



FERDINAND DE LESSEPS STATUE

Port Said, Egypt

31.2559556, 32.2873815

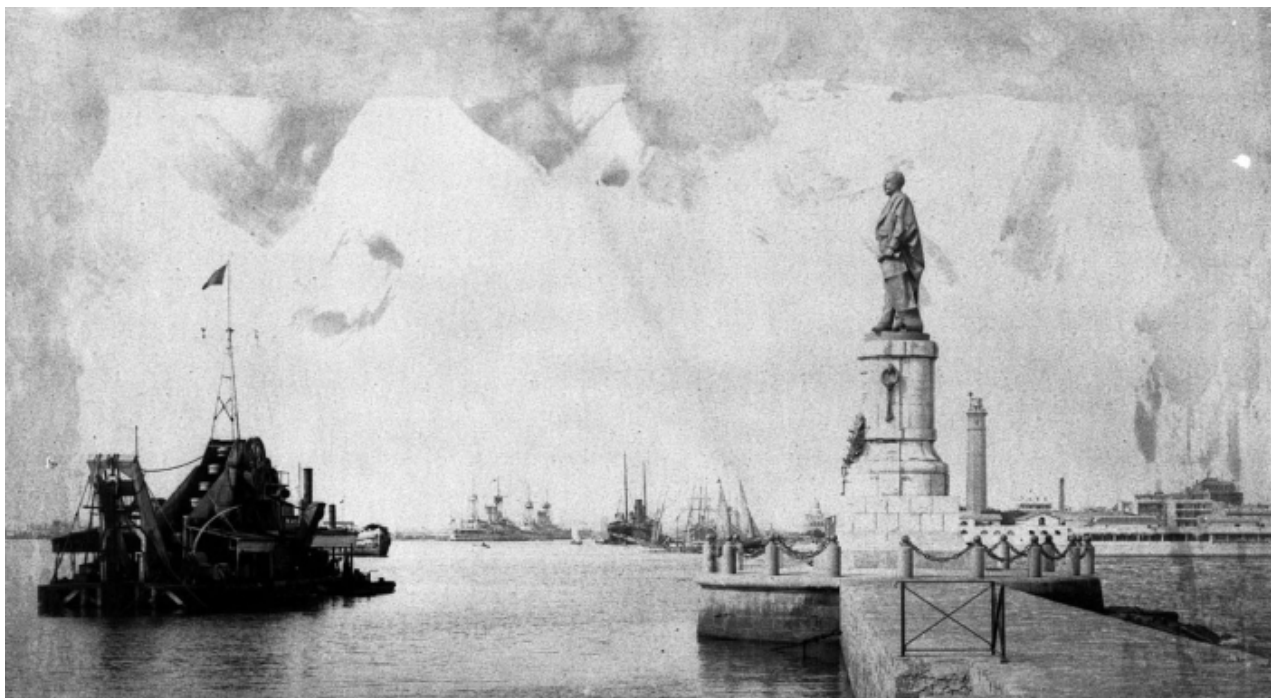


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Executive Summary

In 1899, a statue of the engineer of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand De Lesseps was erected at its northern entrance, where it stood until 1956 when it was moved into a warehouse. In 2014 an announcement that the statue would be reinstalled sparked controversy due to De Lesseps's colonial legacy and the harsh conditions that workers were subjected to under his supervision during the construction of the canal. This case study explores the controversies surrounding the statue's return and how it ultimately ended up being transferred to a museum after years in storage.

Introduction

Plans to install a statue commemorating the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps in the Suez Canal International Museum in Ismailia, Egypt, faced backlash from many Egyptians due to its representation of the legacy of French colonialism in Egypt.¹ Concerns over lawsuits filed by human rights activists, placement of the statue, and decline in tourism have been raised as potential issues.² The core of the problem lies with the legacy of Ferdinand De Lesseps and his association with the oppression and abuse of the workers who helped to build the canal, including what is seen as his direct responsibility for the deaths of thousands of Egyptian workers who were drafted in to build the Canal. There is considered to be a close link between De Lesseps, the deaths, and a general prevalence of racism and racialised thinking during his time in power.

Recently, there has been increased clamour around the statue and De Lesseps' legacy. Egyptian officials' indication that the statue would be moved out of storage and into a museum has led to several objections and consternations around its place within Egypt and Egyptian history. The conflicts have created a relentless conflict between those who believe in the importance of De Lesseps' legacy to Egyptian history and the Suez Canal and those who believe that his legacy was ruined and tarnished by the presence of racialised ideas and attitudes towards Egyptian workers.

However, in spite of these contestations, as of December 2020, the statue is outside the Suez Canal International Museum in Ismailia.

Background

The French in Egypt

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte, then a general in the French army, led an expedition to invade and occupy Egypt which, although it ended in defeat, established a particular connection between the two countries and paved the way for French involvement in the Middle East for the 19th and much of the 20th centuries.

Napoleon's motivation for occupying Egypt was a geostrategic one. He hoped that by capturing Egypt, he would dominate the Eastern Mediterranean and close off the land-sea route to India, the 'jewel' in the British crown that had been won after a bitter rivalry between British and French

¹ Khalid Hassan, "Egypt caves to popular pressure, displays controversial French statue," *Al-Monitor*, October 21, 2020.

² *Ibid.*

commercial companies in the Seven Years' War over 30 years earlier. The French invasion forces were vast and far superior in technology and strategy to the Egyptian Mamluk cavalry. It is said that Egyptian forces were defeated at Alexandria and Cairo within hours. The biggest threat to the French army was posed by the British. Alert to French ambitions in the region, a powerful British naval squadron headed by Nelson had been sent to intercept the French forces, and although they didn't succeed in preventing the invasion, they defeated the French fleet decisively only a month later, leaving the 20,000 strong French armies stranded in Egypt. Napoleon himself abandoned his army a few months later, returning to France, where he seized power in a coup that made him First Consul of France.³

The French army remained in Egypt until its surrender to British and Ottoman forces three years later when it was transported back to France in Ottoman and British ships. The three years of French occupation saw both a clash and exchange of cultures, although both considered the other inferior. The Egyptian intellectual elite was reluctantly impressed by the demonstrations of the French scientists, whose interest in the region gave rise to the study of Egyptology and the discovery of important artefacts such as the Rosetta Stone. Meanwhile, many French soldiers gradually assimilated into Egyptian society, converting to Islam and marrying Egyptian women.⁴

Although France never again occupied Egypt, the latter remained heavily dependent on its former occupier financially, particularly after the reckless and excessive spending of Ismail Pasha (r.1863-1879) in his efforts to modernise the country. Alongside Britain, Italy, Austria, and Russia, France's influence over Egyptian finances focused primarily on the interest of foreign bondholders. This relationship continued well into the 20th century.⁵

Ferdinand De Lesseps

The legacy of Ferdinand De Lesseps in Egypt is defined by his significant involvement in colonial and industrial ventures. Born in Versailles, France, in 1805, De Lesseps left his home soon after he graduated from school.⁶ His father was the consul-general for France in Tunisia at the time, and in 1828, De Lesseps found himself in the position of assistant vice-consul general, also in Tunisia.⁷ This was the beginning of De Lesseps' involvement in French overseas affairs. By 1833 De Lesseps became the French consul to Cairo, cementing his name in Egyptian politics and Franco-Middle Eastern affairs.⁸ After retiring from a career in diplomacy, De Lesseps was still

³ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (London: Penguin, 2012), 61-5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ George Edgar Bonnet, *Ferdinand De Lesseps* (Paris: Plon, 1951), 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

fascinated with the history and culture of North Africa.⁹ Upon hearing that his good friend and former pupil Said Pasha was the new Viceroy of Egypt (1854-1863), De Lesseps hastened to propose his canal idea.¹⁰ After being granted a concession in 1856, De Lesseps began to lay the groundwork for a project that would ensure French and British political and economic involvement in Egypt - the Suez Canal. Later in his life, De Lesseps proposed and worked on the Panama Canal project.¹¹ He also played multiple important diplomatic roles for France, such as presenting the United States with the Statue of Liberty.¹² Attempting to assert French dominance and involvement abroad was a clear theme of De Lesseps' historical legacy.

The Suez Canal: Planning and Construction

Running 200 miles from Suez in the South to Port Said in the North, the Suez Canal connects the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, effectively creating a direct route from Europe to Asia without having to circumvent Africa. Such a creation's potential to transform trade and military movement cannot be overstated, especially at a time predating air travel. Whoever governed the canal would not only benefit from an endlessly lucrative resource but could effectively control world trade.

Although the proposed canal would halve the distance between London and Bombay, the British disliked the idea as it would give France too much influence in the region and make British merchants heavily reliant on a waterway that was effectively under French control. Thus, Britain made efforts to block the agreement and prevent the construction of the canal altogether.

The agreement was in the form of a 'concession,' a standard contract by which a government encouraged private companies to invest within its borders; the more generous the terms, the more entrepreneurs would invest. If a venture failed or any terms of the concession were not fulfilled, foreign consuls would claim indemnities to compensate their shareholder citizens. This often meant that developing states that had sold concessions to build the infrastructure they could not afford ended up in debt to foreign powers for the very projects they had wished to avoid investing in.

England attempted to block the Suez Canal concession by making objections to various terms, such as the provision of free labour and French ownership of the canal banks, which Egypt was in no position to ignore. England hoped that the indemnities resulting from these forced legal changes would reach such an amount that the project would become financially unviable for the Egyptians. This turned out to be a misjudgment. Although the French bill negotiated by Napoleon

⁹ BBC, "Ferdinand De Lesseps," *BBC History*, 2014.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

III for the alterations was indeed unprecedentedly vast (totalling nearly 3.9 million Euros), thanks to a stratospheric rise in the price of cotton due to the American Civil War, Ismail Pasha could honour his commitments to the Suez Canal Company and still undertake the project alongside his other considerable ambitions – and so the project went ahead. Although the reign of Ismail Pasha was one characterised by exorbitant spending, the Suez canal was by far the ‘biggest drain on Egypt’s treasury [in] the 19th century,’¹³ and undoubtedly contributed to Egypt’s bankruptcy in 1876.

The city of Port Said, where the statue is located, was notably established at the same time as the construction of the Suez Canal, with a colonial, hierarchical and segregated nature eminent from the outset: main streets were named after European figures; Europeans lived in larger mansions in the eastern part of the city overlooking the canal, whilst Egyptians lived in cramped conditions on the other side.¹⁴

Although the project's main investors were French, British, and American, the labour used to build the canal was mostly forced labour of local Egyptians, resulting in tens of thousands of injuries and deaths.¹⁵ Gamal Abdel Nasser famously cited 120,000 deaths in his speech announcing the nationalisation of the canal in 1956. However, these figures are disputed, with other sources claiming as few as 1,000 deaths by ‘official’ estimates.¹⁶

Timeline of the statue

The Suez Canal was completed in 1869 and opened in a lavish ceremony that was attended by prominent heads of state, including the Empress of France. However, it wasn’t until 1899 that the 33-foot bronze statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps was erected on a concrete base at the entrance of the Suez Canal, in Port Said, in honour of the French diplomat and developer of the canal. Sculpted by Emmanuel Frémiet, the statue’s right-hand welcomes visitors entering the Suez Canal at Port Said, and his left-hand holds the map of the canal. The statue was later removed after the nationalisation of the canal, and its wreckage was found in 1981.¹⁷

Suez Canal: Struggle for Control

Due to its strategic importance, protection of the canal became a cornerstone of British foreign

¹³ Ibid, 100.

¹⁴ Ahmed Elgezy. "A Memory Debate: The Controversial Case of the Lesseps Statue in Port Said", *Égypte/Monde arabe* 23, no. 1, 2021, 145.

¹⁵ Radwa Hashem, "De Lesseps leaves Port Said without returning, and the Egyptian farmer will replace him within months," *Al Watan*, October 10, 2020.

¹⁶ Wilson, *The Suez Canal*, 13.

¹⁷ Elgezy, "A Memory debate".

policy and the reason behind many significant moves in the century that followed its completion. In 1876, with Egypt on the brink of bankruptcy after the 1873 depression, the British bought Egypt's majority shares in the canal to preserve their interests in India and so became the canal's principal 'guardian,' exerting considerable soft power in Egypt. However, after simmering discontent at economic hardship and imperial corruption broke out in the anti-imperialist Urabi revolt in 1881, the British took more concrete steps to exert power over Egypt and protect their interests, which, apart from the canal, included by this time a quarter of Egypt's national debt which amounted to over 90 million GBP. British forces invaded Egypt in 1882, establishing an all-encompassing occupation that would effectively last until 1953.¹⁸

Egyptian Independence

The Egyptian fight for independence was a protracted one, lasting over 30 years. Just as the Suez Canal had contributed to Egypt's occupation by the British, it was tied to Egypt's path to independence.

After the end of the First World War, American President Woodrow Wilson put forward his 14 points, laying out America's post-war foreign policy, among which he promised Arab states an overly aspirational promise of 'self-determination of peoples' and an end to 'conquest and aggrandisement' with the opportunity of presenting their aspirations at the Paris Peace Conference. In 1918, a delegation of nationalist Egyptian politicians petitioned the British high commissioner in Cairo for permission to represent Egypt's nationalist aspirations at the conference. In response, the British arrested and deported the group and those associated with them, sparking the 1919 Egyptian revolution, which spread among all levels of society, with students protesting, workers striking in urban areas, and farmers revolting and attacking the British infrastructure in rural areas. The revolt lasted two months before it was finally put down with force by the British.¹⁹⁻²⁰

The British appointed the Milner Commission to assess the aftermath of the revolution, which concluded that, without some concessions, Britain would not be able to maintain its hold of Egypt. Therefore, in 1922, the British granted Egypt conditional independence, which succeeded in placating its population. Among the many conditions placed upon this independence was the right to control Egyptian defence and foreign policy and to protect the Suez canal.²¹

This far-from-perfect conditional independence took the wind out of the sails of the nationalist

¹⁸ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 188.

²⁰ Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, 163-4.

²¹ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 187.

movement, which became mired in disunity and challenges from other groups, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, communists and royalists for much of the following 30 years. The experience of ignominious defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 eventually created the impetus for a new nationalist effort in Egypt. The nationalist party Wafd won a 1950 election and began taking diplomatic and otherwise steps against British occupation. In 1951 armed conflict broke out in the Suez Canal Zone between British forces, informally government-backed Egyptian guerilla groups, and eventually Egyptian policemen. British violence sparked public unrest and arson in January 1952, creating an opportunity of sufficient chaos for a group of anti-imperialist generals called the Free Officers to carry out a coup against the British-backed King Farouq and declare Egypt an independent republic, to be ruled by Egyptians for the first time since Ancient Egyptian times.²²

The Suez War of 1956

Three years later, the President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalised the Suez Canal, knowing that this would likely result in foreign military interference. Trapped between East and West in the burgeoning Cold War, Nasser had been hard pushed to attain loans for his nascent army's social and industrial development projects and arms without sacrificing Egypt's sovereignty to Western ex-colonial powers. Instead, he declared he would nationalise the Suez Canal and use its revenues to fund his modernising projects, including the Aswan Dam, for which the US had withdrawn a loan due to Nasser's arms deal with communist Czechoslovakia, along with what President Eisenhower saw as other inclinations to the Soviet bloc.²³

Nationalising the canal was completely legal, so long as Egypt paid shareholders in the Company fair compensation. However, financial loss was the least of British and French concerns; for the two failing empires, keeping hold of this key piece of their former influence was perhaps as much a matter of pride as of strategic importance. So, in collaboration with Israel, the British and French invaded Egypt in October 1956 to reassert control over the Suez Canal Zone. Egyptian forces were overwhelmed, so much so that Nasser called on citizens to join their ranks - of whom 1,100 were killed in the fighting in the Canal Zone. However, the US opposed the move as a distraction from its more pressing interests in Eastern Europe and threatened Britain and France with dire political and economic measures (including expulsion from NATO and devaluation of the British currency) were they not to withdraw their troops, which they eventually did.²⁴

Although Egypt's forces were crushed, the very act of survival in the face of three far superior

²² Ibid, 238.

²³ Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, 288.

²⁴ Ibid, 301.

imperial military powers was deemed a major political victory. Nasser had challenged the West and come away unscathed, and as such, became a hero, a champion of Arab nationalism, and the new 'undisputed leader of the Arab world.' His nationalisation of the Suez Canal was unchallenged from that point, and Egypt had finally secured full sovereignty of all of its territory and resources. The Suez Crisis marked a turning point in post-colonial history; the symbolic last bastion of Anglo-French colonial influence in the Middle East had fallen. France gave up on the Arab world and threw its weight behind Israel, while Britain's involvement sparked huge popular opposition and ended in the resignation of then-prime minister Anthony Eden. Mohammed Heikal, a leading Egyptian journalist at the time, famously concluded that the 'Suez cost Britain Arabia.'²⁵

History of the Contestation

Announcing the Move of the Statue

The announcement of the move of the statue from Port Said to the Suez Canal International Museum has become controversial among members of the public. The statue was initially taken down in 1956 after the nationalisation of the Suez Canal but was later restored by a Paris-based historical association and moved to a storage warehouse in the Port Said Maritime Shipyard.²⁶ This association, amongst other French lobbies, called for its restoration based on the argument that Franco-Egyptian relations have moved past old disputes and that the Canal (and thereby its architect) are tangible links between the two nations. This points to nostalgia for a lost era, a point of "meeting" between East and West, as exemplified by various social media accounts.²⁷

The statue's positioning can be interpreted as a metaphor: De Lesseps, in the original location, was both symbolically and directly above the canal and watching all that was using it. Placing the statue on a pedestal could be taken to symbolise the imperialist belief that the French engineers were above the Egyptians who physically built the canal.

In 2020, the Egyptian government took steps to move the statue from its place in storage to the Suez Canal International Museum.²⁸ The announcement of the move came after the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt declared the monument registered under a list of protected antiquities in early October of 2020.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid, 302.

²⁶ Arab Weekly, "Plan to bring back De Lesseps statue in Suez Canal sparks controversy," *Arab Weekly*, July 7, 2020.

²⁷ Elgezy, "A Memory debate"

²⁸ Samy Magdy, "Plan to bring back Suez Canal statue stirs debate in Egypt," *Egypt Independent*, July 7, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.

There are several factors underlying the decision to move the statue from its private home in Port Said Maritime Shipyard to be re-displayed at the Suez Canal International Museum in Ismailia. Firstly, Egypt has seen a decrease in tourism since the 2011 Revolution.³⁰ Moving a controversial and historically notable statue to the front of the Suez Canal International Museum allows for attention to be drawn to the museum, potentially attracting visitors. Secondly, as a protected artefact, some may argue that the statue deserves to be preserved in a museum to be observed in a historical context.

Many saw the move of the statue to the museum as a victory. Members of the public praised this decision as a restoration of a historical artefact in a public setting and no longer in a private warehouse.³¹ After its removal from the original place of standing, the statue was simply hidden from the public. Now at its new location, the de Lesseps statue is available for all to view and learn about. Another reason the move was praised was the decision not to return it to its pedestal at the entrance of the Canal in Port Said.³² Although the pedestal with the inscription remains in the original location, the statue itself will not, in the foreseeable future, be returned there.

Some people saw this as striking a happy medium – while the statue is no longer hidden from the public, it is also no longer glorifying de Lesseps at the entrance of the Suez Canal. Egyptian Human Rights activist Mustafa Bakri filed a lawsuit against the Governor of Port Said to have the statue moved to a museum instead of its original position on the Canal.

Criticism of the Plans

In addition to praise, there was also significant backlash and criticism of the plans to move the statue. This criticism has been present since its restitution: those *fiḍa'iyeen* (fighters) who fought in the 1956 war mobilised in Port Said and threatened to destroy the statue in 1989.³³ Since the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt, social media has been a powerful medium for social change and organisation - although those who voice their opinion are often subject to repression from the state, forced disappearances, and imprisonment.³⁴ Nevertheless, a growing Facebook group titled 'Against the Return of the Statue of De Lesseps' (in Arabic) has upwards of 5,000 members as of December 2020.³⁵ Although the group was started in 2009, it has become recently active again with ignited spirits against the public display of the statue.³⁶ Also using Facebook, the Egyptian

³⁰ Khalid Hassan, "Egypt caves to popular pressure, displays controversial French statue," *Al-Monitor*, October 21, 2020.

³¹ Samy Magdy, "Plan to bring back Suez Canal statue stirs debate in Egypt," *Egypt Independent*, July 7, 2020.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Elgezy, "A Memory debate".

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: No End to Systematic Repression", *Human Rights Watch*, January 13, 2022.

³⁵ Michael Barak, *A National Hero or a Symbol of Oppression? Protesting the Statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps in Port Said* (The Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle East Studies, 2020)

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Writers Union has called upon the current Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi to intervene and stop the statue from being displayed so as not to offend nationalist feelings in Egypt.³⁷ One Egyptian man, Fahmy El Shishtway, wrote on Facebook, in Arabic, of how the statue is a parallel to other controversial statues with recent media attention, such as those of Christopher Columbus and Edward Colston taken down in 2020. He echoes the popular opinion that the statue of de Lesseps, like many others, is a glorification of slavery and colonialism.

Author Michael Barak took the time to interview citizens of Port Said about the new movement plans for the statue. In an interview, one local trader said he intends to file a lawsuit against the Egyptian Ministry of Education for spreading a false narrative in elementary school textbooks, describing De Lesseps' character positively. The trader then called upon parents to teach their children that de Lesseps was a 'traitor.'³⁸ This reflects the opinion of many other Egyptians strongly opposed to the statue's restoration and new placement on display due to the legacy of de Lesseps' presence in Egypt and his role in French colonialism.

Independent Arabia, a prominent Arabic-language newspaper, reached out to Mahmoud Hussein, an Egyptian MP for Port Said, to ask for a statement on the statue's movement. He replied by stating that he and his political party, the Future Nation Party, expressed their solidarity with the people of the governorate, and the party confirmed the inevitability of the return of the de Lesseps statue to Port Said, as it is part of the governorate's antiquities, and that it was not permissible to move it to another place.

With prominent members of Egyptian society both agreeing with the move of the statue and criticising the plan, it is clear that the topic is controversial and highly contested. For some, the statue's protection means preserving history and economic opportunity, but for others, it is a hurtful reminder of colonial influence. However, there has also been a third view which challenges this dichotomy. This is exemplified by the anger, including by those who opposed its restitution, at its secret transportation in October 2020 from Port Said to Ismailia by the Suez Canal authorities. This anger lay in the concept of the statue's belonging to the city and its heritage, which shifts the focus of the debate from its public display to its location, and is an arguably broader perspective shared by many.³⁹

Decision-Making Processes

This controversy was re-ignited on March 3, 2019, when the current Prime Minister of Egypt,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Elgezy, "A Memory debate"

Mustafa Madbouly, applied for the statue to be registered as protected under the official Islamic, Coptic, and Jewish antiquities list.⁴⁰ This application was approved by the Permanent Committee of Islamic, Coptic, and Jewish Antiquities and the Board of Directors of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.⁴¹ These governing bodies in Egypt make the ultimate decision as to what is considered protected as antiquity.

Summary and Conclusions

De Lesseps himself understood the power a statue can hold, given that during his time as a diplomat, he gifted the Statue of Liberty from France to the United States of America. Plans to move a statue of French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps were disputed from the onset. Not only was the new location disputed, but concerns were raised over the presence of a statue representing an engineer who was instrumental in the French extension of the Suez Canal during French colonial presence in Egypt. This case raises questions about how responses to disputes over monuments can effectively address deeper structural topics, such as colonial legacies, historic preservation, and visibility of controversy.

Research contributed by Taibah Al-Fagih, Emily Rosindell, Ursula Aitchison and Ishan Raj

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. 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.

The Contested Histories project 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, and, 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 EuroClio - European Association for History Educators 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.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen

Program Director

+33 66828327

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139

2585HP The Hague The Netherlands

secretariat@euroclio.eu www.euroclio.

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