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The Difficult Heritage of Dictatorship in Europe

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jch**Clare Copley** 

University of Central Lancashire, UK

Nick Carter 

Australian Catholic University, Australia

This special section examines how post-authoritarian societies in Europe since 1945 have negotiated the material legacies of dictatorship. By bringing together researchers working on sites, buildings and monuments once, or still, closely associated with Nazism, Fascism or State Socialism, the special section affords a bird's-eye view of the differing 'cultures of remembrance'¹ at play across six European nation-states: Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Albania and Croatia. It also speaks to the broader global monuments debate over what to do with the physical remains of 'histories that hurt,'² which flared after the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

We use the term 'difficult heritage' to describe these legacies. In doing so, we acknowledge our debt to Sharon Macdonald's seminal *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (2009). Here, Macdonald described difficult heritage as the material remains of 'a past that is recognized as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity.'³ We find Macdonald's definition attractive for two reasons. First, it is admirably clear and succinct. Second, and more importantly, it encompasses the dual ideas of heritage as anything that has survived from the past, *and* heritage as a practice or

1 H. Bodenschatz, 'Urbanism. Architecture and Dictatorship: Memory in Transition', in K. B. Jones and S. Pilat (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture* (Abingdon 2020), 65.

2 S. Nauret, 'The Linguistic and Cultural Interpretation of Dissonant Heritage: the ATRIUM Cultural Route', *Almatourism*, 15 (2017), 16.

3 S. Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (Abingdon 2009), 1.

Corresponding author:

Clare Copley, Senior Lecturer in Modern European History, University of Central Lancashire, 308 Livesey House, Heatley St, Preston, PR1 2HE, UK.

Email: ccopley@uclan.ac.uk

process, whereby something 'old' is conserved, preserved, restored and/or (re)presented depending on contemporary perceptions of its cultural or historical value. The definition is thus broad and flexible enough to cover a spectrum of difficult heritage 'types' from, for example, the 'quintessentially mundane' legacy of commemorative road names and plaques to heavily burdened places of 'pain and shame' connected to death, trauma and suffering, which have subsequently attained heritage status.⁴ The articles in the special section run the gamut from street renaming in post-communist Poland (Ochman) to the post-communist 'lives' of political prisons and labour camps in Southeastern Europe (Badesçu). The other three articles sit at points in between, examining in turn the fate of fascist and communist-era monuments and sites in postwar Italy and reunified Germany (Carter and Demshuk) and the 'voided landscape' of Hitler's Führerbunker in Berlin (Sharples).

As one might expect, the diversity of difficult heritage (in terms of types and difficult-ness) has attracted researchers from a range of disciplinary and subdisciplinary backgrounds including heritage and tourism studies, memory studies, urban geography, architectural and art history, sociology and social anthropology. While historians have been active in the field, they have by no means been predominant. Certainly, the confluence of past and present in studies of difficult heritage presents historians with particular conceptual and methodological challenges. The meanings and materialities of sites of difficult heritage are continually in flux and, even where they may appear to have become relatively settled, a shift in the political or urban landscape can reopen myriad questions or engender new ones. As such, analysis of difficult heritage sites involves the scrutiny of very recent, and often ongoing, discussions which are not traditionally considered to be within the purview of the historian. Yet, we would argue, there are good reasons to view difficult heritage through a historical lens. The origins of difficult heritage sites are comfortably grounded in 'the past' while the contests that surround them ripple into the present. To analyse a difficult heritage site or object historically is, therefore, to examine its journey from its origins to the present day. In doing so, the historian is able to identify and explore the complex layers of meanings, memories, uses and approaches that have been attached to it over time. As our contributors demonstrate, by recognizing difficult heritage as a metaphorical 'palimpsest' (Sharples and Demshuk) or by taking a 'biographical' approach towards difficult heritage (Badesçu) the historian is particularly well placed to capture these dynamic social, cultural and political processes. In turn, this guards against overly simplified and superficial readings of difficult heritage sites.

The articles that follow bring a strong historical focus to six interconnected areas of inquiry. First, the instrumental use of architecture, art and urban space by European dictatorships for ideological, educative and propagandistic ends and the close identification of particular sites, buildings and monuments with actually existing authoritarianism. Second, the post-regime survival of those sites, buildings and monuments once closely

4 M. Azaryahu, 'The Power of Commemorative Street Names', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14 (1996), 311; W. Logan and K. Reeves (eds) *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* (Abingdon and New York, NY 2009).

associated with former dictatorships. Third, changing approaches and attitudes towards the relics of dictatorship over time. Fourth, the particular societal, cultural and political contexts which have helped to shape and frame responses to the difficult heritage of dictatorship at the local and/or national level. Fifth, the complex interplay – and attendant tensions – between memory politics, aesthetics and the ‘seemingly more banal politics of use’ at difficult heritage sites.⁵ Sixth, the impact of ‘concepts and debates from elsewhere’ on local debates and actions regarding ‘what to do’ with the material legacies of dictatorship.⁶

These questions lie at the heart of our own research on the difficult heritage of dictatorship (Copley on the difficult heritage of Nazism and the GDR, focusing on Berlin; Carter on the difficult heritage of Fascism, focusing on Rome). In our previously published work, we have also both favoured a case study approach to reveal and analyse the complexities of negotiating difficult heritage in two very different national – and capital city – contexts.⁷ For us, the case study allows for a measure of analysis, detail and nuance that is difficult to achieve otherwise, especially so in the case of a word-limited journal article. The contributions to this special section follow our preference. While this means the articles are nationally or locally focused (Badesçu’s essay the exception) our hope is that readers will approach the contributions as a collection, to be considered and compared in the round.

The special section opens with Caroline Sharples’ study of the Führerbunker in Berlin, Hitler’s underground shelter during the last months of the Second World War and the site of his suicide in May 1945. Quickly sealed off by Soviet forces, the bunker subsequently survived attempts by the Soviet and East German authorities to destroy it before being marooned after 1961 in the ‘Death Strip’ between the inner and outer elements of the Berlin Wall. The ruined shell of the bunker was filled in 1988 but after the fall of the Wall and German reunification, the site’s notoriety made it both a tourist attraction and a headache for a city administration wrestling with the question of how the newly unified Germany should engage with its Nazi past. Only in 2006, however, was the Führerbunker finally transformed from ‘an unmarked patch of land to a labelled site of interest’, with the unveiling of a bilingual information board marking the bunker’s location underneath an otherwise nondescript car park. Utilizing netnography (the study of online cultures) to analyse Tripadvisor reviews of the site, Sharples argues that its setting and the understated presence of the information board has turned the long intangible and semi-mythical Führerbunker into ‘an effective countermemorial, its very

5 P. B. Jaskot, ‘The Reich Party Rally Grounds Revisited: The Nazi Past in Postwar Nuremberg’, in G. D. Rosenfeld and P. B. Jaskot (eds) *Beyond Berlin: Twelve German Cities Confront the Nazi Past* (Ann Arbor MI 2008), 144.

6 Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 7.

7 See for example: C. Copley, ‘Curating Tempelhof: Negotiating the Multiple Histories of Berlin’s ‘Symbol of Freedom’, *Urban History*, 44, 4 (2017), 698–717; C. Copley, *Nazi Buildings, Cold War Traces and Governmentality in Post-Unification Berlin* (London 2020); N. Carter and S. Martin, ‘The Management and Memory of Fascist Monumental Art in Postwar and Contemporary Italy: The Case of Luigi Montanarini’s *Apotheosis of Fascism*’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 22, 3 (2017), 338–364; N. Carter, ‘“What Shall We Do With It Now?”: The Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana and the Difficult Heritage of Fascism’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 66, 3 (2020), 377–95.

absence from the contemporary cityscape sparking public discussions among visitors and fostering a critical, grassroots reflection upon the challenges of handling legacies of dictatorship.'

In the second article, Andrew Demshuk analyses the communist and post-communist 'lives' of Leipzig's Karl Marx monument. Originally attached to the modernist façade of the Karl Marx University (KMU) campus in Augustusplatz in central Leipzig, the giant communist-era frieze now sits in a university courtyard several miles from the city centre. As Demshuk shows, the 'difficulty' of the monument post-1990 owed less to its subject matter than its long association in the public mind with the communist government's hugely unpopular 1968 dynamiting of the gothic Paulinerkirche in Augustusplatz, which was demolished to make way for the KMU campus. Consequently, from its inauguration in 1974, many Leipzigers regarded the Karl Marx monument – and the new campus buildings to which it was attached – as symbols of communist cultural barbarism. This left both the monument and campus vulnerable after the collapse of communist East Germany and German reunification, 1989–91. Still, though, it was only in 2005 that the fate of the campus was finally decided (the existing buildings would be demolished) and not until 2006 that Marx was moved, an indication of the lack of consensus between politicians, planners, academics, university officials, artists, cultural organizations and ordinary citizens over what exactly *should* be done. Today, a new set of campus buildings, complete with a splendid postmodern rendering of the former Paulinerkirche, occupy the site of the KMU, renamed the University of Leipzig in 1990. The Karl Marx monument meanwhile endures the banality of exile, surrounded by information boards and images of the demolition of the gothic church.

The capacity of regime-sponsored monuments to retain or lose what Demshuk calls their 'ideological charge' after the collapse of a dictatorship is explored further in Nick Carter's essay on three surviving 'faces' of Fascism in the northern Italian city of Brescia: Piazza Vittoria in the city's historic centre, the monument-ossuary to the Fallen of the First World War in the nearby Vantiniano cemetery, and the 'Bigio', a huge marble statue of a nude male youth originally located in Piazza Vittoria. Carter shows that despite their shared origins and proximity, the three have been negotiated and remembered very differently locally since 1945. Practical and functional issues have long dominated discussions over and memories of Piazza Vittoria but the square's origins under Fascism have not been forgotten. Carter attributes this to the trauma caused by the creation of the piazza, which involved extensive demolitions and the forced relocation of thousands of *bresciani* to the periphery; to the continuing strength of anti-Fascist Resistance memory in the city; and to the deadly 1974 neo-Fascist bombing of an anti-Fascist demonstration in neighbouring piazza della Loggia. In the case of the ossuary, its status as a monument to the Fallen of the Great War allowed it to quickly shed its Fascist connotations postwar and become part of the new republic's commemorative practices. Of the three legacies explored by Carter, the 'Bigio' is perhaps the most intriguing. Removed to a council warehouse in 1945, it has remained in storage ever since. The fate of the statue, however, remains a controversial and divisive issue. Carter sees this not only as a consequence of Italy's highly politicized 'memory wars' over Fascism/anti-Fascism but also of the statue's decades-long absence from

the cityscape: whereas objects usually acquire new layers of meaning overtime through their interactions with people, the contested meanings and values attached to the *Bigio in confino* have remained much as they were at the moment of its removal.

The last two articles in the special section focus on communist legacies in post-socialist Central and Southeastern Europe. In the first of these, Ewa Ochman examines and explains the strategies pursued by right-wing Polish nationalist groups since the early 1990s to legislate and decommunize public space in Poland, culminating in the so-called ‘street de-communization law’ of 2016. While the early years of Poland’s post-communist transition saw a wave of street renaming across the country, this was a relatively short-lived and uneven process, with local decisions left to local councils. Right-wing nationalist groups, which favoured a state-driven, centrally organized and comprehensive purge of the communist commemorative landscape as part of a wider purge of ex-communists from public office, were stymied for many years by the political dominance of liberal-leaning parties at the national level. Polish liberals, while agreeing in principle with the nationalist right over the need to decommunize public space, did not regard this as a priority or a matter for central government. The right’s opportunity to enact legislation followed the stunning election victory of Jaroslaw Kaczyński’s Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2015, which for the first time in post-communist Poland’s history returned a single party majority in the lower house of the Polish parliament. Although ostensibly about decommunizing public space, the 2016 law signified the wholesale rejection by the nationalist right of the liberals’ previous ‘thick line’ approach to Poland’s transition, based on societal reconciliation and pluralism. Under the new law, not only would new names effectively be imposed on local authorities, but the names selected for removal revealed a particularistic reading of the country’s highly contested recent past. Moreover, as Ochman shows, the PiS was able to shut down political debate around the law and its consequences by framing opposition as pro-communist and, by extension, anti-Polish. Here we are reminded of Maoz Azaryahu’s observation that the convergence of de-commemoration and commemoration ‘is a substantial part of the symbolic message of renaming as a celebration of change *and a demonstration of authority* [emphasis added].’⁸

In the final contribution to the special section, Gruia Badesçu explores the relationship between local, national and European memory in shaping approaches to the memorialization of sites of communist political violence in Southeastern Europe. Focusing on four former political prisons – Sighet and Pitești in Romania, Spaç in Albania, and Goli Otok in Croatia – Badesçu shows how the ‘Europeanization of memory’ of communist crimes, a process facilitated by the Council of Europe and European Parliament and connected to the eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU), has supported local ‘bottom-up’ activism in the absence of state-level engagement. Sighet prison, for example, was transformed into a museum in the 1990s thanks to the work of civil society activists, who took inspiration from Holocaust memorialization practices in Western Europe and consciously

8 M. Azaryahu, ‘German Reunification and the Politics of Street Names: The Case of East Berlin’, *Political Geography* 16, 6 (1997), 482

sought – and secured – Council of Europe support for the initiative. Soon after it opened, the Council of Europe went as far as to declare the museum one of the most important sites of commemoration in Europe, alongside Auschwitz and the Caen museum and memorial in Normandy, instantly propelling it into the ‘European memorial mainstream’. Sighet’s place in European memory culture was underlined in 2018 when it was awarded European Heritage Label status by the EU as a memorial that ‘provides insight on the repression by communist regimes in Europe throughout the twentieth century.’⁹ As Badesçu reveals, however, the success of Sighet has not been easy to replicate at other former prison sites elsewhere in Southeastern Europe, despite the activism of individuals, civil society organizations and victims groups, and (in the cases of Romania and Croatia) the Europeanization of funding for memory projects following EU accession. In these instances, issues of ownership (Pitești, Spaç), isolation (Spaç, Goli Otok), and competing commercial demands (Pitești, Spaç, and Goli Otok) have threatened or constrained memorialization initiatives. Pitești has also had to contend with the unwelcome attention of far-right nostalgics who come to honour the Iron Guard sympathizers who were tortured and abused in the prison.

We see some points of convergence in the five essays that constitute the special section: in the processes by which a particular site becomes ‘difficult heritage’; in the rough contours of the debates that surround such sites; in the relationships and power asymmetries between the actors that initiate and participate in those debates; in the combination of local conditions and ‘multiple interactions with various elsewheres’ in shaping approaches;¹⁰ and in some of the strategies used in the management of difficult heritage. At the same time, though, the contributions caution us against generalization (what Macdonald referred to as ‘an emphasis upon identifying universal “orientations”’).¹¹ As our contributors show, each site examined in this special section comprises multiple heavily contingent, inextricably entangled elements which contribute both to its ‘difficultness’ and to its designation as ‘heritage’.

The historical study of difficult heritage has taken on a new resonance in the wake of the global monuments debate as it reveals the significance not just of the events that led to a site’s inception or its current form in the built environment, but also of the silences, obfuscations and memory contests that constitute each site’s history. As such, we are required to consider not just the origins of problematic sites but also the implications of different societies’ responses, or lack of responses, to those sites over the years. In this regard, the essays in this section each point to valuable avenues of future historical research into difficult heritage in general and the difficult heritage of European dictatorship in particular. Sharples’ analysis of Tripadvisor posts shows how the contemporary elements of the study of difficult heritage compel us as historians to reconsider our source base as we interrogate how modern audiences encounter, experience and

9 <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/initiatives-and-success-stories/european-heritage-label/european-heritage-label-sites/sighet-memorial-romania> (accessed 22 September 2023).


10 Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 186.


11 Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*, 4.

discuss problematic sites. Demshuk, Carter and Badesçu demonstrate the value of ‘de-centring’ research on the difficult heritage of dictatorship, the first two by moving beyond the much-studied capital city context into the underexplored provinces, the latter by taking a transnational approach to the study of a particular difficult heritage ‘type’, in this case, political prisons, to reveal the interplay of local, national and international memorial contexts and entanglements. Finally, Ochman reminds us how historical memory and political power structures are deeply embedded in the humblest of urban settings, the street name. (We note here that the *Journal of Contemporary History* last published an article on street renaming in 1986. We hope that where Ochman has gone, others will soon follow.)

Just as there is no universal template for an ‘appropriate’ response to difficult heritage, there is no straightforward, mono-directional trajectory that takes a site from ‘problematic’ to ‘dealt with’. Even sites that appear to be relatively settled today are liable to change as contemporary efforts to engage with their difficult pasts come to be viewed as inadequate, excessive or dissonant in other ways. As the contributions to this special section show, the study of difficult heritage is never ‘just’ the analysis of a site but also an interrogation of a society’s constantly evolving cultures, values, and ideologies. In an age of increased popularism and polarization, the politics of the past are all too frequently invoked by various parties in competing bids for legitimacy. We believe that rigorously researched, balanced and coherent studies which place these memory contests into historical context can be a much-needed redress to this and hope that the essays contained in this special section will pave the way for further work in this area. Just as difficult heritage is a process, so too is its study.

ORCID iDs

Clare Copley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7001-7604>

Nick Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6363-4148>

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Biographical Notes

Clare Copley is a Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. Her publications on difficult heritage, memory, power and the built environment in modern Germany include: *Nazi Buildings, Cold War Traces and Governmentality in Post-Unification Berlin* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) and

“‘Stones do not Speak for Themselves’”: Disentangling Berlin’s Palimpsest’, *Fascism*, (2019). Her article, ‘Curating Tempelhof: negotiating the multiple histories of Berlin’s ‘symbol of freedom’, *Urban History* (2017) was awarded the Dyos Prize for the best article submitted to the journal that year. She is now working on a new project on the occupation of West Berlin with a particular focus on the U.S. Court of Berlin.

Nick Carter is Associate Professor of Modern History at Australian Catholic University. He is the author of *Modern Italy in Historical Perspective* (2010) and (as editor) *Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento* (2015). His current research examines the difficult heritage of Italian Fascism. His work in this area has been published in the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2017), *Modern Italy* (2019), and the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* (2020). In 2019, he co-edited a special issue of *Modern Italy* on difficult Fascist heritage with Simon Martin. His article, ‘The meaning of monuments: remembering Italo Balbo in Italy and the United States’, was a joint winner of the Christopher Seton Watson Memorial Prize for the best article published in *Modern Italy* in 2019.