
The Importance of Historical Heritage and the Fallacy of the Cancel Movement: International Case Studies

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Abstract: *The urge to rename streets, topple statues, and discredit historical figures is a dangerous development which must be stopped. Sadly, both the left and the right have succumbed to the urge to destroy heritage at one point or another. The present exploratory paper provides examples from Albania, Ecuador, and Japan to provide an international context to the challenge of dealing with history through a biased contemporary perspective. Best practices should be publicized by the media so as to educate the public about the importance of history and the need for preservation rather than destruction.*

Keywords: *cancel movement, historical heritage, preservation*

1. Introduction

Attacks on historical heritage are not a new problem (Raszelenberg, 1999; Singh, 1962). Nevertheless recent attacks on important symbols of Western civilization have received support from some of the institutions tasked with the duty to protect culture and heritage (Lucey, 2020; Slotkin, 2020). Examples include the removal of the Statue of Queen Isabella the Catholic from the California Capitol, removal of the statue of Christopher Columbus in Baltimore, Maryland, vandalism of statues of figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Sir Winston Churchill, and even attacks on the legacy of President Woodrow Wilson in Princeton University. Vandalism by ignorant mobs and radical elements is not surprising

but the support from City Mayors, City Councils, mainstream media, and liberal academics is shocking, appalling, and dangerous.

Even though there are historical cases where damage to historical monuments is virtually impossible to prevent such as when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) destroyed important parts of Palmyra castle during their retreat from Syrian government forces in 2016. However there are also many examples of governments going to great lengths to protect historical heritage even in enemy territory. The American bombing campaign against Japan included explicit orders to avoid historical heritage (Bix, 2000; Feigenblatt, 2016). Both allied and axis armies in World War II attempted to protect historical artifacts and monuments (Togo, 2005; Yang, 2010). Even the Communist Party of China protected the country's historical heritage making considerable investments in archeological departments and museums, with the very tragic exception of the Cultural Revolution (Shelah-Lavi, 2015; Wang, 2008). One of the most balanced approaches is the one of the contemporary Russian government; monuments connected to Imperial Russia are protected while those from Soviet times are also preserved (Tsygankov & Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009). Both the Imperial periods as well as the Soviet one are important parts of Russian history and both periods had considerable achievements in different fields.

The following section provides contemporary examples of dealing with historical heritage ranging from Albania in Europe to Japan in East Asia. Examples were chosen to include historical heritage and statues left by both left wing and right wing regimes and a range of different approaches that were used to handle the contextual complexities.

2. Erasing the Communist Legacy in the Republic of Albania and Moldova

The primeval urge to destroy traces of previous regimes is not confined to left leaning governments. Countries in the former Soviet bloc suffered from a wave of historical revisionism and a cleansing of street names and monuments after the fall of the Iron curtain (Dzurek, 1999). The Republic of Albania is a good example of this phenomenon. After the fall of Communism, virtually all monuments from the communist period were destroyed. The very few monuments left were closed to the public for years for fear of public opposition to their protection. Specific examples include the destruction of the Enver Hoxha Museum in central Tiranna, which was located in the now colloquially called “Pyramid” at the center of the city. The finished museum was vandalized and the contents destroyed after the fall of communism and the building is now derelict. One of the few remaining museums of the Communist period that remains standing is the Bunker which was built to house high ranking officials in case of an invasion. This facility was kept off limits for decades and only opened recently as a museum. It is one of the most visited museums in Albania but it had to be protected for decades from the destructive urges of its own people.

Another example from the former Communist block is the case of Moldova. This small country is one of the least visited countries in Europe. Moldova is home to one of the most intractable frozen conflicts in the region, namely the separatist Republic of Transnistria. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Transnistria declared independence from Moldova and kept the Soviet system and legacy while Moldova made the transition into a liberal democracy in the Western mold. The difference between the two areas is highly visible to the naked eye. Transnistria is still covered with Soviet symbols and statues while Moldova has few historical markers left, one of the reasons why it is not a popular touristic destination. One of the ironies of the post-Soviet world is that Transnistria is a popular touristic destination for people who visit the region as it provides a glimpse at the Soviet past. This autonomous region is only recognized as de jure independent by the Russian Federation but it enjoys de facto independence (Dzurek, 1999).

The two previous examples show how the destruction of national monuments and markers is not only common among the left but in many cases the right has eagerly attempted to erase the past. Even though communist regimes in Albania and Moldova made many mistakes and Albania was considered to be one of the most repressive governments in the communist bloc, there is also no doubt that the people of those countries achieved many things during those decades. Albania had one of the best armies in the region and an excellent infrastructure which includes a modern railway system. The communist Albanian government also invested a disproportionate amount of money and resources in protecting ancient heritage with a large full time staff of professional curators and archeologists.

3. The Pyrrhic Battle over the Name of a Park in Ecuador

The examples in the previous section involve violent constitutional changes leading from one political system to another. Nevertheless there are also cases of democratically elected governments engaging in similar attempts at erasing history. One interesting example is the case of the park known as the Park of the Iguanas in central Guayaquil, Ecuador. The park has had several official names. The park was officially named Parque Seminario in honor of a prominent citizen who donated the funds to improve the park following French style. Improvements included a large gazebo and fencing of the park with wrought iron. The leftist Government of Rafael Correa officially changed the name to Parque Bolivar in honor of the independence hero. Part of the reason for the change was a concerted attempt to de-emphasize elite culture in Ecuador and to attempt to weaken traditional elites. The change had very little practical effect because most local call the park Parque de las Iguanas because of the ubiquitous reptiles or Parque Seminario and the majority of international tour guides continue to call it Parque Seminario ("Parque Seminario," 2020).

The case of the Seminario Park shows the futility of attempts at erasing local history. Rather than part of a process of empowerment for the local people it is perceived by the local people as an outside imposition to rob them of their local traditions and culture. The following section provides a very famous example from Asia.

4. The Controversial Case of Yasukuni Shrine

One of the most common claims by partisans of destroying historical monuments is that the ideas or regimes they represents were “evil”. This is a very subjective assessment as there is no regime which can be described as purely evil. “Evil” is not a very scientific term and in terms of governance certain policies may be resisted by certain interest groups while supported by others. Even though there is no doubt that certain regimes committed many atrocities, their mistakes do not erase their successes. History is supposed to commemorate both the good and the bad. The Yasukuni Shrine is a very important cemetery in Japan which also serves as a Shinto Shrine (HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, & WAN, 2007; Morton & Olenik, 2005). Shintoism is the national religion of Japan and it is strongly connected to the imperial family (Morton & Olenik, 2005).

In Shintoism ancestors are enshrined when they become spirits/*kami*. Rituals are supposed to be performed to the *kami* every year because they are believed to have the power to intervene in the lives of the living (Morton & Olenik, 2005). More importantly for our present discussion, Yasukuni is the equivalent of the American Arlington cemetery in that burial there is a great honor and historically it was connected mostly with government officials and military officers who fought for Japan since the reign of Emperor Meiji (Morton & Olenik, 2005). The shrine is supposed to honor not only the Japanese who fought in the wars but also colonial subjects who fought on behalf of the Japanese such as Koreans. There are more than one thousand people interned in Yasukuni who were convicted of War crimes by the highly politicized Tokyo Trials. 14 of those people are considered Class-A War criminals (Morton &

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Olenik, 2005). Nevertheless it should be noted that there are over two million people interned in the complex and therefore the few controversial figures are a very small minority of the people who are honored in the Shrine. It should be noted that the Japanese government receives strong complaints from neighboring countries such as South Korea, North Korea, and China about the Shrine. The main criticism is that Japanese government officials pay their respects and send offerings to it. Every Prime Minister has made at least one visit in person during their tenure which has further infuriated opponents of the Shrine (Hook, Gilson, Hughes, & Dobson, 2005; [Togo, 2005](#)). The main argument is that it glorifies Japan's militaristic past and that therefore it is offensive to the victims of World War II.

The Japanese government has steadfastly refuses to stop supporting the Shrine and Japanese Prime Ministers and officials continue to visit it (Togo, 2005). From a Japanese perspective it is a symbol of their heritage and national honor. The Shrine provides continuity from the prewar to the present and thus provides a bridge to cross the traumatic defeat of World War II. General Douglass McArthur, Allied Supreme Commander for the Pacific and the main drafter of the current Japanese constitution understood the importance of heritage in Japan and in particular the pivotal role of the imperial institution in the social fabric of Japan and therefore decided to protect the Imperial family and many of its affiliated institutions (Smith, 1997; Togo, 2005). Needless to say there was considerable opposition to McArthur's approach both from inside of Japan as well as from abroad. Many Americans favored a wholesale re-engineering of Japanese society such as the one that had being forced on Germany after their defeat while many neighboring countries clamored for a reinterpretation of history and for the destruction of symbols of pre-war Japan (Smith, 1997).

The low-key and steadfast approach followed by the Japanese government regarding Yasukuni is a good example of how to deal with radical waves of criticism clamoring for the destruction or

sidelining of national symbols. Rather than engaging the radical revisionists in an endless and fruitless debate in the national media, it is a much better approach to focus on the importance of national heritage and to focus on educating the public about their past. This proactive approach is much more effective in garnering the support of the silent majority while at the same time dealing indirectly with some of the objections of the radical opposition.

5. Conclusions

The destruction, removal, or defacing of historical heritage is an attack on all of humanity. Censoring the past is the worst act of censorship possible and it is a sign of overblown pride and arrogance. Evaluating the past from the perspective of the present is methodologically invalid. It is as ridiculous as expecting a Roman Gladiator to follow the rules of combat of modern boxing. Attributing to one group the power to judge the actions of another group or person who no longer live is equally absurd. It is one thing to analyze the actions of a government official from the late 20th century and it is a completely different challenge to attempt to understand the challenges and context of the Spanish conquistadors in the 15th and 16th centuries. One of the most worrisome aspects of the recent wave of historical revisionism and attacks on national historical heritage is that many of the culprits are educated individuals, many of them are teachers. Rather than teaching their pupils to have an open mind and to embrace diversity and complexity, they dogmatically condemn entire historical periods and participate in the destruction of our national heritage.

The present paper has shown through several case studies the importance of protecting historical heritage regardless of ideology. Red Square in Moscow is as much a part of its history as the Winter Palace and both represent important periods of the history of that great nation. A balance between catering to the needs of the present and respecting the past can be achieved. Japan is a good example of how to deal with a glorious past interrupted by a traumatic period of

occupation. Academics and educators are at a forefront of the battle to protect our history and monuments.

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