

CHAIR REPORT

Committee: UNESCO

Topic: The Issue of Contested Historical Narratives and the Politics of Collective Memory as Drivers of Modern Conflict

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Introduction

History is not a few events from the past that need to be forgotten. It can play a key role in determining present-day politics and conflicts. Historical narratives focus on how events from the past can be recorded, taught, remembered, and interpreted, even if the perspectives are coming from different teams. Many countries tend to take turns in argument over historical narratives, whether it's over territorial conflict, political tensions, and even a nation's identity. These differences can become more critical when governments, political groups, or communities, use variants of historical narratives to support their own ideology.

Collective memory, on the other hand, can be seen as the way some individuals remember important events from their past. This knowledge can be passed down from friends and families to public and private institutions to social media, including monuments, museums, schools, or even through national/holiday celebrations. In some cases, this term can be used to help communities remember victims and prevent similar events from happening again. However, when historical narratives are presented from a one-sided perspective, it can lead to distorted interpretations, biased opinions, or outright denial, creating tension between different groups.

This issue still remains relevant today as historical disagreements continue to affect international relations in different regions. Examples include a modern-day conflict

between Cambodia and Thailand regarding certain monuments based in Cambodian territory, different collective memories of the wars in former Yugoslavia, and disagreements between Japan and South Korea regarding Japan's colonial rule. Therefore, the committee must consider how history and collective memory can be preserved while also preventing historical disagreements from escalating into modern conflict.

Key Terms

Collective Memory

The way a group or society remembers important events from its past. Collective memory can be influenced by families, schools, governments, museums, monuments, media, and cultural traditions.

Historical Narrative

The practice of writing or narrating history in story-based themes, making history more engaging and aids in educating future youth. It also plays as a reflection of the author's personal experience or as a POV of a certain cultural identity. These narratives may find themselves as useful identity building, preserving tradition or as biased propaganda.

As for "contested" historical narratives, it is when the narrative is being disagreed/debated upon by different groups, countries, or communities. This can happen when people have personal viewpoints to who was responsible, what happens, or how an event was remembered.

Modern Conflict

In the term of "modern" conflict, it references conflicts during the 21st century, involving verbal disagreements, psychological warfare, or military and territorial disputes. This term also finds itself covering social, civil justice movements such as prejudice over racism, homosexuality, religions, sexism, and even modern classism.

Historical Denialism

Also known as historical negotiationism, the distortion or refusal to accept well-established historical events or facts. Historical denial can become a concern as it attacks objective truth, insults the dignity of victims and survivors, and reactivates the hateful ideologies that caused past catastrophes.

Historical Revisionism

The process of changing or reinterpreting an existing understanding of history. Historical revisionism has found itself in historical research, playing the purpose of being educational

and perseverance. However it still raises risks when facts are deliberately changed or denied for political propaganda or personal ideologies, leading to historical denialism.

Background Information

Historical narratives have existed for centuries as communities continue to record wars, political changes, cultural traditions, and major events. However, the way these events are perceived is not always the same between different groups. We often find governments playing an important role in deciding which historical events are taught in schools, how they are displayed in museums, and about the national significance of the event. Doing so, will allow for different understandings of the same event between countries or communities that have different perspectives or context.

During the 20th century, major events such as the two World Wars, the Holocaust, colonialism, genocides, and proxy wars had created historical memories which still influence societies today. For example, the Holocaust became an important part of Germany's historical representation and education after World War II, while past results of colonialism still continue to affect regions in Asia, Africa, and America.

The issue became more visible when historical memories began being connected to modern political disputes. In regions such as the Balkans, East Asia, and the South Caucasus, different interpretations of history have contributed to political disagreements and social tensions. UNESCO has therefore emphasized the importance of education, museums, archives, and cultural heritage in helping communities understand difficult histories and support reconciliation.

Major Countries and/or Organizations Involved

Minimum of four countries or organizations. Write a few sentences about them.

Cambodia

Cambodia is an important example in two ways: Due to the historical memory surrounding the Khmer Rouge period from 1975 to 1979, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek Genocidal Center have become important places for remembering the victims and educating younger generations. In July 2025, UNESCO inscribed Cambodia's memorial sites onto the World Heritage List as "Cambodian Memorial Sites: From Centres of Repression to Places of Peace and Reflection." This

shows how historical collective memory can be used for bringing up remembrance, teaching the younger generations, and reconciliation.

Another example would be the modern border-conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. Due to historical denialism and revisionism, the two countries have been in a border dispute, where historical and cultural claims have contributed to the tension, especially towards the ownership of the Preah Vihear Temple, an ancient temple located near the Cambodia-Thailand border, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. In 2025, armed clashes between the two countries occurred along several areas of their disputed border, while UNESCO expressed concern towards the protection of the cultural heritage near Preah Vihear. This shows how different historical narratives from both countries can lead on to modern conflict and distortion of the past events.

Japan

Japan remains involved in discussions about historical memory, especially regarding its action in the east region of Asia during the first half of the 20th century. Historical disagreements with countries such as South Korea and China have included issues involving wartime actions, colonial rule, textbooks, memorials, and the recognition of victims. These disagreements can continue to affect diplomatic relations even many decades after the original events.

Germany

Germany plays an important role model on collective memory, of how a country can address a difficult historical past. Following World War II and the Holocaust, Germany decided to develop educational programs, memorial sites, museums, and public remembrance to acknowledge the crimes committed during the Nazi period. The country's approach has often been used as an example of how education and remembrance can contribute to preventing historical denial and promoting responsibility.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO plays an important role through representing international support and advocacy for education, culture, historical sites, museums, archives, and cultural heritage. UNESCO supports the preservation of historical and cultural materials while also promoting education for peace and international understanding. In 2023, UNESCO adopted the Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, where it encourages for education systems to help develop peace, human rights, critical thinking, and international understanding.

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe plays an important role in promoting history education, human rights and cooperation between European countries. The council has worked on the significance of controversial historical events, especially in countries affected by war and political conflict. The organization has also encouraged dialogue between historians and communities when misunderstandings arise.

International Court of Justice (ICJ)

ICJ has shown its importance in this topic, as they are responsible for resolving disputes between countries through international law, in a timeline where historical interpretations and territorial claims can sometimes become international legal disputes. ICJ can also play as an evidence manifest on the legality of certain topics, using the Cambodia-Thailand border dispute as an example, we can see the historical denialism, as ICJ has ruled Preah Vihear's ownership to Cambodia in 1962. Cases like these can show how historical and territorial disagreements can continue to affect overseas relations and the significance in involving our neighboring organizations when it's right.

Timeline of Events

A minimum of 4 events needed, please provide a brief description of the event.

For the date format use: day/month/year , ex: 3 June 2009

<i>Date</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>9 December 1948</i>	<i>The United Nations adopted the Convention following the mass violence and genocide experienced during the World War II. The convention established genocide as a crime under international law and created an international responsibility to prevent and punish it.</i>
<i>22 January 1963</i>	<i>France and West Germany signed the Élysée Treaty, which strengthened the cooperation between the two countries after decades of conflict. The agreement is an important example of how former enemies can use cooperation and not let their own historical experiences destroy relations, instead to create a shared future.</i>

- 16 November 1972 UNESCO adopted the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The Convention created an international system for protecting cultural and natural heritage, including historical places that are important to the identity and memory of communities.*
- 15 April 1995 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission began its work in South Africa to investigate human rights violations committed during apartheid. It became an important example of using truth, testimony and public discussion to address a difficult national history.*
- 17 October 2003 UNESCO adopted the Convention to protect traditions, knowledge, practices, and cultural expressions passed between generations. This helped expand the understanding of heritage beyond buildings and monuments.*
- 26 February 2007 The International Court of Justice delivered its judgement concerning the Genocide Convention and the events in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The case became an important international legal example concerning responsibility for genocide and the interpretation of historical events.*
- 11 July 2021 The 26th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide was commemorated internationally. The continued remembrance of the victims demonstrates how events from the past can remain politically and socially important, decades after a conflict has ended.*
- 20 November 2023 UNESCO Member States adopted the Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development. The Recommendation encourages education to promote peace, international understanding, human rights, and critical thinking.*
- 11 July 2025 UNESCO inscribed Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and the former M-13 prison as the Cambodian Memorial Sites: From Centres of Repression to Places of Peace and Reflection. The inscription*

recognized the importance of preserving Cambodia's historical memory while using sites for education and peace.

27 January 2026 *UNESCO launches an online course to help educators teach histories of genocide, war, colonialism, and other forms of violence. The course focuses on using historical sources and testimonies to help students understand how the past can continue to influence modern societies.*

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

minimum of five treaties and/or events, include a few Sentences describing the results or what happened.

- ***Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948:*** *The United Nations adopted the Genocide Convention on 9 December 1948. It established genocide as a crime under international law and requires countries to work towards preventing and punishing genocide.*
- ***UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection, 1972:*** *The Convention was adopted on 16 November 1972 and established international cooperation for protecting cultural and natural heritage. Historical sites can be important for preserving the memory and identity of communities.*
- ***UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003:*** *Adopted on 17 October 2003, this Convention focuses on protecting traditions, knowledge, practices, and cultural expressions. It recognizes that cultural heritage can help bring communities closer together and support understanding.*
- ***UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, 2023:*** *Adopted on 20 November 2023 by all 194 UNESCO Member States, this Recommendation encourages education systems to promote peace, human rights, international understanding, and critical thinking. It also recognizes education as an important method of preventing discrimination, hate speech, violence, and conflict.*
- ***UNESCO International Program on Holocaust and Genocide Education:*** *UNESCO has developed programs to support education about the Holocaust and*

other genocides. These programs aim to help students understand the causes and consequences of mass violence while preventing denial and distortion of historical events.

- ***UNESCO Memory of the World Programme:*** *This programme works to preserve documentary heritage such as archives, manuscripts, and historical documents. Protecting these sources can help future generations access evidence about historical events rather than relying only on political or national interpretations.*

Previous Attempts to solve the issue

There have been many attempts by governments and international organizations to address the problems caused by contested historical narratives. One of the major approaches has been the use of education. UNESCO has continued to support history and peace education, especially regarding violent pasts such as genocide, war, colonialism, and other forms of mass violence.

Another approach has been the establishment of museums, memorials, and archives. These places can preserve evidence and personal testimonies from historical events while allowing victims and their communities to have their experiences remembered. Cambodia is one example, where Tuol Sleng and Cheoung Ek have been used for remembrance and education. In 2025, UNESCO showed recognition of the Cambodian Memorial Sites as World Heritage further showed the importance of preserving historical memory.

Countries have also attempted to solve historical disagreements through reconciliation and international cooperation. The Élysée Treaty between France and West Germany in 1963 is an example of former enemies creating stronger relations after major conflicts. Similarly, truth and reconciliation processes, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, have attempted to address past human rights violations through testimonies and public discussions. However, these approaches do not always completely solve disagreements, especially when political groups continue to have different interpretations of their past.

Possible Solutions

While addressing contested historical narratives, delegates should strive to focus on allowing communities to preserve their history while also preserving historical disagreements from creating future conflict. One possible approach could be to strengthen historical education and encourage schools to teach difficult historical events, while considering different perspectives from both oppositions. Governments

and education systems should provide students with reliable historical sources, testimonies, and evidence instead of only presenting one national perspective. This could help younger generations develop critical thinking and understand that different communities may have experienced the same event differently.

Furthermore, UNESCO and Member States could encourage cooperation between museums, archives, historians, and educational institutions from countries with historical disagreements. Joint research projects could allow historians from different countries to study historical documents and develop educational materials together. This could be useful for countries such as Japan and South Korea, where historical disagreements continue to influence modern relations. However these programs should not force countries to accept one single interpretation of history, as Member States should still be able to protect their own cultural identity and historical traditions.

Another possible solution could be strengthening museums and historical sites as places for education and reconciliation. Governments could provide funding for the preservation of memorial sites, archives, testimonies, and historical documents. These sites could also organize youth programs, exhibitions, and international educational exchanges to allow young people to understand the experiences of different communities. The Cambodian Memorial Sites demonstrate how places connected to painful historical events can be transformed into spaces for education, reflection, and peace.

Moreover, the international community should work against the deliberate denial or distortion of serious historical events. This does not mean that every disagreement about history should be punished, as historical research can naturally develop when new evidence is found. Instead, governments, schools, museums, and organizations should promote the use of reliable evidence and encourage people to compare different sources before accepting historical claims. Public awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs can also help people recognize misleading historical information, especially when social media is used to spread false or highly biased information.

Finally, addressing the concerns over violation of national sovereignty or international propaganda interfering with their education systems, Member States are recommended to focus on voluntary cooperation, technical assistance, and sharing educational resources rather than forcing governments and ideologies to change their cultural history. Member States could receive support in developing balanced history materials, training teachers, preserving archives, and/or creating cultural exchange

programs. This approach can allow for countries to maintain their national identity while encouraging greater international understanding and reducing the possibility of historical disagreements contributing to modern conflict.

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