SET IN STONE?

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Berlin, Charlottesville & Bristol

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Text by David Olusoga

Defeated nations topple statues, victorious nations erect more. In the flush of victory, nations tend to confuse the demonstrable superiority of their arms with a presumed superiority of their aims, and the morals underpinning them. If defeat is the ultimate shock to the system, victory can be a soporific reaffirmation of tradition and traditional values. Old certainties remain certain, old heroes remain heroic and both remain unquestioned. The vanquished see the world from the other end of the telescope. It is in defeat that failed regimes and their heroes are discredited and old ideologies repudiated. It is amidst the humiliation of occupation, and the hand-wringing and finger-pointing that follows, that states discover previously unknown capacities to abandon once-cherished ideas and institutions and reassess their pasts. It is at those moments that old statues to yesterday's men begin to look vulnerable.

Yet the struggles around statues in Britain and the United States that took place in 2016 and 2017 did so not against the backdrop of national defeat but within the maelstrom of bitter internal division. Both nations are going through what the Australians have long called 'history wars'. As statues are one of the mechanisms by which official versions of the past are made laterally solid, they inevitably become the totems and the lightning-rods for national struggles over their pasts. But these debates are not really about statues. They are battles of ideas, occasioned by the sudden rise of new forms of ethno-nationalism and the coming-of-age of campaigns to 'de-colonise' British history and, in the United States, overthrow one-and-a-half centuries of a historical rewriting of the Civil War. Statues are not the issue but the focus, in part because the removal of a statue is one of the greatest possible photo

opportunities, second only to the toppling of one. Hoisted by a crane and trussed up with straps, statues, in that instant, lose their dignity and symbolic power. The sight of them being torn from their plinths makes the immovable suddenly portable, and the histories they represent once again negotiable and fluid. The removal of a statue is street theatre at its most literal and dramatic, and for those for whom official histories are to be defended, the disempowerment of statues is a cause worth defending, as are the lines drawn in metaphorical sand around the plinths on which the heroes of the Confederacy or the British Empire stand. Seventy years ago, both Britain and America, in their roles as the occupying powers of post-war Europe, understood the power of statues and the importance of their removal.

In January 1947, two years after the fall of Berlin and the end of the Second World War, a work party made their way through what remained of the Tiergarten, the city's once-beautiful public park. There they set to work removing 32 gigantic white-marble statues from their plinths. Once uprooted, these stone leviathans, each of them almost three meters tall, were loaded into trucks and transported across the city. Their destination was the Charlottenburg Palace, then a bombed-out and blackened ruin. In the grounds of the palace each statue was lowered into a specially dug pit. They were then covered over with earth and entombed, consigned to an unnamed grave.

The statues that were subjected to this bizarre funeral had been created in the last years of the 19th century. They had been intended, supposedly, as a gift to the people of Berlin from their Kaiser, Wilhelm II. Their subjects were the 32 monarchs who had ruled over Brandenburg, Prussia and then Germany from the 11th century all the way up to 1888; the year Wilhelm II ascended the throne. The Kaiser installed these monuments to his forefathers along Siegesallee – Victory Boulevard – an elegant avenue that cut through the Tiergarten, and which was itself a private project funded by Wilhelm II, who convinced himself that the new statues would help “make the city the envy of the world”.

Just 46 years after the last of the statues was installed on Siegesallee, the Allied Control Council in Berlin pressured the authorities of the then occupied and devastated German capital to have them removed from public display. In 1947, Europe lay in ruins and the Western world was in deep reflection on a war that had killed around 50 million people. In such an atmosphere, the British, American and French occupiers concluded that the history of conquest and war that the Siegesallee statues celebrated and memorialised was irredeemably contaminated with the militarism and hyper-nationalism that had led to two world wars.

Years later, in less febrile times, the Siegesallee statues were disinterred and once again transported across Berlin. This time they were assembled in the grounds of the Spandau fortress, an old citadel not far from the Spandau Prison in which Rudolf Hess lived out the life sentence he had received at the conclusion of the Nuremberg Trials. That is where they remain. Even at the time of their creation at the beginning of the 20th century, there had been those in Berlin able to see the folly and hubris of the Siegesallee statues. The city's more irreverent inhabitants nicknamed Siegesallee 'Puppenallee' – Doll’s Avenue. More than a century later and their toxicity is palpable. Enormous, severe and unsubtle they are a chilling sight. Some are pock-marked from shrapnel blasts, wounds acquired during a war fought long after the deaths of the men they portray. Others have sustained more serious injuries. A dozen of the statues have lost their lower sections so the torsos alone remain, propped up on wooden pallets. Otto II, Margrave of Brandenburg, has his legs but has a missing right arm. Friedrich Wilhelm II has been decapitated. These warrior kings, some clad in armour, their gigantic stone hands clutching swords, are monuments to the unbridled ethnic nationalism and fetishized militarism that were base elements within the primordial broth from which Nazism crawled. Despite being memorials from the age of the Kaisers, and not from the Third Reich, they have no place in the modern capital of a nation still committed to liberalism and tolerance. Historically toxic, they are permanently quarantined in the grounds of the Spandau Citadel.
The Siegesallee statues are not alone in exile. In the gloomy vaults and obscure warehouses across the country are other equally radioactive relics of Germany past; the public art of the Second and Third Reichs.

Albert the Bear Sculpture, in Spandau Citadel (Berlin)

The idea that the Siegesallee statues might today be somehow detoxified and reinstalled in modern Berlin is anathema. This is because 21st-century Germany is a nation that largely understands and acknowledges that there are chapters of its history that cannot be uncritically memorialised and there are figures within the German story whose legacies demand a degree of contextualisation that is beyond the capacity of heroic statuary. This insight, this capacity for self-awareness, is matched by few other nations. It should be noted that the German gift for historical self-analysis does not seep into every aspect of the nation's history. Germany remains stubbornly incapable of coming to terms with the fact that her armies and bureaucrats committed terrible crimes in the country's short-lived African empire; atrocities that include punitive raids, forms of slavery, wars of extermination and a campaign of ethnic cleansing in what is now Namibia that fits the legal definition of genocide

like a glove. But what the burial, exhumation and continuing exile of the Siegesallee statues demonstrates is that, in relation to certain aspects of her past, Germany has been able to apply standards and approaches that are alien to both Britain and America. For while both those nations demand and expect that other states – Germany, Japan, and to a lesser extent Italy – regard chapters from their pasts as unfit for memorialisation, they have, until recently, largely rejected the notion that there are any aspects from within their own national histories to which similar caution or restrain could or should be exercised.

This stark contrast stems, in part, from the fact that history plays a very different role in the national self-identities of Britain and America. In 2016 Neil Macgregor, formerly director of the British Museum and currently founding director of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, spoke about the differences in how the British and the Germans look at their histories. "In Britain," Macgregor said, "we use our history in order to comfort us to make us feel stronger, to remind ourselves that we were always, always deep down, good people..."[1] For Germany, despite her blind spots, the past is not a roll call of national honour, there to make Germans feel good about themselves, rather it is a vast national repository of cautionary tales and warnings. Modern Germany plucked her impressive capacity to reframe and analyse her history from the fires of 1945. Defeat, occupation and the process of de-Nazification combined, eventually, to forge a new national culture in which warrior kings and populist demagogues who had made calls to nation, blood and soil, are viewed with profound suspicion. German militarism and a Germanic cult of ethnic nationalism had led the nation into the dark valley of 1945. This in itself was proof that the generals and politicians of the 20th century were catastrophically flawed figures and the purveyors of flawed ideologies. Statues and monuments to them were removed or destroyed by the occupying powers after 1945; those that survived the purge are kept locked away by the German authorities. As few nations spawned regimes as malevolent as National Socialism, and as few nations have experienced a defeat as complete as that which befell Germany in 1945, the nation's exceptionalism in this regard might be expected, but that does not make the example any less instructive.

In the United States in 2017 the new History Wars claimed their first casualties. In Charlottesville, Virginia, a young woman was murdered by a white supremacist. Her killer, along with groups of Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and so-called Neo-Confederates, had rallied around a statue to Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Among the long and inchoate list of aims and demands such groups have made public is that Confederate statues be protected from the rolling process of removal that has already taken place in 30 US cities. After decades of complaints from African Americans and others that these memorials present a distorted version of Southern history and are intentionally divisive and insensitive totems of white supremacism, the national mood has shifted – although it took a mass shooting in a black church for that shift to begin.

Those involved in the removal of these memorials from cities across America have faced such visceral and ferocious opposition that month by month the removals have come to increasingly resemble military operations – both in the level of planning involved, and the firepower on hand. The German workers who removed the Siegesallee statues from the ruins of the Tiergarten 70 years ago did so in broad daylight. The American construction workers commissioned to lift bronze effigies of Confederate generals and politicians from their plinths carry out their labours in the dead of night. Information as to the times and dates of each removal is closely guarded. When the night arrives, the construction workers arrive in convoy, protected by phalanxes of police officers, representatives of America's increasingly heavily armed and, in some cases, almost paramilitary police forces. Some of the construction workers feel compelled, on such occasions, to don masks to conceal their identities, others wear stab-vests or even bulletproof Kevlar vests. At one removal in Louisiana, the local police force placed snipers at vantage points above the memorial in order to protect the workers from armed attack. These precautions are necessary because once the lawsuits have been rejected and the legal avenues exhausted, the threats pour in. They include death threats. When news of a removal becomes known, pro-Confederate groups have on occasions massed around threatened monuments, Confederate flags in hand, chants and curses filling the air. In some states the numbers willing to rush into action to protest the removal of a bronze

Statues, originally from the Victory Avenue in the Tiergarten, in Spandau Citadel (Berlin)

general from a marble plinth dwarf those willing to mass in defence of poor, flesh-and-blood Americans facing eviction at the hand of bailiffs and the banks for whom they work.

Some of those who demand that the programme of removals be halted speak of them as assaults on tradition and history itself. They are hurt and defensive, and utterly reject suggestions that they attempt to re-imagine the past as a litany of crimes and injustices as well as a glorious list of victories and achievements. Divisions that are long-established and well-understood have been both illuminated and widened by the statues issues. Today 62 per cent of white Americans are unwilling to countenance the removal of Confederate statues. The vast majority of African Americans want them gone. If there is a positive to take from recent clashes it is that our contemporary debates about statues have revealed, to both black and white, a forgotten history. Many of the statues in question are not what people previously imagined. Some are nowhere near as old as most Americans had presumed. These are not century-old monuments that date back to the decades immediately after the Civil War. They are cheap, made-to-order monuments that date from two major periods of the 20th century. The first occurred in the years after 1915, during the revival of the KKK and the great wave of brutality and lynching that disfigured the lives of millions of black Southerners, and which inspired many of them and their children to leave for the North. It was during this miserable era that the ranks of the KKK swelled to six million members. The second burst of Confederate memorialisation took place not in the 1860s but the 1960s, and was a reaction against the Civil Rights movement, as well as recognition of the centenary of the war itself. The Confederate statues erected during that period were paid for or subsidised by a small number of pro-Confederate lobby groups. Many of those statues are therefore younger than some of the white supremacists who have gathered to defend them, and who regard them as integral features of white Southern history.

Such statues are not, strictly speaking, memorials to the Civil War but symbols of white supremacy, erected at pivotal moments in American history when white power appeared to be challenged or was in need of

reaffirmation. In that respect they are memorials that speak to another history; not that of the Civil War but of post-Civil War American racism and the failed era of 'Reconstruction'. Indeed, some directly celebrate events and figures whose historical role was in the thwarting of attempts to create a new reconstructed South, in which black people had equal rights and franchise. One of the statues recently removed in Louisiana was erected in honour of the White League – a white supremacists' militia – and celebrates an attack they launched against the integrated New Orleans police force in 1874, in an attempt to topple the state's reconstruction government, nine years after the end of the Civil War. The implication in much recent reporting has been that by becoming the totems around which white supremacists are rallying, these statues are being co-opted and misused. The opposite is true. They are in fact performing exactly the function for which they were erected. Statues to Confederate generals and slave owners, like those to Confederate war criminals such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, were erected in order to reinforce white supremacy. They have nothing to do with Southern heritage or the Civil War and everything to do with racial intimidation.
The monument that stands in the heart of Baltimore to General Stonewall Jackson looms over a Northern city with a population that is around 64 per cent African American. It was never there to defend Southern heritage but to strike fear in the hearts of black Baltimoreans. As the true ages and the genesis stories of these memorials become more widely understood, the claim that such statues are integral and sacred elements of Southern history and heritage becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Facts about the age of statues and the motivations of the men who built them have been similarly forgotten in Britain. Edward Colston, the slave trader whose life and reputation has returned to haunt modern Bristol, is a case in point. What is now being discovered by thousands of Bristolians is that the concert hall in the centre of the city, which for several years has been at the centre of an ugly and divisive dispute, was not named after Colston while he was alive. The slave trader died in 1721. The hall was given its name in 1867. Likewise, the portrait of Colston, which is today held by Bristol Museum, was not painted until 1844 and the statue of him that stands a hundred metres from the concert hall was not erected until 1895, 174 years after his death. The cloyingly unctuous dedication on the plinth

Joachim II Hektor Sculpture, in Spandau Citadel (Berlin)

of that monument describes Colston as “one of the most virtuous and wise sons of the city”. But those words were written by men who had never met him. The modern cult of Colston that pervades a number of Bristol institutions was given form by the city fathers of later generations. If the removal of Colston's statue would constitute an erasure of history, as Colston's defenders claim, the history at threat is not the one they claim.

The battle over Colston's statue, and over the Bristol institutions that carry his name, has divided opinion within the city and beyond. But its other effect has been to draw national and international attention to Bristol's role in the Atlantic slave trade. While the other slave traders from Bristol's past remain obscure, the memorialisation of Edward Colston – something he deliberately set out to secure – is what prevents his name from slipping into obscurity and prevents his crimes from being forgotten. Even his defenders now have to acknowledge that he was a man who traded in human flesh and grew rich from human misery. By choosing to stand in defence of statues, groups and individuals on both sides of the Atlantic have unintentionally drawn public attention to the crimes of the men memorialised in bronze and marble, and on the backstories that explain when and why their statues were erected. Histories that otherwise might have been kept in the historical shadows have been drawn into the light.

The question raised by the current debates around statues is not whether or not we should condemn the crimes and the racism of men from the past, or judge them by modern standards. The question is: do we want to be societies that uncritically memorialise men from the past who we know committed terrible crimes, merely because memorials to them were created before we had the capacity to recognise those crimes? Does the erection of a statue end all debate? Does it fix a figure as a hero and render their reputation untouchable, impervious to revision, no matter what revelations about them later emerge? Is history literally set in stone once a statue is affixed to a pedestal?

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David Olusoga is a British-Nigerian historian, producer and presenter. He is the author of *Civilizations: Encounters and the Cult of Progress, The World's War,* which won First World War Book of the Year, *Black & British*: *A Forgotten History* which was awarded both the Longman-History Today Trustees' Award and the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize, and *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*. He writes for *The Observer, The Guardian, The New Statesman and BBC History Magazine.*

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Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer.

Previously, Claire Doherty was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering arts producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

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