



DEBATING MATTERS

sixth-form debating competition

DEBATING MATTERS TOPIC GUIDE

“Monuments to historical figures should remain”

INTRODUCTION

On 9 April 2015, the University of Cape Town removed a statue commemorating the 19th century British imperialist Cecil Rhodes [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. This was the culmination of a month long campaign by both students and academics as part of the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement, which argued that Rhodes was more than just a symbol of past oppression – that he represented an institutional racism which continues to exist within the university today [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Since then, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of certain historical monuments 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 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: [The 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 to controversial historical figures remain?

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” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] 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 that: “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 institutions history that has contributed to everything good, bad and ugly about it” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In the case of the Rhodes statue at 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, suggest that these monuments represent individuals whose actions and legacies should not be celebrated or memorialised. And while not agreeing that the statue of Cecil Rhodes should come down at Oriel College Oxford, author and columnist Timothy Garton-Ash concedes that, “this is a perfectly legitimate debate about the politics of memory” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For some, the statue of Rhodes

represents the glorifying of a “racist mass murderer of Africans” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and serves to further alienate black students who study at Oxford and elsewhere. As one Rhodes Must Fall campaigner argues: “While these histories continue to be forgotten, a sentimentalised, whitewashed statue stands in the way of academic rigour.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Moreover, our understanding and interpretation of historical norms and values changes over time, which means we should be constantly re-appraising historical monuments. “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 statues of certain historical figures has a broader aim, beyond the statues themselves, and that it is about former colonial powers such as Britain accepting past atrocities, and realising that there are aspects of history which, “should not be uncritically celebrated”, asking if, “we really want to be a society that uncritically memorialises a 19th 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 and statues to them [Ref: [London Review of Book](#)], 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, “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 removing a statue of 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 are legitimate parts of the narrative and fabric of history. Allowing these monuments to stand isn't to legitimate the views of 19th century slave holders or imperialists or Confederate Generals, 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](#)], with writer Brendan O'Neill maintaining 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 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

The trouble with people who lived in the past

David Mitchell **Guardian** 16 March 2016

Must Rhodes fall?

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

Racism at Oxford goes deeper than a statue of Cecil Rhodes

Dena Latif **Guardian** 4 January 2016

Cecil Rhodes and Oriel College, Oxford

Professor Mary Beard **Times Education Supplement** 20 December 2015

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

Oxford's Cecil Rhodes statue must fall – it stands in the way of inclusivity

Yussef Robinson **Guardian** 19 January 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

Under Rhodes

Amia Srinivasan **London Review of Books** 31 March 2016

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

A short history of statue toppling

Martin Gayford **Spectator** 9 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.

Oriel College Oxford

University of Cape Town