including Columbus and King Leopold II", *Guardian*, April 11, 2021

should remain.²³ Despite public criticism, the city government at the time refused to alter the statue, citing concerns over compromising the monument's historical integrity.²⁴

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 intensified actions against Columbus statues. At least 33 statues were removed or slated for removal across the United States during this period.²⁵ For instance, in Richmond,²⁶ Virginia,²⁷ protesters tore down a Columbus statue, set it on fire, and submerged it in a lake. Similarly, in Minnesota,²⁸ indigenous activists toppled a Columbus statue at the state capitol, highlighting the ongoing resistance against symbols of oppression.

The movement has also seen significant developments internationally. In August 2024, Trinidad and Tobago announced plans to redesign its coat of arms, removing references to Columbus's three ships, symbols of European colonisation, and replacing them with the steelpan, an instrument originating from the island. These changes reflect a broader effort to reclaim national identity and shed colonial legacies.²⁹

Ongoing Debates and Cultural Reassessment

The #ColumbusMustFall movement is part of a broader reckoning with colonial history and its enduring legacy. Across the world, statues and monuments commemorating controversial historical figures have become focal points of debate, sparking discussions about how societies should confront their past. Christopher Columbus, long celebrated in Western narratives as a pioneer of exploration, is increasingly viewed through a more critical lens as a figure who initiated the colonisation, enslavement, and genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas. The movement calls for a reassessment of public symbols that honour Columbus, arguing that these monuments represent a glorification of colonial violence rather than an objective historical remembrance.³⁰

These debates over Columbus monuments extend beyond simple removal; they touch on larger questions about how history is taught and remembered.³¹ Some advocate for the outright dismantling of such statues, arguing that they are symbols of oppression that should not occupy public spaces. Others propose alternatives, such as relocating them to museums where they can be displayed with historical context, allowing for critical engagement rather than passive

²³ Kristina Borrman, (2022) "Naming, Blaming, and Claiming: The Columbus Monument and the Struggle for Diversity Rights in Syracuse, New York," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Christopher Brito, "Dozens of Columbus Christopher Columbus statues have been removed since June", *CBS News*, September 25, 2020.

²⁶ Lateshia Beachum, Laura Vozzella and Derek Hawkins, "Christopher Columbus statues toppled in Minnesota, beheaded in Boston, attacked in Richmond", *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Al Jazeera, "Trinidad and Tobago redraws coat of arms to remove Columbus's three ships", *Al Jazeera*, August 21, 2024.

³⁰ Ivan Pereira, "Christopher Columbus statue debate rises as controversial statues fall across the country", *ABC*, June 10, 2020.

³¹ Kristina Borrman, "Naming, Blaming, and Claiming: The Columbus Monument and the Struggle for Diversity Rights in Syracuse, New York," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 2, 2022.

celebration.³² Still, others resist any changes, citing concerns about erasing history or diminishing the achievements associated with European exploration.

A key parallel to the removal of Columbus statues is the growing movement to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day.³³ Advocates argue that Columbus Day perpetuates a Eurocentric narrative that ignores the suffering of indigenous communities, presenting Columbus as a heroic figure while omitting the atrocities committed in his wake. The push to replace the holiday seeks to shift the focus toward recognising and honouring indigenous resilience, culture, and contributions, rather than celebrating a figure linked to their historical oppression.³⁴

To advance this goal, activists and educators have launched campaigns aimed at raising awareness and influencing policy changes. Schools, universities, and local governments have played a significant role in these efforts, incorporating indigenous perspectives into curricula and passing resolutions to formally recognise Indigenous Peoples' Day in place of Columbus Day.³⁵ These initiatives aim to challenge historical misconceptions and promote a more inclusive understanding of history, one that acknowledges the voices and experiences of marginalised communities.

Ultimately, the #ColumbusMustFall movement is not just about statues or holidays. It represents a broader push to confront historical injustices and ensure that public memory reflects a more truthful and inclusive narrative. By challenging the glorification of colonial figures, the movement underscores the need for societies to acknowledge past harms and work toward greater recognition, equity, and justice for indigenous and marginalised peoples.

Columbus in La Paz

In Bolivia, the legacy of colonisation remains a contentious issue, particularly regarding historical monuments. The vandalism of the Christopher Columbus statue in La Paz in 2021 reignited debates about how colonial-era figures should be represented in public spaces. While some argue that statues of Columbus honour historical exploration and European contributions, others view them as symbols of indigenous oppression.³⁶ The municipal government faced public pressure to determine whether the statue should be restored, relocated, or permanently removed.³⁷ The Ministry of Culture acknowledged the need for national discussions on historical representation and indicated that decisions should reflect Bolivia's multicultural identity 'These acts of vandalism that are taking place in La Paz are really reprehensible because all this public ornamentation belongs to all of us.'³⁸

³² Caio Ruvenal, "Camila Opazo, arqueóloga chilena: "Para las culturas no occidentales hay piezas que no deben exhibirse, porque tienen su propio simbolismo", *El País*, December 2, 2024.

³³ Emma Colton, "Harris doubles down with 'Indigenous Peoples' Day' post amid outrage over Columbus Day rhetoric", *Fox News*, October 14, 2024.

³⁴ David Alire García, "Columbus holiday in Latin America revives centuries-old historical debate", *Reuters*, October 13, 2024.

³⁵ Bill Bigelow (n.d.). "Abolish Columbus Day Campaign", *Zinn Education Project*.

³⁶ Sebastián Ochoa, "Desnarigado y pintarrajeado, Cristóbal Colón tiene un futuro incierto en La Paz", *Sputnik Mundo*, August 5, 2021.

³⁷ Swissinfo.ch. "Una protesta en Bolivia intenta tumbar un monumento de Cristóbal Colón". *Swissinfo.ch*, August 2, 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.

The individual responsible for damaging the statue rejected the national judicial system, requesting to be judged by his Aymara community.³⁹ This highlighted the tensions between indigenous legal traditions and Bolivia's formal justice system. The case sparked a national conversation on the coexistence of indigenous and state legal frameworks, an issue that has been increasingly debated since Bolivia adopted its plurinational constitution in 2009.⁴⁰ While some legal experts argued that indigenous justice should be upheld in such cases, others contended that acts of vandalism should fall under the state's jurisdiction.⁴¹

I am unjustly persecuted in this justice system that is not ours, I have to be judged by my community, as an Aymara I will never accept that they judge me with their justice system.⁴²

Decision-Making Processes

The fate of the Columbus statue remains uncertain. While some officials support its restoration as a cultural artefact, others argue for its removal, suggesting that museums or academic institutions would be more appropriate places for controversial historical monuments. This debate mirrors discussions taking place worldwide. In the United States, statues of Confederate generals and European colonisers have been taken down following public protests,⁴³ with some relocated to museums and others destroyed. In Spain,⁴⁴ government institutions have begun reviewing colonial-era collections in museums to address historical inaccuracies and promote decolonisation efforts.

Academics, such as Walter Mignolo, state that true decolonisation requires dismantling epistemic and symbolic forms of colonial control, including how history is memorialised.⁴⁵ For instance, a recent Ugandan court ruling mandated the removal of British colonial monuments and the renaming of streets in Kampala, reflecting a significant step in decolonial resistance and an assertion of Uganda's right to control its historical and cultural narrative.⁴⁶

Similarly, Camila Opazo, a Chilean archaeologist, advocates for the ethical treatment of historical artefacts, emphasising that many Indigenous communities consider certain objects sacred and inappropriate for public display. Opazo highlights the importance of cultural reconciliation and respect towards Chile's Indigenous peoples, noting that many culturally significant objects should not be exhibited in Western museums due to their inherent symbolism and meaning.⁴⁷

These perspectives underscore the need for public spaces and institutions to reflect contemporary values and promote a more inclusive historical narrative that respects Indigenous cultures and

³⁹ Noticias Fides, "Young man who broke the nose of the Columbus monument asks to be judged in his community", *Agencia de Noticias Fides*, March 10, 2022.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Swissinfo.ch, "Una protesta en Bolivia intenta tumbar un monumento de Cristóbal Colón," *Swissinfo.ch*, August 2, 2021

⁴² Noticias Fides, "Young man who broke the nose of the Columbus monument asks to be judged in his community," *Agencia de Noticias Fides*, March 10, 2022.

⁴³ BBC, "Confederate and Columbus statues toppled by US protesters", *BBC*, June 11, 2020.

⁴⁴ Marina Velasco, "Por qué Franco sí y Colón no", *HuffPost*, June 23, 2020

⁴⁵ Guardian, "Uganda is right to decolonise its historical and cultural landscape", *Guardian*, March 12, 2025.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Caio Ruvenal, "Camila Opazo, arqueóloga chilena: "Para las culturas no occidentales hay piezas que no deben exhibirse, porque tienen su propio simbolismo", *El País*, December 2, 2024.

histories. In Bolivia, discussions persist on balancing respect for indigenous heritage with the preservation of historical artefacts.⁴⁸ Other nations have taken more definitive actions; for example, Mexico has replaced Columbus statues with indigenous figures, and Colombia has initiated legal reforms to facilitate indigenous representation in national historical narratives.⁴⁹

These efforts reflect a growing recognition of the need to reframe history in a way that is inclusive of all perspectives, particularly those that have been historically marginalised. However, the Bolivian government is still struggling to decide what to do with the Columbus statue, as no definitive decisions have been made. For now, a fence has been erected beneath the statue.

Summary and Conclusions

The dispute over the Christopher Columbus statue in La Paz, Bolivia, is part of a broader global conversation about the relevance of colonial-era monuments in today's world. In August 2021, demonstrators tried to tear down the statue, denouncing Columbus's ties to oppression. This reignited discussions about how historical figures linked to colonialism should be commemorated. Supporters of the statue argue that it honours exploration and global connectivity, while critics condemn its celebration of a legacy marked by Indigenous exploitation and cultural erasure. Following the protest, local officials debated moving the monument, while the accused vandal demanded trial by his Aymara community, a stance underscoring tensions between state justice systems and Indigenous autonomy.

This incident in Bolivia appears to reflect a broader global reconsideration of the celebration of colonial-era figures. Across the United States, Colombia, Spain, and other countries, statues have been removed, damaged, or reinterpreted as societies seek to come to terms with their complex legacies. In response, some institutions have initiated processes to decolonise public spaces and museums, intending to amplify Indigenous voices and re-evaluate dominant historical narratives. However, opinions remain varied, with some supporting the removal or relocation of these monuments. In contrast, others perceive these actions as a form of historical censorship rather than a necessary reevaluation of the past.

The debate over Columbus and other colonial figures reflects a broader struggle to address the lasting impacts of European expansion and its consequences on Indigenous populations. Removing statues is not merely an act of destruction but part of an effort to reshape historical memory and public consciousness. While some governments argue for preserving these monuments as historical artefacts, others recognise their continued presence as a symbol of colonial trauma. The role of academia in these discussions is crucial, as scholars provide the necessary historical context to understand these shifts in perspective.

Ultimately, managing colonial heritage remains a complex and evolving issue, requiring a nuanced approach that neither glorifies historical figures without criticism nor erases history altogether. The case of Bolivia exemplifies how these discussions are deeply intertwined with broader issues of justice, national identity, and Indigenous rights. Moving forward, a more inclusive historical

⁴⁸ VOA, "¿Por qué la figura de Cristóbal Colón se volvió controversial en EE. UU. y Latinoamérica?", *Impacto Media*, October 14, 2024.

⁴⁹ Sebastián Ochoa, "Desnarigado y pintarrajeado, Cristóbal Colón tiene un futuro incierto en La Paz", *Sputnik Mundo*, August 5, 2021.

narrative that integrates Indigenous voices and acknowledges both the consequences of colonisation and the resilience of those who endured it may provide a more balanced and equitable representation of history.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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