

## TOPIC GUIDE: HISTORICAL MONUMENTS (GERMANY EDITION)

**"MONUMENTS TO CONTROVERSIAL  
HISTORICAL FIGURES SHOULD REMAIN"****PUBLISHED: 15 JAN 2018****AUTHOR: JOHN MILNES-SMITH**

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**INTRODUCTION**

On 17 October 2016, Austria's interior minister, Wolfgang Sobotka, announced that the controversial, 200-year-old building in which Adolf Hitler was born would be demolished. Such a decision followed years of debate over the status of the home, with most viewing it as a reminder of a dark chapter of history [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Others, however, such as the occasional crowds of neo-Nazis who have visited the site, have made the building a tourist attraction and location for glorification in a trend that has pushed many of the local townspeople of Braunau and minister Sobotka himself to support the destruction of the building. [Ref: [Deutsche Welle](#)] In many other nations, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of certain historical memorials has gathered pace, with the American city of New Orleans recently voting to remove statues of prominent Confederate figures of the American Civil War, such as Robert E Lee and Jefferson Davis, in an attempt to confront the South's racist past [Ref: [CNN](#)]. At Oxford University, a campaign began for the removal of a statue of Sir Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, with supporters observing that any steps to address the lack of black and minority students and lecturers at the institution were undermined by the monument [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For supporters, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign 'operates on the premise that these present discrepancies are rooted in history, and the present and the past must, together, be critically engaged with' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, a number of critics have begun to express concern at campaigns to 'whitewash' history, with columnist Matthew D'Ancona arguing that: "There is a modernist urge to wipe away the past and replace it with the new, but we should resist it." ( [Ref: New York Times](#) ) At its heart, the debate is about our relationship with history, and whether removing statues and monuments has a role to play in reappraising historic wrongs, or whether they encourage us to airbrush out difficult and contentious parts of our history, rather than engage with and understand them. Should monuments or heritage sites of controversial historical figures remain?

*For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.*

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT

*This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.*

### Do historical monuments matter?

‘Public statues are intensely political’ notes writer Martin Gayford. He outlines the nature of public memorials and statues, and observes that over time, our appraisal of individuals changes, for instance as with the thousands of statues of Lenin and Marx brought down after the fall of the former Soviet Union [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. From this perspective, historical monuments do matter as they can be seen as symbols of norms and values we agree to commemorate, as historian Professor Christopher Phelps argues [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)]. He says: ‘History is one thing, memorials another. As tributes, memorials are selective, affirmative representations. When a university names a building after someone, or erects a statue to that person, it bestows honour and legitimacy.’ [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)] However, the moral value of historical monuments is fiercely contested. For critics, in removing these statues we are in danger of symbolically removing distasteful aspects of history which allow us to understand the present. As one South African student notes in reference to Rhodes: ‘Removing him omits an essential part of the institution’s history that has contributed to everything good, bad and ugly about it’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Some have argued that removing unplanned sites such as the home of Hitler’s birth, as opposed to monuments, may have the opposite effect that those wishing to destroy it would intend. Despina Stratigakos cites the example of the Nazi Berghof which was blown up by authorities and left in ruins only to eventually become a renewed shrine for neo-Nazis. Stratigakos further contends that removal of a simple building dating back to the seventeenth century opens the possibility for a void into which any type of new meaning may be projected [Ref: [Quartz](#)]. In the case of the Rhodes statue at the University of Oxford, some attempt to place the monument in its historical context, and note that Oriel College was founded in 1324, and as such, its statues serve as a repository of history, good and bad. More importantly, they argue: ‘A salient fact about the Oriel statue of Rhodes is its date: 1911. It is an echo in stone of a different time.’ [Ref: [New York Times](#)]

### Why do people want to remove them?

Advocates of removing statues of controversial figures or questionable heritage sites, suggest that these memorials represent individuals whose actions and legacies should not be celebrated or immortalised. Moreover, our understanding and interpretation of historical norms and values changes over time, which means we should be constantly re-appraising historical monuments. Christopher Phelps argues: ‘To reconsider, to recast, is the essence of historical practice. It follows that altering how we present the past through commemorative symbol is not ahistorical...on the contrary, it represents a more thorough coming to terms with the past and legacies, a refusal to forget.’ [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)] Viewing historical figures through critical eyes is vital for supporters who do not see statues and memorials as benign and meaningless symbols. Instead, they argue that in the case of the Confederate statues in New Orleans, for example: ‘The statues serve less as a testament to the men they depicted than to the cause they represented, as propaganda to a particular point of view that dominated a particular time.’ [Ref: [The Advocate](#)] Historian David Olusoga claims that the movement to bring down memorials of certain historical figures has a broader aim, beyond statues or sites themselves, and that it is about former powers such as Britain and Germany accepting past atrocities, and realising that there are aspects of history that ‘should not be uncritically celebrated’, asking if ‘we really want to be a society that uncritically memorialises a nineteenth-century racist.’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Ultimately, supporters argue that we should morally judge figures such as Rhodes -

and in that judgement, decide whether or not we should still have public memorials regarding them [Ref: [London Review of Books](#)], because ‘parts of the past are not dead and symbols matter’. [Ref: [Guardian](#)]

### Re-writing history?

Historian and broadcaster Professor Mary Beard contends that instead of tearing down memorials to controversial figures, it is ‘more important is to look history in the eye and reflect on our awkward relationship to it... not to simply photoshop the nasty bits out.’ [Ref: [Times Literary Supplement](#)] In a similar vein, some are cautious about the idea of subjecting historical figures to modern standards of moral judgement [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and question what good an example such as removing a statue of Cecil Rhodes will do in a practical sense, as: ‘Rhodes cannot be expunged from the history of Oxford, Britain and South Africa.’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Opponents of campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall are critical of attempts to infantilise students and the public by claiming that statues of historical figures in some way have an impact on social issues today. One commentator argues that: ‘Campaigners are deluding themselves if they think that removing a flag or statue will make any difference to inequalities of race, class or gender’ [Ref: [The Conversation](#)], and suggests that rather than insisting that statues should come down, they need to engage in the politics needed to bring about real change. Furthermore, for these critics the act of understanding history relies on recognising how the past informs the present, and not editing out parts we don’t like, which in turn means that the individuals and events of the past, which are at times memorialised through monuments, street names or statues, are legitimate parts of the narrative and fabric of history. Allowing these sites to stand isn’t to legitimise the views of slave holders, imperialists, and other controversial figures, but rather, it is part of the ‘challenge of history’ to debate the moral questions the monuments may present, and confront them head-on [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Additionally, the problem with attempting to eradicate problematic aspects of history, critics argue, is that campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall are emblematic of a wider contemporary fixation with pathologising the past [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Writer Brendan O’Neill maintains that: ‘What is most notable about Rhodes Must Fall is its treatment of history as a source of psychological trauma.’ [Ref: [spiked](#)] In light of the arguments on both sides, should monuments and heritage sites of controversial historical figures be removed, or does this do a disservice to history, and make us victims of history rather than subjects who can understand and engage with it?

## ESSENTIAL READING

*It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.*

**Evil Resident: Adolf Hitler’s Birth House Haunts Austrian Town** [🔗](#)

New Delhi Television 29 April 2015

**Why is Cecil Rhodes such a controversial figure?** [🔗](#)

BBC News 1 April 2015

## FOR

**Must Rhodes fall?** [🔗](#)

Matthew D’Ancona **New York Times** 28 January 2016

## AGAINST

**Why Hitler’s house should be destroyed** [🔗](#)

Jamie Aspden **Redbrick** 16 November 2016

**Removing Confederate monuments in New Orleans is the right thing to do** [↗](#)

Stephanie Grace **The Advocate** 21 March 2016

**Removing racist symbols isn't a denial of history** [↗](#)

Christopher Phelps **Chronicle of Higher Education** 8 January 2016

**The University of Cape Town is right to remove its Cecil Rhodes statue** [↗](#)

David Priestland **Guardian** 13 April 2015

## IN DEPTH

**The real meaning of Rhodes must fall** [↗](#)

Amit Chaudhuri **Guardian** 16 March 2016

**Hitler's old house gives Austria a headache** [↗](#)

Bethany Bell **BBC News** 29 December 2014

## KEY TERMS

*Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.*

**American Civil War** [↗](#)

**Cecil Rhodes** [↗](#)

**Colonialism** [↗](#)

**Confederate States of America**

**Imperialism** [↗](#)

**Rhodes must fall** [↗](#)

## BACKGROUNDEERS

*Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.*

**Why the Austrian government's plan to demolish Hitler's birth house is contentious** [↗](#)

Luke Fiederer **Archdaily** 1 November 2016

**The terrible problem of Hitler's earliest home** [↗](#)

Jessie Guy-Ryan **Atlas Obscura** 10 April 2016

**Cecil Rhodes colonial legacy must fall – not his statue** [↗](#)

Siya Mnyanda **Guardian** 25 March 2016

**Not all racist monuments should be torn down** [↗](#)

Zachary Fine **New Republic** 10 March 2016

**Rhodes hasn't fallen, but the protesters are making me re-think Britain's past** [↗](#)

Timothy Garton Ash **Guardian** 4 March 2016

**New Orleans says goodbye to its Confederate status** [↗](#)

**Economist** 4 February 2016

**Students who say Rhodes must fall should be celebrated – not sneered at** [↗](#)

Dan Hodges **Telegraph** 4 February 2016

**History is not a morality play: both sides of the Rhodes must fall debate should remember that** [↗](#)

Cheryl Hudson **The Conversation** 30 January 2016

**Finally! Oriel College should have stood up to Rhodes Must Fall long ago** [↗](#)

Harry Mount **Telegraph** 29 January 2016

**Will Rhodes must fall fail?** [↗](#)

**BBC News** 18 January 2016

## **Defending Robert E. Lee** [↗](#)

Barry D. Wood **Huffington Post** 11 January 2016

## **Topple the Cecil Rhodes statue? Better to re-brand him a war criminal** [↗](#)

David Olusoga **Guardian** 7 January 2016

## **Never mind Rhodes – it's the cult of the victim that must fall** [↗](#)

Brendan O'Neill **spiked** 28 December 2015

## **The statue of Cecil Rhodes like that of Saddam, must fall** [↗](#)

Chi Chi Shi **The Times** 26 December 2015

## **Message to students: Rhodes was no racist** [↗](#)

Nigel Biggar **The Times** 22 December 2015

## **Cecil Rhodes was racist, but you can't readily expunge him from history** [↗](#)

Will Hutton **Guardian** 20 December 2015

## **Confederate monuments will come down in New Orleans** [↗](#)

Kevin M. Levin **Atlantic** 17 December 2015

## **Don't tear down Confederate monuments – do this instead** [↗](#)

Jack Hitt **Reuters** 23 July 2015

## **Why we shouldn't pull down all those Confederate memorials** [↗](#)

Alfred L. Brophy **Newsweek** 10 July 2015

## **ORGANISATIONS**

*Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.*

## **IN THE NEWS**

*Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.*

## **Austrian Court: government's seizure of Hitler's birth home is constitutional** [↗](#)

Jonathan Zalman **The Tablet** 3 July 2017

## **Ex-owner of Adolf Hitler's birthplace sues Austria** [↗](#)

**New Delhi Television** 1 February 2017

## **Austrian MPs vote to seize Hitler's birthplace house** [↗](#)

**BBC News** 16 December 2016

## **Head of Rhodes Trust backs rights of Rhodes must fall in Oxford movement** [↗](#)

**Independent** 2 June 2016

## **Rhodes statue removed in Cape Town as crowd celebrates** [↗](#)

**BBC News** 29 April 2016

## **'Take it down!': Rhodes must fall campaign marches through Oxford** [↗](#)

**Guardian** 9 March 2016

## **Cecil Rhodes statue row: Chris Patten tells students to embrace freedom of thought** [↗](#)

**Guardian** 13 January 2016

## **Students trying to 'write Rhodes out of history'** [↗](#)

**The Times** 4 January 2016

## **Oriel students want Rhodes statue to stay** [↗](#)

**The Times** 4 January 2016

## **New Orleans votes to remove Confederate Civil War memorials** [↗](#)

**CNN** 18 December 2015

**Dutch citizens honor a Wermacht soldier** 

Thomas Burmeister **Welt 24** 17 October 2008

## **AUDIO/VISUAL**

This site contains links to websites operated by parties other than Debating Matters. Although we make every effort to ensure links are current, they will sometimes break after Topic Guide publication. If a link does not work, then the publication reference and date should enable you to find an alternate link. If you find a broken link do please send it to the **webmaster** for review.

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