



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,  
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND  
ANDREW TOMPKINS

# THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History  
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2023 Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapter's authors



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (eds), *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources>

This book is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership “Teaching European History in the 21st Century”, which ran from 2019-2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-870-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-871-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-872-2

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-873-9

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 978-1-80064-874-6

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-875-3

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-876-0

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0323

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

## 7.4.3 Heritage and Memory in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

*Jaroslav Ira, Gertjan Plets, and Gábor Sonkoly*

---

### Introduction

The nineteenth century is often viewed as the birthplace of ‘heritage’ because of the establishment during this period of so-called GLAM institutions—Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums. As highlighted in the seminal work of British sociologist Tony Bennett, it was in the aftermath of the French Revolution that heritage became a public good used primarily by the state to foster nationalism and modern norms and ideas around the industrial political economy and scientific progress. The birth of the nation state ensured the development of a concerted interest in heritage and memory, not only because of the role it served as a tool for cultural governance, but also because of a growing pressure on the historic environment due to industrialisation and fast-paced modernisation.

At first glance, the twentieth century can seem like a postscript to the previous century when modern ideas first became normalised. However, the post-1918 period is significant in the context of heritage and memory for a number of reasons: first, heritage became further institutionalised and bureaucratised; second, mass tourism and post-1945 development led to a ‘heritage boom’; and third, academic interest in heritage and memory grew to such an extent that the new sub-disciplines of heritage and memory became dominant fields in the humanities. In this chapter, we will first broadly outline the growing interest in heritage and memory in and beyond academia. Subsequently, we will zoom in on key domains of heritage and memory practice in Europe in the twentieth century. As Europe witnessed a series of violent conflicts during this period, we will discuss developments in the field of post-conflict memorialisation. Urban heritage developments will also be explored. Finally,

the role of Europe itself in European heritage and memory activities will be explored, with a critical examination of the growth of a European heritage and memory industry.

## The Twentieth Century: The Heritage Boom and Birth of New Disciplines

The roots of heritage preservation and its first legislation can be traced back to the three decades before the First World War. Over the course of the twentieth century, heritage became increasingly institutionalised. In the aftermath of the destruction of the First World War, the League of Nations debated international standards in the fields of heritage conservation during times of conflict. Between the two World Wars member nations of the League of Nations agreed on key principles, formulated in the 1935 Roerich Pact, which advocated the creation of a “Red Cross for heritage” in times of conflict. Although the League of Nations was primarily concerned with heritage preservation after conflict, its attention signaled a growing regard for cultural property and a willingness to find institutional protections for heritage. It took another World War and its associated destruction before the principles of the Roerich Pact were translated into the 1954 Hague Convention. This convention was not only signed by most UN nations, it was also ratified and implemented in local laws, putting systematic heritage protection on the political agenda for the first time. Equally important was the foundation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as part of the United Nations system after the Second World War. Through UNESCO, a multitude of conventions encouraging UN member states to implement heritage legislation were drafted. At the same time, a post-war economic boom in Europe resulted in the disappearance of heritage sites at an unprecedented rate. As new housing, transportation infrastructure and industrial zones were developed in and around historical centres, much heritage was threatened by destruction. This triggered both bottom-up calls for heritage protection as well as the adoption of expansive heritage protection laws and monument lists across many states in Europe from the 1960s onward.

This institutionalisation of heritage protection went hand in hand with its bureaucratisation. Although local heritage workshops, often grassroots organisations of amateurs and heritage enthusiasts, continued to be very active and to call for the protection of vernacular and industrial heritage, the proliferation of lists, laws, and paperwork meant that heritage increasingly became an expert-driven practice defined by architects, archaeologists, museologists and conservation specialists. The World Heritage Convention of 1972 drew even more attention to heritage as an issue on international and

national agendas. Although this convention is best known for encouraging nations to work together to protect sites of outstanding universal value as World Heritage Sites, through its ratification on the national level it also enacted a greater institutional awareness of the need for protecting natural and cultural heritage.

Consequently, the heritage field witnessed growth and more concerted bureaucratic attention for heritage tourism. Additionally, a growing awareness of and concern for a rapidly vanishing past contributed to a ‘heritage boom’. The growth of mass tourism in Europe, which began in the 1960s, also contributed to the development of a heritage industry. Heritage and culture thus began to accommodate and cater itself to the gaze of the tourist. UNESCO’s World Heritage Label, for example, became the most sought-after branding tool for attracting tourists. Although the heritage industry was quite advanced in the capitalist West, in socialist Europe as well, a tourist industry began to develop in the 1960s. In the Soviet Union, for example, the Kremlin invested heavily in the medieval heritage sites of the so-called ‘Golden Ring’ (which included Moscow, Rostov, Yaroslavl, and Suzdal) to develop their tourism industry.



Fig. 1: Olga Ernst, UNESCO World Heritage plaque at Þingvellir National Park, Iceland. CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World\\_Heritage\\_plaque\\_at\\_Þingvellir\\_National\\_Park.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World_Heritage_plaque_at_Þingvellir_National_Park.jpg).

As this heritage boom expanded over the course of the 1970s, postmodern perspectives on culture and identity, and a broader cultural turn in the discipline of history drew attention to the political and cultural nature of heritage and memory. Throughout the 1980s academia started to shift its attention from solely finding solutions for heritage management to also studying how societies and states remember, and how they transform 'things from the past' into culturally meaningful heritage, or even invent traditions. By the end of the 1990s, this research into the power relations which defined heritage policy and the Western hegemonic discourses encoded in many global heritage conventions began to fundamentally change the way heritage was approached.

Many academics called for a more critical stance towards dominant and especially institutionalised heritage practices and canons. The work of Australian heritage scholar Laurajane Smith is particularly important. Smith coined the concept of "Authorized Heritage Discourse", critically questioning the dominance of Western, expert-driven engagements with the past. An awareness of the important role of Western norms and the role of the state in heritage initiatives resulted in the establishment and rapid growth of a new field—Critical Heritage Studies. Equally important within this trend are the discussions around colonial heritage, which intensified throughout the 1990s. Debates around colonial statues and collections in Europe have not only encouraged academics to take a more activist stance, but these discussions have also ensured that the intrinsically Western conceptions of heritage have been challenged.

Such calls within academia for sharing authority between experts and ordinary people or the decolonisation of heritage practices—which, as mentioned above, had their roots in the end of the twentieth century—have also been adopted outside academia during the beginning of the twenty-first century. Over the past decade, museums across Europe have embraced the idea of becoming 'participatory' and creating room for co-curation with citizens and visitors. In archaeology, citizen science is becoming a cornerstone of archaeological resource management. Generally, four decades of critical engagement with the politics of heritage have started to change our engagement with the past in the present. The sector is increasingly aware of the disciplinary dangers intrinsic to heritage and memory work, and there is also increasing attention to difficult pasts and heritages. However, polarisation and the nationalistic mobilisation of history in the public domain still takes place, reminding us that heritage will always remain a political issue. Slowly, the discourse around colonial collections is also changing. The decision of the French president Emanuel Macron to repatriate the so-called 'Benin bronzes', artifacts looted from Benin during the colonial period and held in the Quai

Branly Museum in Paris, was a watershed moment. While these might all be twenty-first century developments, they build on changing paradigms from the late twentieth century.

## Urban Heritage

In the first half of the twentieth century, the European history of urban heritage followed the nineteenth-century pattern of the identification of historic urban quarters, towns and centres and the protection of urban monuments. Initially, up to the 1970s, cultural heritage was primarily used to provide a solid basis for different—but primarily national—levels of identity-building endeavours by mobilising both professionals and amateurs through protection projects. During this long process, ‘historic centres/towns’ were defined and protected all over Europe.

From the perspective of the evolution of urban heritage, two major shifts can be identified. The first major shift saw the globalisation of the concept of cultural heritage as the common culture of humanity, through institutions such as UNESCO. In the second half of the twentieth century, the designation of historic centres and towns spread across Europe and there were extensive debates about the reconstruction of these locales in the aftermath of the Second World War and the rapid urban development of the post-war period. As a result of these debates and discussions about the new professional standards of world heritage, preserved urban entities were re-defined as ‘urban heritage sites.’

The second shift started in the 1990s, when cultural heritage had become a global concept, with hundreds of European cities, towns and monuments recognised as World Heritage Sites. Despite the unmistakable success of the world heritage label, the Western conceptualisation of the World Heritage Convention has suffered constant criticism. The expansion of the notion of heritage as both a global and local reference point for identity building also required a flexible concept, which could extend beyond definitions based on the distinction between ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ heritage, as standardised by the World Heritage Convention. This holistic approach to cultural heritage, sought after by heritage professionals, re-defined the principles and the categories of previous heritage interpretations. In the case of urban heritage, this conceptually expanding renewal leads to the concept of the ‘heritage city’, according to which the city reflects the current holistic concept of heritage (uniting tangible, intangible and natural aspects) and is managed by its community.

The global importance of European urban heritage is indicated by the fact that the three most important standard-setting instruments were formulated in European cities, and these played different roles according to the evolution of this notion of urban heritage. The international regulation of urban

heritage preservation is thought to have started with the Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments in 1931, which was assembled by the participants of the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, organised by the International Museums Office to provide the first internationally approved norms of the preservation of historic cities and sites. However, this standardisation became systematic only with the Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites of 1964, which was drawn up by conservation professionals to provide an international framework for restoration, thanks to the efforts of UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). In 2005, the Vienna Memorandum, named at a conference co-organised by UNESCO and the City of Vienna, introduced a prominent redefinition of the conceptualisation of the historic urban landscape (HUL) approach. Athens was a symbol of ancient European values and Venice was a globally recognised example of a monumental city threatened by nature. However, their roles as cities were rather passive in the wording of the standards. Vienna, on the other hand, contributed actively to the development of the HUL and that of the 'heritage city'.

This conceptual development reveals complex economic, political, and social changes in many European historic centres and quarters, which decreased in importance during the deurbanisation process that took place before the 1970s. These historic areas regained significance from the 1980s onwards as (1) abandoned historic quarters became major touristic destinations; (2) rust belts became trendy residential areas; (3) slumming artisanal quarters became innovative venues of creative industries; (4) gentrification replaced monument protection in many European historic cities, where reconstruction of historic monuments, harshly refuted by the Venice Charter, became possible in the name of identity politics and of the heritage communities of these historic cities and towns.

## Memory

If the nineteenth century gave birth to national memories alongside nation-building processes, cultivation of national memories remained no less important in the twentieth century. The new states that emerged after the First World War, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or the Baltic states, deployed an official collective memory to forge national identities, which materialised in new monuments and memorials, names of streets and squares, or the introduction of new state holidays. This undertaking was replicated again after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia in the 1990s, as the successor states (re)invented their pasts. Furthermore,

many regime changes, such as those that oversaw the installation of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, led to the imposition of ideologically motivated master-narratives in official memory cultures. These master-narratives often intertwined concepts of historical materialism with the existing heroic story of the nation. Thus, for instance, the Hussite Reformation movement of early-fifteenth century Bohemia, the Czech national revival of the nineteenth century, and the ultimate ‘victory of the working class’ in 1948—i.e., the installation of a communist regime—were interwoven in a continuous narrative that affected the ways history was disseminated in socialist Czechoslovakia, not least in popular genres such as historical movies.

The twentieth century also witnessed the growth of theoretical reflection on how the past has been collectively remembered, and the birth of the new discipline of Memory Studies. As early as the 1920s and 1930s, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs theorised the social dimension of collective and individual memory. Much later, in the 1980s, another French scholar, Pierre Nora, introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory), an inventory of—and reflection on—many topoi in French collective memory, an approach that has been replicated in many other national contexts. Other scholars explored media and mechanisms of cultural memory as a sphere of cultural reproduction. Collective traumas of twentieth-century wars, oppressive regimes, and violent atrocities, as well as the spectre of their being denied or forgotten, were additional impulses for Memory Studies, namely in setting the agenda for how to deal with the difficult past. The Second World War and the Holocaust were in many ways seminal in this respect.

The memory of the Second World War unfolded through several phases, while also following different trajectories in Western and Eastern Europe. Official amnesia, reinforced by Cold War divisions and a clear-cut differentiation between perpetrator and victim countries, prevailed in the West until the 1960s, when questions about the past were raised with new urgency. (West-)German controversies about the unresolved Nazi past were paralleled in other countries, such as Italy and Austria, which strove to integrate periods of authoritarian regimes into their national narratives. In some of the countries that had hitherto styled themselves as victims, the memory of the Second World War became unsettled by questions about collaboration with Nazism and complicity in the persecution of the Jews. In France, for instance, these disturbing issues became known as the “Vichy Syndrome” (Henry Rousso), a strand of thought which argued that the Vichy regime, the common name of the French government after the country’s military defeat, was in fact an integral part of a distinct strand of a broader French political and intellectual tradition (antisemitic, conservative) as opposed to a mere aberration imposed by a German military victory.

In Eastern Europe, the official memory of victimhood held firmly until 1989. Only then were some darker aspects uncovered, such as collaboration with Nazi Germany or complicity in the Holocaust. Illustrative are controversies surrounding Polish society's role in the Holocaust. These were reawakened by the book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, published in 2000 by Polish-American historian Jan T. Gross, which dealt with the massacre of Jews in the small town of Jedwabne in 1941, and the recent decision of the Polish legislature to criminalise any mentions of 'Polish concentration camps'. The latter case is just one of many examples of the regulation of memory by law, a controversial but common practice in contemporary Europe. The Ukrainian 'decommunisation laws' adopted in 2015, which banned the use of Nazi and Soviet symbols—while also honouring the paramilitary organisation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the far-right terrorist and politician Stepan Bandera (1909–1959)—are another example. This act led to a massive renaming of streets and statues, but also raised concerns about freedom of speech and the obscuring of UPA atrocities, such as the massacre of Poles in Volhynia in 1943. On the other hand, the fall of the Iron Curtain has facilitated reconciliatory processes across East-West divides, such as the adoption of the *Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and Their Future Development* (1997), in which the signatory states apologised respectively for Nazi crimes and the annexation of the Czechoslovak borderland in 1938, and the forcible expulsion of Sudeten Germans after the war. Many reconciliation measures, such as symbolic gestures—the 'Kniefall von Warschau' (Warsaw genuflection) by German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970 being the most iconic case—or bilateral historical committees that worked on acceptable interpretations of the difficult recent past, were often present before 1989.

While facilitating memory debates on a truly European scale, the fall of the Iron Curtain also revealed discrepancies between Western and Eastern dealings with the past, both in content and in form. The Holocaust became the cornerstone of the Western and globalised memory culture, reaching the status of the utmost evil. In contrast, the crimes of Stalinism were compared with other atrocities in European history. Moreover, different parts of Europe have their own particular traumas and memory issues. While the legacy of socialism remains an important issue in many Eastern European countries, the legacy of colonialism has haunted many Western European societies. Coming to terms with the latter has caused more than public debates about how to tackle the colonial past in museums or schools. Recently, this process also included the pulling down of statues of many historical figures who embody or symbolise colonial oppression, a movement that was much less popular in the post-socialist countries, who were reluctant to share self-criticism for

a past they do not consider as 'theirs'. Whereas many Western countries experienced a pluralisation of memory and a return to more affirmative national narratives, in post-socialist countries the new state elites attempted to impose an official version of the memory of communism. This was often centred around the actions of so-called 'totalitarian' regimes, marginalising many private memories that did not fit simple schemes such as repression and resistance, or that were often disregarded as mere nostalgia. Such differences in memory cultures were often described as a contradiction between the 'politics of regret', supposedly typical of Western Europe, and the 'politics of truth', pursued by post-socialist countries and embodied by state-funded institutions for the study of the recent past, such as the Institute of National Memory in Poland or the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in the Czech Republic. In the context of EU enlargement, Western mnemonic standards became a soft criterion for candidate states, which are evident for instance in the expectations that Turkey discuss and acknowledge the Armenian genocide (1915–1917).



Fig. 2: A plaque in Warsaw commemorating Willy Brandt's genuflection during his visit to a Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial in 1970, Public Domain, Wikimedia, Szczębrzeszyski, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willy\\_Brandt\\_Square\\_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willy_Brandt_Square_02.jpg).

## Europeanisation of Memory and Heritage

Recent decades brought efforts to create a collective European memory, either by endorsing common ways of dealing with a divisive past, or by searching for a shared European narrative. While some interwar intellectuals, such as the Austrian-Japanese politician Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972), could still call on the traditions of antiquity, Christianity, or the Enlightenment to champion projects of pan-European unity, the experience of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and decolonisation undermined efforts to ground European identity on a resolutely positive story. Instead, the focus turned to the painful points of a difficult past, such as colonialism, totalitarian regimes, or forced migrations, with the Second World War and the Holocaust conceived as the negative founding myth of Europe and the ‘zero point’ of post-war European integration. Some historians followed the *lieux de mémoire* approach and completed inventories of the European realms of memory, drawing up lists of personalities, events, places, or traditions, which reflect European myths, aspirations, values, or traumas, or have shown enduring power to generate diverse meanings, conflicting appropriations, and contradictory views. Most recently, the House of European History, a museum created on the initiative of the European Parliament which opened in 2017 in Brussels, has endeavoured to present a shared European history, while trying to hold space for diverse perspectives and interpretations.

The second half of the twentieth century has also witnessed a Europeanisation of heritage. This entailed the reinterpretation of tangible and intangible remnants of the past as having a distinctively European value, while making heritage a resource that should foster a sense of European identity. The concept of ‘European heritage’ was coined by the Council of Europe in the European Cultural Convention of 1954 concerning the preservation and accessibility of heritage deemed a shared European treasure. But the major turning point was the crisis of the European integration process in the 1970s, which gave birth to cultural policies of the European Community (later the European Union). Cultural heritage became an operational term for ongoing integration on a cultural basis. Over the past four decades, these cultural policies have manifested in many programmes designed to promote the European dimension of cultural heritage, such as European Heritage Days, the European Capital of Culture, and more recently, the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe and the European Heritage Label, which represents a counterpart to UNESCO’s World Heritage Label.

## Conclusion

Memory and heritage in twentieth-century Europe have fundamentally been shaped by the traumatic events of this period, such as the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Cold War divisions. These experiences have impacted the ways in which European societies deal with the past. The later part of the century has witnessed an unprecedented concern with these legacies. It has seen efforts to overcome divisive moments in European history, but also the instrumentalisation of memory for current political agendas. At the same time, over the course of the twentieth century, heritage and memory in Europe have seen an internationalisation and a Europeanisation. With respect to internationalisation, the reconstruction of the devastated continent gave rise to a new understanding of heritage, with urban heritage sites, historic town centres, and heritage cities growing into important international tourist attractions. This internationalisation was accompanied and shaped by the development of new supranational institutions, such as UNESCO, and the establishment of two new academic disciplines—Heritage Studies and Memory Studies—which have provided a critical framework for making sense of these processes. With respect to Europeanisation, amid ongoing European integration, the later part of the period has seen considerable efforts to cultivate a distinctively European heritage and memory.

## Discussion questions

1. Why was there a ‘heritage boom’ in the second half of the twentieth century?
2. What role did international institutions such as UNESCO play in the development of heritage and memory in twentieth-century Europe?
3. Think of the most important monuments or memorial sites in your home town. How do they fit into this process?

## Suggested reading

- Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- Den Boer, Pim et al., eds, *Europäische Erinnerungsorte* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2012).
- Graham, Brian, and Peter Howard, ‘Heritage and Identity’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. by Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 1–15.

- Gross, Jan T., *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- Halbwachs, Maurice and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- Hicks, Dan, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).
- Nora, Pierre et al., eds, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).
- Müller, Jan-Werner, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- Pakier, Małgorzata and Bo Stråth, eds, *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).
- Patel, Kiran Klaus, *The Cultural Politics of Europe: European Capitals of Culture and European Union since the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- Smith, Laurajane, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).