



## ISTED LION

Flensburg, Germany

54.78546, 9.42983



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### Executive Summary

The Isted Lion, created to commemorate Danish victory in the 1850 Battle of Isted, has been the subject of German-Danish debates about national and cultural identity in the historically contested Schleswig border region since it was first erected in 1862. This case study examines the journey of the statue across multiple cities in Denmark and Germany, which culminated in its return to its original location in the town of Flensburg in 2011. In addition, it analyses the decision-making processes and variety of actors involved in the debates, as well as continued controversies about the contemporary symbolism of the monument.

## Introduction

The Isted Lion (Danish: *Istedløven*; German: *Idstedt-Löwe*) was created in Flensburg (Danish: Flensborg) in 1862, commemorating the Danish military victory over the German Confederation in the 1850 Battle of Isted during the First Schleswig War. The meaning and physical location of the Isted Lion have changed repeatedly over time, with each relocation not only closely tied to a politically motivated reinterpretation of the war itself, but also to various conceptions of the Danish and the German nations in the historically contested border region of Schleswig.

This case study traces the journey of the monument to Berlin in 1866, to Copenhagen in 1945, and finally back to its original site in Flensburg - by then a German rather than Danish town - in 2011. Particular attention is paid to German-Danish discussions in the postwar period about bringing the sculpture back to its original location. Debates about the re-framing of the Isted Lion as a symbol of bilateral friendship also highlight the tensions associated with conferring new interpretations on sites of memory, especially in regions that have historically been subject to territorial contestations between countries.

## Background

The Isted Lion was created by Schleswig sculptor Hans Wilhelm Bissen as a memorial to Danish soldiers who had fallen in the First Schleswig War (1848-1851), in the context of long-standing German-Danish tensions in the regions of Schleswig and Holstein. The military conflict had revolved around control of the largely German-speaking duchies of Schleswig, a territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, and Holstein, a member of the German Confederation but under Danish rule via personal union. German nationalists demanded the incorporation of Schleswig into the Confederation; however, with Denmark winning the war and retaining its control over these regions, the status quo was maintained.<sup>1</sup>

The Battle of Isted took place on July 25 1850 near the village of Isted, with both sides suffering heavy losses. Initially intended to commemorate the Danish victory, the Isted Lion project was set in motion by national liberals, notably the Danish statesman Orla Lehmann, in the context of attempts to rouse the population's national consciousness via works of art.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, however, the aim of celebrating Danish military strength sparked criticism, leading Lehman, during the process of securing donations to fund the project, to recast the planned statue as a memorial to soldiers who had fallen during the Battle of Isted and were buried in the cemetery of the nearby Schleswig town of Flensburg.<sup>3</sup> The reconfiguration of the cemetery as a memorial site involved the construction of a burial mound over a grave for fallen Danes, the addition of a flag mast and memorial stones for

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Jebesen and Martin Klatt, "The Negotiation of National and Regional Identity During the Schleswig Plebiscite Following the First World War," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 183-184.

<sup>2</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31.

Danish generals, and the removal of a mass grave for fallen Schleswig and Holstein soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

During the inauguration ceremony on July 25 1862 (the anniversary of the Battle of Isted), speeches and songs - including the melody of the hymn 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' by Martin Luther - celebrated the Danish victory over Germany and the awakening of the Danish national consciousness; this was perceived as an affront by many in the region, which had continued strong cultural ties to Germany.<sup>5</sup> The monument was seen as a provocation across the German Confederation: for example, the magazine *Über Land und Meer*, published in Stuttgart in the Kingdom of Württemberg, called the memorial a 'mean-spirited symbol of victory, a symbol of mockery, [and] a symbol of derision against the deeply wounded people of Schleswig-Holstein'.<sup>6</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *Relocation to Berlin, Germany (1866)*

The Second Schleswig War in 1864 was the second military conflict over control of Schleswig and Holstein. With the Kingdom of Prussia and the Austrian Empire emerging the victors of the war, Denmark was forced to surrender control of the duchies.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the Isted Lion was pulled down by German nationalists on February 22 1864; as Florian Greßhake notes, its removal was driven by local actors rather than official representatives of the Prussian state.<sup>8</sup> Minister-President of Prussia Otto von Bismarck expressed his disapproval over attempts to demolish the memorial; however, the damage done to the monument led commander Friedrich Graf von Wrangel to order its complete removal.<sup>9</sup>

Following the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Schleswig-Holstein became a province of the Kingdom of Prussia.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the Isted Lion was brought to Berlin and placed in the courtyard of the *Zeughaus* on the central boulevard Unter den Linden. Being too large for this location, it was subsequently moved to a cadet school in the Berlin locality of Lichterfelde in 1878, and was thus re-contextualised as a symbol of Prussian-German military strength.<sup>11</sup> As Marie

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32-34; Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Inge Adriansen, "The Isted Lion: From Memorial of War to Monument of Friendship," in *Memorials in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict: From History to Heritage*, eds. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose and Paola Filippucci (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 282.

<sup>5</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Kühl, "Die dänische Minderheit in Preußen und im Deutschen Reich 1864-1914," in *Nationale Minderheiten und staatliche Minderheitenpolitik in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert*, eds. Hans Henning Hahn and Peter Kunze (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 121.

<sup>8</sup> Florian Greßhake, *Deutschland als Problem Dänemarks: das materielle Kulturerbe der Grenzregion Sønderjylland-Schleswig seit 1864* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 105-106.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Kühl, "Die dänische Minderheit in Preußen und im Deutschen Reich 1864-1914," in *Nationale Minderheiten und staatliche Minderheitenpolitik in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert*, eds. Hans Henning Hahn and Peter Kunze (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 121.

<sup>11</sup> Florian Greßhake, *Deutschland als Problem Dänemarks: das materielle Kulturerbe der Grenzregion Sønderjylland-Schleswig seit 1864* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 107; Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Inge Adriansen, "The Isted Lion: From

Louise Stig Sørensen and Inge Adriansen note, moving the statue back to Flensburg was out of the question since it continued to be viewed as a symbol of Danish authority and was therefore unpopular among the local community there.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, German banker Wilhelm Conrad had the statue replicated in zinc and installed by the Wannsee lake in Berlin in 1874, where it still stands (Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The original monument had been separated into three parts for storage before being moved to Berlin; these marks are still visible today and were also reproduced in the Wannsee copy.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 1: "Flensburg lion monument at Heckeshorn, Berlin-Wannsee"**  
Image by Orderinchaos via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

After World War One, the Schleswig plebiscites were held in 1920 to determine the future German-Danish boundary. Flensburg, the original location of the Isted Lion, was in the zone that voted to stay German; however, as the zone directly north of it voted to join Denmark, Flensburg now became a town at the border between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> The Isted Lion remained in Berlin

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Memorial of War to Monument of Friendship," in *Memorials in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict: From History to Heritage*, eds. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose and Paola Filippucci (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 284-285.

<sup>12</sup> Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Inge Adriansen, "The Isted Lion: From Memorial of War to Monument of Friendship," in *Memorials in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict: From History to Heritage*, eds. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose and Paola Filippucci (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 284.

<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Karwelat, "Lange Irrfahrt eines heimatlosen Löwen," *Die Tageszeitung*, November 20, 1992; Henrik Zipsane, "National Museums in Denmark," in *Building National Museums in Europe 1750-2010. Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011*, eds. Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2011), 226.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Karwelat, "Lange Irrfahrt eines heimatlosen Löwen," *Die Tageszeitung*, November 20, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Nina Jebesen and Martin Klatt, "The Negotiation of National and Regional Identity During the Schleswig Plebiscite Following the First World War," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 183-186.

while these territorial changes took place.

### *Relocation to Copenhagen, Denmark (1945)*

At the end of World War Two in 1945, American soldiers took control of Lichterfelde. Danish journalist Henrik Ringsted contacted an acquaintance in the American military, Barney Oldfield, to unofficially bring about the return of the 'abducted' lion to Copenhagen; General Dwight D. Eisenhower subsequently asked for a formal written request from the Danish government, which was provided by foreign minister Christmas Møller.<sup>16</sup> The statue was officially presented to King Christian X in Copenhagen by American Major General Ray Barker on October 20 1945, and placed outside the *Tøjhus* building of the Danish War Museum (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> Heritage and culture specialist Henrik Zipsane notes that this location was symbolic given its connection to documenting Danish military history.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, because the Danish authorities anticipated acts of sabotage when the statue was erected, it was initially placed under armed guard until December 1947.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2:** "Tøjhusmuseet" Image by Ib Rasmussen via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 1.0

### *Relocation to Flensburg, Germany (2011)*

<sup>16</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 112.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Henrik Zipsane, "National Museums in Denmark," in *Building National Museums in Europe 1750-2010. Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011*, eds. Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2011), 227.

<sup>19</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 114.

In February 2010, the Flensburg town council, following German-Danish discussions spearheaded by mayor Klaus Tscheuschner, approved the return of the Isted Lion to Germany.<sup>20</sup> The costs of the restoration and transport of the statue were covered almost entirely by the Danish government and private Danish foundations, as stipulated in the German decision. Sørensen and Adriansen posit that the lack of protest in Denmark about this expenditure might have been a possible result of a desire to promote the history of the Danish nation.<sup>21</sup>

The statue was officially unveiled at its original site in the Flensburg Cemetery (see Figure 3) on September 10 2011 during a ceremony attended not only by officials from the city of Flensburg, but also by Prince Joachim of Denmark, the Danish Minister of Culture Stig Møller, and the German ambassador to Denmark Michael Zenner.<sup>22</sup> Cultural events were organised across Flensburg to coincide with the return of the statue, including informational tours in German and Danish, as well as an exhibition at the *Museumsberg* about the lion as a cultural symbol.<sup>23</sup>

A new plaque on the pedestal indicates that the statue was first erected in 1862 and brought back to Flensburg in 2011 as a symbol of friendship and trust between Danes and Germans (Figure 4); another traces the journey of the memorial between 1862 and 2011 in Denmark and Germany (Figure 5). Both Danish and German are used as languages on the plaques. The Isted Lion has thus been recast as a site of memory for both nations, taking on a new significance as a symbol of reconciliation.



Figure 3: "Isted Lion" Image by Soenke Rahn via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

<sup>20</sup> Holger Ohlsen, "Rat einig: Der Löwe kommt zurück," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, February 19, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Inge Adriansen, "The Isted Lion: From Memorial of War to Monument of Friendship," in *Memorials in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict: From History to Heritage*, eds. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose and Paola Filippucci (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 294.

<sup>22</sup> See photograph in Christian Dewanger, "'Teil der gemeinsamen Geschichte': Grußwort zur Rückkehr des Istedt-Löwen nach Flensburg," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 58, no. 4 (2011): 286.

<sup>23</sup> Joachim Pohl, "Der Löwe ist los - und bekommt Besuch," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, September 9, 2011; Joachim Pohl, "Große Löwenschau zu Ehren des Istedt-Löwen," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, September 9, 2011.



Figure 4: "Original Flensburg lion, new plaque front side" Image by Soenke Rahn via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0



Figure 5: "Original Flensburg lion, new plaque back side" Image by Soenke Rahn via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

## Decision-Making Processes

### *Postwar German-Danish discussions*

In the postwar period, the Bonn-Copenhagen declarations of 1955 recognised the Danish minority in Germany and the German minority in Denmark, paving the way for a normalisation of relations in the Schleswig border region.<sup>24</sup> Debates about the location of the Isted Lion, however, had begun already with its removal from Berlin to Copenhagen in 1945. When King Christian X was presented with the statue on October 20, he remarked, 'I believe that when the circumstances allow for it, the Lion should be brought back to Flensburg in line with tradition...to commemorate all those who sacrificed their lives during the Three Years' War.'<sup>25</sup> The decades that followed saw continuous Danish discussions about moving the Isted Lion to its original location in Flensburg. In 1956, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish-language Flensburg newspaper *Flensborg Avis*, along with prominent Danes in South Schleswig, expressed their view that the statue belonged in Flensburg.<sup>26</sup> Over the years, other locations within and outside of Copenhagen were proposed as possible alternative sites for the monument.<sup>27</sup> For example, around 2000, a citizens' group in Fredericia attempted to argue for the relocation of the statue to their town, the site of an 1849 battle during the First Schleswig War.<sup>28</sup> Against the backdrop of these differing proposals, however, the Danish government continued to stress that it would only relocate the Lion to its original site in Flensburg, which required a unanimous vote from the Flensburg town council.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Jørgen Kühl, "Sustainable Peace and Cooperation in Borderlands: The Danish-German Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations 1955-2005," *European Yearbook of Minority Issues* 5, no. 6 (2005): 119-125.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 113. Three Years' War is a Danish name for the First Schleswig War.

<sup>26</sup> Lars N. Henningsen, "Der Ildstedt-Løve – Geschichte und Politik. Vom Misstrauen zur Freundschaft," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 57, no. 2 (2010): 120.

<sup>27</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 119.

<sup>28</sup> Henrik Zipsane, "National Museums in Denmark," in *Building National Museums in Europe 1750-2010. Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011*, eds. Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2011), 227.

<sup>29</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 119-120.

However, reservations about moving the statue to Flensburg remained on the German side: for example, an attempt was made to return the memorial in 1962 - 100 years after its creation - and was advocated by Flensburg mayor Hanno Schmidt. However, the bid was ultimately unsuccessful due to perceptions of its original symbolism and association with Danish military victory.<sup>30</sup> Simultaneously, regional citizens' groups became increasingly vocal on the other side of the issue. 1985 saw the formation of a Flensburg citizens' association called 'Holt den Löwen zurück' (bring back the lion), which advocated for the statue to be relocated to Flensburg as a symbol of Danish-German reconciliation, even proposing to cover the costs of transport itself.<sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, the return of the memorial to Flensburg continued to be supported by representatives of the German minority in Denmark and Artur Thomsen, the chairperson of the Schleswig *Grenzfriedensbund* (border peace association).<sup>32</sup> The latter stated in an article:

We should invest all our energy in this process of conciliation and simultaneously show other nations that a new Germany has emerged, namely a country that nobody in the world needs to fear. However, this involves generosity, tolerance, and the willingness to reach an agreement, including in relation to the interests of our neighbours. And what would be lost from the German element of Flensburg through taking back a memorial, which, though once erected by Danish nationalists, was also damaged and removed by German nationalists shortly thereafter?<sup>33</sup>

During a notable podium discussion on the subject of the Isted Lion in Flensburg on September 15 1992, the chief editor of the major regional newspaper *Der Nordschleswiger*, Siegfried Matlok, similarly argued that the statue should be returned to Flensburg. The heated debate that followed included the director of the Schleswig-Holstein *Heimatbund* cultural organisation, Hans-Joachim von Leesen, accusing the Danish side of nationalism. Subsequently, plans to initiate the return of the statue to Flensburg were scrapped as a result of the controversy.<sup>34</sup>

It was only in June 2009, under the leadership of Flensburg mayor Tscheuschner, that a concrete plan for the relocation of the statue materialised.<sup>35</sup> The ultimate February 2010 decision to return the Isted Lion to Flensburg followed discussions by a German-Danish coordination group, which included representatives of the German and Danish culture ministries, the Danish general consulate in Flensburg, the Flensburg mayoral office, and the director of the Flensburg *Museumsberg*.<sup>36</sup> Some differences emerged during discussions, for example, the Danish side proposed that dark bricks be used for the new pedestal; however, all parties eventually agreed on light sandstone, as with the original monument.<sup>37</sup> The resolution of differences of opinion over the plan to move the statue thus took place in an amicable manner, although some such as Zipsane have pointed out that Danish

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Karwelat, "Lange Irrfahrt eines heimatlosen Löwen," *Die Tageszeitung*, November 20, 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.; Jörn-Peter Leppien, "Der Ildstedt-Löwe – Ein Denkmal mit vielen Gesichtern," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 57, no. 2 (2010): 138-140.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Inge Adriansen, *Denkmal und Dynamit. Denkmälerstreit im deutsch-dänischen Grenzland* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011), 121.

<sup>34</sup> Florian Greßhake, *Deutschland als Problem Dänemarks: das materielle Kulturerbe der Grenzregion Sønderjylland-Schleswig seit 1864* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 407-409.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 410-411.

<sup>36</sup> Holger Ohlsen, "Rat einig: Der Löwe kommt zurück," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, February 19, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

museums were left out of discussions due to the highly politicised nature of the initiative.<sup>38</sup>

### *Responses to the Isted Lion's 2011 return to Flensburg*

The return of the Isted Lion to Flensburg has generally been welcomed. In the journal of the *Grenzfriedensbund*, Danish historian Lars N. Henningsen called the relocation a 'magnificent act', emphasising its symbolic importance for German-Danish relations.<sup>39</sup> German historian Jörn-Peter Leppien noted the capacity of the monument to facilitate historical and political education, especially due to its proximity to the *Museumsberg* and consequent potential integration into Flensburg's cultural landscape.<sup>40</sup> The aesthetic dimensions of the statue have also been received positively. The local photographer Christoph Dittert, who documented its return, stated, 'I find it good that the Lion is coming back to Flensburg...It fits well there and is a new attraction for Flensburg. And it stands for reconciliation between Germans and Danes.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the historian Frank Lubowitz remarked,

In my view, it harmonises wonderfully with its surroundings. On one hand, it is a very large sculpture, and on the other hand, the trees are also very tall; moreover, its colour allows it to integrate well into the landscape as a whole, and that is also my impression - that many will embrace it very quickly and that it will bring a lot of joy, precisely also because it is actually a very beautiful sculpture.<sup>42</sup>

However, views about the symbolism of the Isted Lion, particularly with regard to its re-dedication to German-Danish friendship and reconciliation, have been somewhat more nuanced. For instance, even while Lubowitz supported the return of the statue, he stated, 'It is and remains a Danish national monument, and it will first have to prove its quality as a monument to reconciliation.' Furthermore, he noted that Danish plans to erect a reconciliation memorial in Dybbøl, the site of a key battle of the Second Schleswig War, had been cancelled due to criticism; therefore, in his view, the symbolic relocation of the statue to Germany lacked reciprocity between both sides.<sup>43</sup>

In his speech during the unveiling ceremony on September 10 2011, town council chair Christian Dewanger remarked on the old and new symbolism of the statue:

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<sup>38</sup> Henrik Zipsane, "National Museums in Denmark," in *Building National Museums in Europe 1750-2010. Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011*, eds. Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2011), 227-228.

<sup>39</sup> Lars N. Henningsen, "Der Idstedt-Löwe – Geschichte und Politik. Vom Misstrauen zur Freundschaft," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 57, no. 2 (2010): 124.

<sup>40</sup> Jörn-Peter Leppien, "Der Idstedt-Löwe – Ein Denkmal mit vielen Gesichtern," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 57, no. 2 (2010): 141-146.

<sup>41</sup> Joachim Pohl, "Der Löwe ist los - und bekommt Besuch," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, September 9, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Dietrich Mohaupt, "Grenzbeziehungen und Grenzgänge," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, April 16, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

The Isted Lion is not a monument to friendship. The Lion is a monument of an era of nationalistic pursuits, a claim to power and sovereignty cast in bronze...And therefore, the message of peace and friendship does not come from the Lion itself, but from the act of its return and new display. It is precisely because of the overcoming of the boundary and the consciousness a shared German-Danish region, along with the close friendship and collaboration across the border as well as between majority and minority populations, that the Lion has come back not as a distortion of history, but instead as a recognised constituent part of German-Danish history.<sup>44</sup>

Dewanger noted that the creation of an identity in the German-Danish border region was still in the process of developing, and stated the importance of preserving different cultures while simultaneously bringing them together; he further argued for a shared consciousness and recognition of the history of the region 'without obscuring its unpleasant aspects'.<sup>45</sup>

The re-signification of the Isted Lion, however, has also been viewed in a more critical light, notably by the historian and specialist on Schleswig-Holstein and Danish-German history Jan Schlürmann. Schlürmann has argued that the statue cannot be a memorial for the common history of the border region since, according to him, it has no meaning for the German majority population.<sup>46</sup> In an article in the journal of the Association for Schleswig-Holstein History, he referred to the Isted Lion as a symbol of the Danish nation and asserted that the project was characterised by a 'two-way dissonance': 'The Danish minority have had their monument taken from them, and the German majority population have had a memorial foisted upon them - a memorial that requires a full-scale pedagogical offensive before it even becomes known to people.'<sup>47</sup> Schlürmann's views sparked heated debate and were also sharply criticised by the *Grenzfriedensbund*.<sup>48</sup> In an article published five years after the Isted Lion's return to Flensburg, Schlürmann extended his critique:

[...thus far, the German side] has not adopted the Isted Lion as a symbol of a shared German-Danish memory culture as it actually intended to. Till today, it has not generated vitality in its own reinterpretation [of the monument], and it has not created a place for the Lion in its own memory culture, let alone put forward proposals for a joint memorial event.<sup>49</sup>

Despite his support for the relocation of the Isted Lion, Henningsen has criticised the new role of the statue in the annual Danish commemorations of the Battle of Isted in the Flensburg Cemetery: while the burial mound (Figure 6) continued to function as a gathering place for the ceremony, wreath-laying was now taking place by the Lion as well. In his view, the statue was no longer Danish, but a monument to German-Danish friendship; consequently, he called for the Lion to be

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<sup>44</sup> Christian Dewanger, "'Teil der gemeinsamen Geschichte': Grußwort zur Rückkehr des Istedt-Löwen nach Flensburg," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 58, no. 4 (2011): 285-286.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>46</sup> Frank Lubowitz, "Kein Symbol einer gemeinsamen Geschichte," *Flensburger Tageblatt*, December 3, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Jan Schlürmann, "Der 'Istedt-Löwe': Anmerkungen zur Geschichtspolitik in Flensburg," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 79 (2010): 53.

<sup>48</sup> *Grenzfriedenshefte*, "Hässliche Polemik gegen die Grenzfriedenshefte: Einige Bemerkungen der Redaktion," *Grenzfriedenshefte* 57, no. 4 (2010): 326-330; see also Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte, "Erklärungen und Einsendungen zum Beitrag von Dr. Jan Schlürmann zum Istedt-Löwen, MGSHG 79, Okt. 2010," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 80 (2011): 38-76.

<sup>49</sup> Jan Schlürmann, "Fünf Jahre Istedt-Löwe: Eine Bilanz," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 90 (2016): 33.

left out of the Danish ceremony, or for the event to become a joint German-Danish one.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 6:** "Grave hill for 51 memorial stones of fighters of the Battle of Isted" Image by Soenke Rahn via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

## Summary and Conclusions

The decades-long debates about the relocation of the Isted Lion to Flensburg demonstrate that support for the move has not been universal. In addition, protracted controversy and criticism, even after the return of the monument to Flensburg in 2011, suggests that national and cultural identities in the German-Danish border region are continually being negotiated by members of the community. This has been underscored by Flensburg's position as a town on the border between the two countries, in a region that has historically been subject to a number of territorial changes and contestations.

Furthermore, the debates on the change in the Isted Lion's symbolism from Danish military victory to Danish-German friendship have highlighted not only the potential for sites of memory to be reinterpreted, but also the possible politicisation of cultural heritage. These sites and symbols, as well as the dialogues surrounding them, are therefore characterised by the involvement of a range of actors with differing and often conflicting viewpoints and agendas.

Research contributed by Amelie Bonney, Arjuna Keshvani Ham, Monika Lendermann

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<sup>50</sup> Lars N. Henningsen, "Der neue Ildstedt-Löwe – eine Herausforderung für die deutsche-dänische Gedenkkultur," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 88 (2015): 49-50.

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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.

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