



COMMEMORATING THE SELK'NAM GENOCIDE

Punta Arenas, Chile

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Executive Summary

The late nineteenth century saw the systematic killing of the Selk'nam indigenous group members at the hands of European settlers in Punta Arenas, Chile. Until 2007, the official state narrative surrounding the fate of the Selk'nam failed to recognise the genocidal dynamics underpinning the dramatic decline in their population. Instead, such a narrative celebrated the legacy of prosperous businessmen like José Menéndez, whose active role in enabling the genocide has recently been highlighted in revisionist history. The process of contesting the conventional narrative at the state level has nevertheless deepened the grievances of Selk'nam descendants and raised concerns over the rights of indigenous groups in Chile. This case study traces these recent discursive shifts and explores the novel sites of conflict created over the appropriate ways to commemorate the Selk'nam genocide.

Introduction

The Selk'nam, also known as the Onawo or Ona people, were one of three indigenous tribes that inhabited Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the South American continent and presently shared by Chile and Argentina.¹ During the late 19th century, the group's members suffered a campaign of mass killing at the hands of European settlers, a historical fact that the Chilean State has failed to recognise and actively commemorate.² Instead, the official historical narrative remembers the legacy of settlers such as José Menéndez, whom recent historiography has placed at the forefront of the Selk'nam genocide.³

Over the last 15 years, Chile has witnessed heightened efforts to commemorate the genocide that has been accompanied by the growing repudiation of the figure of Menéndez and his public memorials in Punta Arenas. These recent phenomena have sparked a wider conversation about the rights of indigenous populations in Chile and raised questions about the State's role in their protection and inclusion. This case study considers public commemorations of the genocide. It shows that the Chilean State and population are very much in the early stages of coming to terms with, recognising, and actively commemorating this event.

Background

The Selk'nam were one of the last remaining indigenous groups in Chile to have interacted with European settlers. Indeed, their genocide did not occur until the second half of the nineteenth century, when an influx of European agriculturalists began to establish themselves in Tierra del Fuego and the city of Punta Arenas, invited by the Chilean State to settle in those areas. Of the 4000 Selk'nam that lived in Chile in 1850, only about 100 remained in 1930.⁴ Such a campaign of extermination was mainly carried out by sheep ranchers, who profited significantly from ties to the British wool trade and sought territorial expansion to meet the economic demand. In addition to the mass murder, some members were exposed to forced labour, some were imprisoned on Dawson Island, and children, in particular, were given to Salesian missionaries to compel their religious conversion and assimilation into the European order.⁵

José Menéndez, a Spanish businessman, was an instrumental figure behind Patagonia's flourishing agricultural enterprise. Owing to his economic legacy for Punta Arenas and the region of Magallanes, he has been elevated and celebrated in regional and national memory in Chile. Following his death in 1918, he was remembered fondly in the press and often given appellatives in tribute, such as 'the last conquistador' and 'King of Patagonia.'⁶ As with many other cases, his role in driving economic growth and prosperity was reinforced to some degree by the right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet. In May 1975, to mark the centenary of the arrival of Menéndez to Punta

¹ Chapman, Anne. *European Encounters with the Yamana People of Cape Horn, Before and After Darwin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

² Veksler, Bernardo. "Historiador chileno niega el genocidio del pueblo selk'nam." *El Diario del fin del mundo*, July 30, 2007.

³ Alonso Marchante, Luis. "A cien años de la muerte de Menéndez: el destronado rey de la Patagonia y responsable del genocidio selk'nam." *El Mostrador*, April 25, 2018.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Adelaar, Willem. "South America". In Moseley, Christopher (ed.). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (3rd ed.)*, pp.86-94. UNESCO, 2010.

⁶ Alonso Marchante, Luis. "A cien años de la muerte de Menéndez: el destronado rey de la Patagonia y responsable del genocidio selk'nam." *El Mostrador*, April 25, 2018.

Arenas, Pinochet ordered the name of the street 'Valdivia' in the city to be changed as a tribute to the businessman.⁷

The street carries his name to this day. There is a commemorative bust in the centre of Punta Arenas, and many of the city and region's landmark buildings can be associated with Menéndez. Moreover, his descendants continue to control specific industries in the region, particularly forestry, agriculture and fishery.⁸

Chile's prevailing historical narrative has generally celebrated business people like Menéndez. This has fostered the historiographical neglect of the fate of the Selk'nam people and many other indigenous groups, like the Mapuche. At the same time, it sustained a discursive tradition that fails to adequately recognise the genocidal dynamics behind their significant population decrease and the role of the State and business people in it. There have even been deliberate efforts to cover up Menéndez's role in the genocide. One of his descendants claimed in 1971 that the extinction of the Selk'nam people resulted from their dangerous eating habits.⁹ In fact, until relatively recently, the more passive 'extinction' euphemism governed public discourse surrounding the Selk'nam people over 'genocide.'¹⁰ This is only now starting to change.

History of the Contestation

In 2007, a bill was presented before the Chilean Senate (the upper house of the Congress) by a Senator from the Socialist Party, Pedro Muñoz Aburto, to recognise the genocide of the Selk'nam and Aónikenk indigenous peoples and to erect a commemorative monument in Porvenir, a community in the Magallanes region.¹¹ The proposal slowly made its way through the legislative process. However, crucially, Senators Andrés Chadwick from the Independent Democrat Union and Mariano Ruiz-Esquide from the Christian Democratic Party suggested replacing the word 'genocide' with 'extinction' because of the potential consequences that recognising the genocide could carry for the State.¹² On the other hand, the lower house resolved to use the term 'genocide,' even though two members opposed arguing that victims might seek to derive a right to compensation due to the legislation.¹³ The debate stalled over this issue, and the bill was neglected for years.

The motion was not revived in Congress until 2018. In both instances, Michelle Bachelet from the Socialist Party was the country's president, while between 2010 to 2014, the president was Sebastián Piñera from the liberal-conservative party *Renovación Nacional* (National Renovation). By that time, significant strides had been made on the historiographical scene, including the publication in 2014 of a monograph titled *Menéndez, Rey de la Patagonia* (Menéndez, King of Patagonia) by Spanish historian José Luis Alonso Marchante, which underscores the active role played by Menéndez in the genocide of the Selk'nam.¹⁴ Argentine writer and journalist Osvaldo Bayer

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Orellana, Antonia. "Del genocidio selk'nam al asesinato de Schneider: El historial de la familia Menéndez y su rol en la Ley de Pesca." *El Desconcierto*, September 20, 2016.

⁹ Veksler, Bernardo. "Historiador chileno niega el genocidio del pueblo selk'nam." *El Diario del fin del mundo*, July 30, 2007.

¹⁰ Cossio, Héctor; Oliveros, Tatiana. "El genocidio de indígenas en el sur de Chile que la historia oficial intentó ocultar." *El Mostrador*, August 13, 2014.

¹¹ La Tercera. "#VíaInclusiva: A un paso de la promulgación queda proyecto que reconoce genocidio de etnias Selk'nam y Aónikenk." *La Tercera*, March 9, 2019.

¹² Fajardo, Marco. "Gesto de reparación histórica: Congreso debate inclusión de Selk'nam en Ley Indígena." *El Mostrador*, June 24, 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alonso Marchante, Luis. "A cien años de la muerte de Menéndez: el destronado rey de la Patagonia y responsable del genocidio selk'nam." *El Mostrador*, April 25, 2018.

remarked that the text would be 'the definitive book on the truth of what happened in southern Chile and Argentina.'¹⁵ Politicians in the Chilean Congress have frequently invoked the book itself.¹⁶

Then, in April 2016, a group of historians and academics from universities in Chile and across the world and writers and politicians signed a public letter obliging the Chilean State to recognise the genocide of the Selk'nam and engage with the Chilean State in the process of reparations.¹⁷ In line with the United Nations' definition of genocide, they argued that the murder of the Selk'nam was a 'planned and systematic' process and therefore required recognition from the State.¹⁸

Consequently, by March 2019, the law recognising the genocide of the Selk'nam and calling for the erection of a monument in Magallanes had made substantial progress, with the proposal approved in the lower house with 114 votes in favour, one against and one abstention.¹⁹ As a result, the proposal was sent up to the Senate and was under consideration until its approval in 2020.²⁰ The provision for a memorial intends to perpetuate the memory of the Selk'nam for future generations, and public collections will finance the works in the region. A special commission is meant to be established to oversee the project.²¹ Following the success of the motion in the lower house, Deputy for Magallanes, Sandra Amar, independent but endorsed by *Unión Demócrata Independiente* (Independent Democratic Union), remarked:

Hundreds of years later, we are only beginning to understand that recognition and respect for indigenous peoples in our country is fundamental. To this end, the creation of private and public instances which seek to preserve and care for the culture of our ancestors is fundamental for the development of an integral society.²²

Selk'nam Reaction

However, the motion faced backlash from Selk'nam descendants. As they argued, the overt recognition of genocide in the legislative action is tied to acknowledging that the Selk'nam are an extinct ethnic group. While recognition and memorialisation of the genocide are important to them, it risks overshadowing the fact that a small number of people who claim Selk'nam ancestry are marginalised and fighting to be recognised as an indigenous group to access certain rights; in particular, about 200 people who make up the eight families in the Comunidad Covadonga Ona.²³ They regard plans to recognise and commemorate the alleged extinction of the Selk'nam as a new, historiographical 'genocide' in its own right.²⁴ Hermany Molina, President of the *Corporación Pueblo Selk'nam Chile* (*Selk'nam People Corporation Chile*), claimed that 'we believe there was a genocide, but we were not extinguished; we are alive and over time have accumulated proof of this.'²⁵

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ La Tercera. "La memoria del pueblo selknam puja por entrar a la historia oficial." La Tercera, January 26, 2020.

¹⁷ El Mostrador, Cultura+Ciudad. "Historiadores piden al Estado de Chile reconocer el genocidio del pueblo Selk'nam." El Mostrador, April 28, 2016.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados. "Cámara despachó a ley proyecto que da reconocimiento legal al pueblo afrodescendiente chileno." Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados, Centro de Prensa, March 7, 2019.

²⁰ Diario Constitucional, "Aprobado por la Cámara de Diputados proyecto que reconoce al pueblo Selk'nam como etnia reconocida por el Estado," *Diario Constitucional*, June 27, 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Porras, Diana. "Genocidio Selk'nam: descendientes y magallánicos luchan contra el olvido." *Diario U Chile*, August 5, 2018.

²⁴ El Desconcierto. "'¿De qué nos sirve una estatua?': Descendientes selknam denuncian que ley que reconoce el genocidio por parte del Estado, los declara extintos y les niega el reconocimiento como Pueblo Originario." *El Desconcierto*, March 10, 2019.

²⁵ Ibid.

The failure of the State to recognise the Selk'nam as an existing indigenous group and to provide for its legal protection is all the more remarkable considering that the State has, in other contexts, acknowledged the existence of the Selk'nam through participation in consultations with various government ministries and the Proceso Constituyente Indígena.²⁶ Molina similarly highlights the challenges of conflicting interests when the State gets directly involved in the process of definition and commemoration in the following remarks:

The interest of the State has always been that fewer indigenous groups exist. The same goes for businesses who want resources from our territories. Likewise, academics who appropriate our archaeological heritage, photographs, designs and ceremonies. We want to be recognised as an indigenous community. We have rights, and for this reason we want Congress to drop this proposed legislation.²⁷

Therefore, it is clear that attempts to recognise and commemorate the genocide cannot be taken at face value by everyone, not least by the Selk'nam themselves. In March 2019, the Corporación Pueblo Selk'nam Chile, together with the *Asamblea Originaria por la Plurinacionalidad y Descolonización* (Original Assembly for Plurinationality and Decolonisation - Asodeplu), presented a complaint to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (coincidentally, ex-President of Chile Michelle Bachelet) and to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli, in the hope of blocking the proposed legislation..²⁸

In response, Gabriel Boric, the member of the lower house for Punta Arenas and now president of Chile, defended the legislation by stating, 'I think there is a confusion in the denouncement made by the Selk'nam people because to accept that there was a genocide on the part of the State, whether direct or indirect, does not mean that the community is being declared extinct.'²⁹

Nonetheless, the most pressing matter and overriding concern for the Selk'nam people is to be recognised under Chile's Indigenous Law. This campaign is now well underway in the Chilean parliament (as of early 2020), and proposed legislation is making progress, building upon precedents such as the accommodation of the Pueblo Diaguita in Indigenous Law in 2006.³⁰ A report by the Chilean Commission for Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples, presented to the parliament in 2020, shows an awareness of the debate over 'genocide' and 'extinction' and the relationship between the motion to recognise and commemorate the genocide and the motion to recognise the Selk'nam as an indigenous group. As per a report by the Commission for Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples,

The idea of the extermination of the Selk'nam, should not be confused with the notion of their genocide which was recognised officially in a report for the CVHNT (*Comisión por la Verdad Histórica y el Nuevo Trato*), and in a legislative project which is currently in its first constitutional stage. The first [term] implies the physical disappearance of a community, while the second refers to an attempt to totally or partially destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. In other words, a genocide does not always imply to extermination of a group.³¹

²⁶ Porras, Diana. "Genocidio Selk'nam: descendientes y magallánicos luchan contra el olvido." *Diario U Chile*, August 5, 2018.

²⁷ El Desconcierto. "'¿De qué nos sirve una estatua?': Descendientes selknam denuncian que ley que reconoce el genocidio por parte del Estado, los declara extintos y les niega el reconocimiento como Pueblo Originario." *El Desconcierto*, March 10, 2019.

²⁸ González F., Tomás. "Comunidades selk'nam denuncian al Estado ante la ONU: "Nos están declarando extintos." *Diario U Chile*, March 14, 2019.

²⁹ La Tercera. "#VíaInclusiva: A un paso de la promulgación queda proyecto que reconoce genocidio de etnias Selk'nam y Aónikenk." *La Tercera*, March 9, 2019.

³⁰ Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados. "Cámara despachó a ley proyecto que da reconocimiento legal al pueblo afrodescendiente chileno." *Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados, Centro de Prensa*, March 7, 2019.

³¹ La Tercera. "La memoria del pueblo selknam puja por entrar a la historia oficial." *La Tercera*, January 26, 2020.

Unofficial Commemorations

Commemoration through the arts

Although the idea of a state-sponsored commemoration of the genocide is only just being discussed as a possibility and far from becoming a reality, there have been several attempts to commemorate the event in other dimensions, particularly in the arts. Artists like Elisa Pritzker³² and Eugenio Dittborn³³ have developed artistic projects about the Selk'nam. In August 2018, a reenactment of an 'auction of Indians' in 1895 took place in the Plaza of Punta Arenas, organised by a professor of history at the University of Magallanes and a local theatre group.³⁴ In September 2018, an artist from Magallanes presented an exhibition on the subject of the genocide in Valparaíso.³⁵ In May 2019, a Chilean film on the subject was presented at l'Atelier de la Cinefondation in Cannes, France.³⁶

In Tierra del Fuego, a project entitled *Fundación Proyecta Memoria* (Project Memory Foundation) is working with the University of Magallanes to bring this aspect of history into public view through the development of a museum.³⁷ This museum will be housed in *Casa Gente Grande* (Big People House), the oldest building in Tierra del Fuego, with special links to the start of the sheep farming industry and not far from the first encounters between Europeans and the Selk'nam took place.³⁸ In June 2019, on the *Día Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de Chile* (Chile's National Day for Indigenous People), the project illuminated the house with imagery associated with the Selk'nam performance and gained wide press coverage.³⁹

In early 2020 the group Alameda Memoria wrote and performed a 'Cantata' at the festival 'Santiago Off' entitled 'Menéndez, auge y caída del rey de la Patagonia' (Menéndez: rise and fall of the king of Patagonia). It depicts the protagonist as primarily responsible for the Selk'nam genocide. The director of the group, Felipe Sandoval, remarked that the impulse behind the project was José Luis Alonso Marchante's book, referenced above, and praises the progressive change in the public imagination of Punta Arenas around the figure of Menéndez.⁴⁰

The Targeting of Menéndez' Memorials

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conjunction of the campaign on behalf of the Selk'nam with the outbreak of protest and social unrest in Chile in October 2019 opened a window of opportunity for the historical contest to develop further. Advocacy favouring indigenous rights has figured prominently in the protest movement's agenda. The destruction of memorials celebrating aspects of Chile's colonial past has brought the oppression of indigenous groups to the forefront of national consciousness and debate.

³² Elisa Pritzker, "Selk'nam Project," *Elisa Pritzker*, [accessed May 23, 2022].

³³ Laura Allsop, "The airborne art of Eugenio Dittborn," *Apollo. The International Art Magazine*, October 14, 2021.

³⁴ Fajardo, Marco. "Intervención deja muda a Punta Arenas con recreación del "remate" de 165 esclavos selk'nam." *El Mostrador*, August 9, 2018.

³⁵ La Prensa Austral. "Artista magallánico presenta exposición sobre el genocidio selknam en Valparaíso." *La Prensa Austral*, September 11, 2018.

³⁶ El Mostrador Cultura. "Película chilena sobre genocidio Selk'nam es seleccionada en l'Atelier de la Cinefondation de Cannes." *El Mostrador*, May 16, 2019.

³⁷ Gallardo, Luis. "Iluminan estancia en Tierra del Fuego en memoria de genocidio Selknam." *Bio Bio Chile*, June 24, 2019.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ El Sureño. "'Día del Genocidio Selk'nam.'" *Indymedia Argentina*, November 25, 2019.

Increasing awareness of the Selk'nam genocide has translated into recurrent attacks on Menéndez's public memorials. On November 5, 2019, a large protest in Punta Arenas resulted in the tearing down of the bust of Menéndez and its placing at the feet of the monument to the Patagonian Indian.⁴¹ The bust was replaced with an image of a member of the Selk'nam community, and the words 'genocidal', 'villain' and 'assassin' could be read around the monument (Figure 1). Two weeks later, a group of masked people attacked a mausoleum belonging to the Menéndez family in Punta Arenas with red paint and erected a slogan saying, 'Here lies José Menéndez, exterminator of the Selk'nam people.'⁴² Typically, local public opinion on such incidents has varied, ranging from those who fully support them as legitimate acts of protest and others who denounce them as acts of violence and vandalism but express tolerance for their ideas and wish to address them through open dialogue. Finally, on December 6 2019, a wooden figure representing the Selk'nam was erected in Santiago's Plaza Baquedano, the epicentre of Chile's protest movement, alongside figures representing the Diaguita and Mapuche communities.⁴³ The targeting of Menéndez's memorials in this context recalls an attempt to legally change the name of José Menéndez Street in Punta Arenas in 2014, which was ultimately unsuccessful because businesses on the street expressed concerns about the potential impact on their sales.⁴⁴

The Selk'nam community itself carries out an act of remembrance every year on November 25, commemorating the first Selk'nam killing in 1886.⁴⁵ This date is not officially recognised by Chilean state bodies, even though across the border in Río Grande, Argentina, the date is officially recognised in law as 'Day of the Selk'nam Genocide'.⁴⁶



Figure 1: The vandalized bust of Menéndez in Punta Arenas. Image by Pam Arq via Wikimedia Commons CC-BY-SA-4.0

⁴¹ Lara, Emilio. "Puntarenenses arrojan busto de exterminador selk'nam a los pies de monumento al indio patagón." *Bio Bio Chile*, November 5, 2019.

⁴² *La Prensa Austral*. "Encapuchados atacaron mausoleo de la familia Menéndez." *La Prensa Austral*, November 25, 2019.

⁴³ *La Tercera*. "La memoria del pueblo selknam puja por entrar a la historia oficial." *La Tercera*, January 26, 2020.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ El Sureño. "'Día del Genocidio Selk'nam.'" *Indymedia Argentina*, November 25, 2019.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Decision-Making Process

As suggested above, public contestation around the Selk'nam genocide has to some extent, developed in response to various aspects of the decision-making process, not least as a result of the failure of the first piece of proposed legislation to adequately address the concerns of the Selk'nam people. For the most part, the act of decision-making follows standard parliamentary and law-making procedures, with the involvement of state bodies such as the Commission for Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples, and the Ministry of Cultures, Art and Heritage.⁴⁷ More so with the second piece of legislation (to incorporate Selk'nam into the Indigenous Law), there has been dialogue with various indigenous groups including Corporación Selk'nam Chile, Comunidad Covadonga Ona and ASODEPLU (Asamblea Originaria por la Descolonización y la Plurinacionalidad).⁴⁸

The proposed law to recognise and commemorate the genocide would involve the creation of a special commission to oversee the financing and construction of a monument. It would comprise a senator (from the upper house), a deputy (from the lower house), and representatives from the Mayor of Porvenir, the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism, the Council for National Monuments and the National Corporation for Indigenous Development. Its functions would include running a competition for the memorial's design, the oversight of its construction and the management of associated funds.⁴⁹

Summary and Conclusions

The recent drive to actively commemorate the genocide of the Selk'nam people in Chile remains diffuse and is overwhelmingly led by non-state actors and the arts, suggesting a lack of political will by state actors to address the group's historical grievances and current demands adequately. Government proposals to commemorate the genocide with a physical memorial and legal recognition have stumbled over how to maintain a balance of priorities which at times seem conflicting – on the one hand, acknowledging that genocide took place, but also that the Selk'nam did not disappear entirely and that their descendants continue to struggle for indigenous rights.

Significantly, the ongoing debate underpins the demand for equal rights for Chilean indigenous groups that have conventionally been marginalised in social, political and economic terms. This debate is reflected in the possibility of Chile being a plurinational state if the constitution is approved in the plebiscite in September 2022. The other major aspect of such a public contestation has been the revision of the role and legacy of José Menéndez, which is redefining how the inhabitants of Punta Arenas understand themselves, their history and public spaces, a movement which has been given added impetus by the Chilean protest movement of 2019-20, that raised awareness on the unresolved questions of indigenous rights in general. The process of historical contestation around the Selk'nam genocide and the individual figure of José Menéndez is still far from over.

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⁴⁷ Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados. "Cámara despachó a ley proyecto que da reconocimiento legal al pueblo afrodescendiente chileno." Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados, Centro de Prensa, March 7, 2019.

⁴⁸ La Tercera. "#VíaInclusiva: A un paso de la promulgación queda proyecto que reconoce genocidio de etnias Selk'nam y Aónikenk." La Tercera, March 9, 2019.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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<https://www.elmostrador.cl/cultura/2014/08/13/el-genocidio-de-indigenas-en-el-sur-de-chile-que-la-historia-oficial-intento-ocultar/>. (PDF 5)
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<https://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2019/03/10/de-que-nos-sirve-una-estatua-descendientes-selknam-denuncian-que-ley-que-reconoce-el-genocidio-por-parte-del-estado-los-declara-extintos-y-les-niega-el-reconocimiento-como-pueblo-originario/>. (PDF 4)
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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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