



CONTESTED HISTORIES

ONSITE Toolkit

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How to Give a Tour about Contested Histories?

This guide is designed to help you organise your tour of a contested historical site, ensuring that it is inclusive and unbiased, and fostering a greater understanding of complex historical legacies and an awareness of how they evolve and impact our society today. The examples and tips in this guide were drawn from recordings of actual tours and interviews with tour guides, educators and others working on contested histories.

“Most people would, I believe, think of a guide as a person who leads tourists or other people interested in part of a city or a museum, and who gives them information about the site or the part of the city or the content of the museum. But when it comes to a guide at contested sites, I think it gets this other meaning, leading people towards conclusions. And I think that as an educator, I see my role most commonly as a guide in terms of helping people to come to their own conclusions. I think that the role of a guide in that context is precisely to lead the people towards their own questions and maybe some answers.”

Miško Stanišić

This guide has been developed within the framework of Contested Histories Onsite, a project by the Memory Studies Association and EuroClio – European Association of History Educators. The initiative looks at contested historical sites as spaces for teaching, learning and working towards social and historical justice. Contested sites and public spaces are those in which historical narratives are being challenged and reshaped by debates on memory and are thus particularly prone to emotions. Such sites can include statues, monuments, memorials, street names, buildings and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. Contested historical sites usually involve conflicting interpretations of the past revolving around difficult historical legacies such as colonialism, war, authoritarianism or fascism.





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The tour preparation will vary depending on the nature of the site, your familiarity with the site as a guide, and the participants joining the tour, among other factors. Nonetheless, there are some questions you can ask yourself to prepare for the tour:

Is this an open or a private tour?

In an open tour, the group will be composed of different participants whose only commonality might be their presence on the tour. You will most likely not know your participants beforehand. Limiting the group size to a maximum of 15-20 participants helps keep the discussion manageable for the guide such that they can cater to all participants.

In a private tour, you will know where the group comes from ahead of time and the purpose and motivation of their participation. At the time of the booking, you can ask some additional questions that will help you better understand your participants, such as their age, professional background, and motivation.

What do I (as a tour guide) know about the site?

As a guide, it is important to have a solid knowledge of the site, its historical background and contestation. For this, you can ask yourself the following questions. Please note that this is a non-exhaustive list meant to spark reflection on the types of issues a tour guide can expect to face:

- Where are we in the city/ region?
- What historical event(s) and/or person(s) does the site represent?
- What historical events took place leading up to the creation or inauguration of the site?

- When and why was the site erected? What is the significance of this location?
- Who commissioned the site? Who funded it? What could this tell us?
- Who was the designer of the site? What other sites did they design, if any?
- How are events and/or persons represented at the site?
- What symbols and iconography¹ are visible at the site, and what do they mean?
- Is the site contested? If so, what is the contestation about?
- What kind of reactions has the site elicited?
- Are there any signs of regular or active commemoration?
- Has the site been actively modified over time?
- Do passers-by engage with the monument? If so, how?

What are your aims and objectives?

Is the tour about introducing participants to the histories and complexities of sites or challenging dominant existing narratives? What impressions would you like participants to leave with? Consider these questions to determine what you want to achieve on the tour. Having clear objectives will help you in designing and structuring the tour. This will also help you reflect on more practical questions like the location of the site, the walking distance between stops, and the length of the tour.

¹ Iconography is a particular range or system of images used to convey meaning. For a more detailed definition, please see <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/iconography>.



Here are some examples of aims from tours that deal with contested histories:

The **tour around the Old Fairgrounds in Belgrade (Serbia)** aims to help participants understand the evolution of the space in the broader context of the city and the site's problematic nature concerning memory culture.

The **tour Sporen van Slavernij in Utrecht (Netherlands)**, aims for participants to understand how the city of Utrecht is connected with the history of slavery and unearth the history of citizens from former colonies and enslaved people. The ultimate aim is to highlight the multicultural history of the city and how colonial history is not unidirectional, but multidirectional and multiperspective.

The **Uncomfortable Oxford tour (UK)** aims to engage participants in discussions about inequalities in Oxford in the past and the present.

The **ATRIUM tour in Forlì (Italy)** aims to make participants think about the decisions that ordinary people had to make under fascism and how these decisions impacted their lives.

The **Valley of the Fallen tour (Spain)** aims to contextualise the history of the site, especially highlighting the experiences of the political prisoners that were forced to build the architectural complex, the history of the site to the present day, and the contestations surrounding it today. It also encourages participants to reflect on how such a monumental contested site can be resignified and contextualised.



At the start of your tour, aim to get a better understanding of your participants. The first few minutes are key: for conversations to be engaging and constructive, it is helpful for the group to connect with both the guide and with each other. In this way, the tour should not be a one-way discourse, but a conversation. Talk with participants, listen to their questions and contributions, and create a space in which they feel safe to express their opinions without judgment.

There are different elements that influence the preparation – so of course the site itself, its specific history, the changes over time as well, because very often, we are not only looking at one specific site at a specific point in time, but we are really looking at the different layers of the past there. Then the participants – what kind of background do they have? Who are they? What age group are they from? What previous knowledge might they have? And then of course, also how much time you have – a guided tour that is two hours long is different from a guided tour that's only an hour.

Aline Sierp

How can I get to know my participants (better)?

A brief round of introductions will help you to know your participants better, what they already know about the site and its history, and will allow you to situate your participants and tailor the tour to their needs and interests as far as possible. In this round of introductions, it is also important for you to introduce yourself. Share a few things about yourself: who are you, why are you their guide, and what are your own expectations of the tour are.

I'm not that important in the story, so I would introduce myself just with my name and the organisation that I'm coming from with just two sentences. But I might ask them to introduce themselves, the participants and that's only for me to better adjust the way I am guiding because I am improvising quite a lot, not in the terms of content, but in the way of how I'm going to present something adjusted to the group, so it would be quite different depending on who people in the group.

Miško Stanišić

I try to find out - as soon as possible as I meet them – not only who they (the participants) are but also what they potentially know. So I ask questions: I ask them to introduce themselves and to talk also about their expectations. I usually also ask them about their previous knowledge. And then I tailor the tour a little bit to that. It's important that you catch the audience where they're standing so as to tailor the tour a little bit according to the previous knowledge and also their needs. Generally speaking, the preparation I have follows a threat, some sort of red threat that it's running through that they can easily follow, and in the beginning, I make sure that I connect to their own experiences and their own previous knowledge.

Aline Sierp



How can I manage my participants' expectations?

One of the most likely causes of disappointment in relation to a tour is a mismatch between expectations and delivery. While it is impossible to account for and prevent this conflict in all cases, miscommunication can be minimised if both the tour guide and the participant are on the same page.

As the guide, establish a relationship with the participants from the beginning to encourage an open conversation about their expectations of the guided tour. These questions will also provide insight into prior knowledge within the group and their level of engagement. This offers a transition to an introduction to the tour itself, where you can continue to ask other related questions. Some examples:

- What do you expect to discuss on this tour?
- Have you ever visited this site/ city? What do you already know about it?
- Do you know of any recent public debates about history and memory, legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism, the World Wars, etc.? What do you already know about these issues?

What should I talk about?

Regardless of the aim of your tour, you should be aware of at least two different, but complementary layers of explanation when visiting a contested site: an introduction to the site and the historicisation of the contestation. Although they are intertwined, it is helpful to separate them for the purposes of explanation.

A. Introducing the site

This introduction covers the historical background of the site. You can refer to the list in the previous section [What do I \(as a tour guide\) know about the site?](#) Please note that you do not need to cover all questions in your explanation; you can choose those which best fit your tour, participants and aims. However, your participants might ask various questions about the historical background; thus, it is important for you as the guide to be able to answer their doubts.

B. Discussing the contestation of the site

Some participants might not be aware of the existence of a contestation or debate about a specific site. Thus, it is important for you, as the guide, to place these contestations into their historical context and to give an overview of how they have developed through time. Here is a non-exhaustive list of possible questions:

- What are the different kinds of narratives surrounding the site? How have these narratives changed over time?
- Who are the people driving these discussions?
- Which aspects or actors of history are foregrounded? Which aspects are neglected?
- Are the voices of minorities represented? If so, how are they represented?

To prepare to give a tour of contested sites, you really need to prepare very well, and you have to prepare also for potential controversies, meaning you need to know the history very well, you need to know all the facts, because that's usually where contestations arise.

Aline Sierp



What can I do to give a dynamic and interactive tour?

Here is a non-exhaustive list of strategies that can help you to give a dynamic and interactive tour:

- Plan your time well and take your time to consider what you want to share. Make sure to leave enough time for reflection and discussion at the end.

No group can pay attention for more than 15 minutes. That's the maximum time span, usually before you have to go and do something else or give them a break. So I cut the tour into these small pieces. And then if I see, for example, that at the end maybe we spend a bit more time in one place because the group was particularly interested, then I'd rather take something [else] out like a whole block instead of running and rushing and giving the group the impression that they didn't see everything.

Aline Sierp

- Speak slowly but engagingly so as not to burden participants with too much information and allow them to understand you more easily. It is also important to make the speech accessible for people who might have difficulties with attention or hearing.
- Keep in mind that it is often easier for participants to remember 2-3 big concepts or ideas, 1-2 narratives, and the discussions they shared and contributed to, rather than detailed information and facts. Decide on what concepts and narratives you would like to explore before the tour. These act as your key guiding themes throughout the tour – don't hesitate to return to them again and again throughout the visit.

All our tours are discussion-based and every single stop of our tour is framed around a question. It's not a theme, but the goal of each stop is to ask this ultimate big question. And we find that generally, people remember a conversation a lot better than they remember a lecture. And by asking them questions, by starting discussions during the tour, we basically help them remember the contents of the tour, but we also at the same time equip them with questions that they might ask later to their family and friends when they go around the same site.

Olivia Durand

- Ask participants questions and encourage them to look around relevant parts of the site, giving them some tasks like observation or reflection in groups.

I often also give them tasks, like observation tasks that they have to go out and look for something, for example, and then describe it back to the group. Or I split the group into small groups and let them listen to different media stations and then they come back and they have to report to the others so that they actually get different content as well. Or I let them describe objects so that they're really engaged with the object. And then of course part of it is also me giving information, but by giving them tasks they really properly enter into a dialogue and that is important.

Aline Sierp



- Use the walks between stops to encourage reflection and answer participants' questions, but also let them wander around the space to get a better grasp of it.

Because we are outside and we are walking and we are walking from building A to building B there is always this natural walk from point A until we gather at the point B and there this walk functions basically as a little break. And then we get there together and we can start again. I think that it is very important to go from intense discussion or presenting a lot of details and to also give space to people to think, feel and digest. If I would give an advice to another guide, I think that these times between point A and point B where the group is walking are very important. Don't rush, take your time, because this walk actually has its function.

Miško Stanišić

I think that our goal is not to evoke emotions. I am actually quite against the idea that a good presentation of such complicated and violent and sad history could be measured by tears or somebody being very emotional. That's totally not a goal of teaching or memorialisation at all. But I don't mind if people are getting engaged emotionally, it is very often unavoidable and emotions are not bad. If people are with teary eyes or even crying, that's fine.

Miško Stanišić

This means you need to be careful with the language used and how the information is presented. It is helpful to:

1. Explicitly state when you are quoting individuals or expressions from the past.
2. Allow your participants to leave the tour and rejoin if needed.

Because some of the topic that we'll be talking about [during the tour] are difficult, we do offer them [participants] the option to step aside during some parts of the tour if they feel that the topic that will be covered might be too triggering for them, and then to re-enter the group when they feel comfortable again. So this is not something that is supposed to be imposed, it is a choice to join the tour – but the tour is based on mutual respect and the acceptance of the diversity of the participants.

Olivia Durand

How do I deal with emotions that might arise during the tour?

Contested sites and public spaces are those in which historical narratives are being challenged and reshaped by debates on memory and are thus particularly prone to emotions. Because of this, the reactions from the public often stem from raw feelings: sympathy, empathy, or antipathy to the narratives brought forward by you as a guide.



3. Provide trigger warnings when mentioning sensitive topics and allow your participants to temporarily excuse themselves through marked exit spaces.

We want to make sure that there are trigger warnings throughout this experience, given the things that we are citing from the historical past, things that are completely, not only unacceptable in this time, but also are unacceptable in those times as well. If individuals don't feel comfortable with discussing or having to listen to some of these things, we want to make sure that there's space for people to have time to collect themselves, to step away, and even to leave if they need to.

Hera Jay Brown

How do I diffuse tense situations and keep the participants' attention?

This section will provide suggestions and techniques for managing tense situations that might arise during the tour, like extremist views or inappropriate behaviour. Although the following list mostly considers tense situations arising within the group, there might be instances where the threat comes from outside the group. In these situations, you can alter the route or interrupt or terminate the tour if things become too unsafe. In the case of private tours, you can offer the other participants a rescheduling option.

A. Extremist Views

Extremism has a broad spectrum, and what we expect in terms of extreme views can span from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. For instance, on one side of the debate, a participant might accuse contemporary activists and historians of attempting to apply political correctness to the past; and on the other side, another participant might call for removing all statues and destroying all contested heritage. Neither view is conducive to productive conversations among the wider group, and they have three main risks: participants can feel they are no longer in a safe space; participants might fear expressing contrasting opinions; and the person who expresses extreme views can monopolise the discussion.

I think that our goal is not to evoke emotions. I am actually quite against the idea that a good presentation of such complicated and violent and sad history could be measured by tears or somebody being very emotional. That's totally not a goal of teaching or memorialisation at all. But I don't mind if people are getting engaged emotionally, it is very often unavoidable and emotions are not bad. If people are with teary eyes or even crying, that's fine.

Miško Stanišić

Sometimes, extremist comments and views can provoke a physical or emotional reaction in other participants. In this case, you can suggest that they take some time out and rejoin the group at the next stop or even leave the tour completely.



1. Ask an open question to change the dynamic

By asking an open question, the discussion is no longer focused on what you think but on what the other person thinks. When redirecting an extreme idea through a question, you should be mindful to invite other participants' voices back into the discussion, which will help to include multiple perspectives in the conversation.

Extremism is a spectrum. It can be extremism of the very ultra-conservative form, and it can also be of the very ultra-liberal form. So of those two forms, one may be a little bit more aggressive than the other, especially towards the guide, and both of those hope can be quite a problem on the tour because it means that participants themselves might not feel safe to express their opinions anymore, and it might just completely break the dynamic of the conversation in the group. The main strategy that we recommend to our guides is to actually answer to extremist statements with a question. Quite often those statements are made as a provocation, they don't necessarily have a lot of arguments behind them. And what we often tell our guides is to actually reuse the wording that the person has used and ask them to unpack a little bit more or ask what they think.

Olivia Durand

2. Accept that sometimes, there is no answer.

If you do not know the answer to one of your participants' questions, do not pretend you do – nobody knows everything. You can say that you will try to find out the answer for future tours. Accepting that a dispute is open-ended is one way to ensure that conversations remain respectful. Acknowledge to participants that a site can elicit a very diverse range of strong reactions.

B. Inappropriate Behaviour

Some participants might demonstrate inappropriate conduct, such as shouting, using insensitive language, or not giving others the chance to speak. Other participants might:

- Feel they are no longer in a safe space.
- Fear expressing contrasting views.
- Feel they are unable to speak.
- Feel physically threatened because of their opinions or their background.
- Feel marginalised or insulted.

Depending on the site and the organisation, some security provisions might already be in place to help guides face such situations. In other cases, it might be up to you as the guide to ensure the group's safety. While not foolproof, setting clear boundaries early on at the start of the tour might help de-escalate tense situations.

Having a few basic rules shared and agreed upon with the participants could be helpful such as listening to others' questions and giving everyone the space to share their opinions. In case of an incident, refer back to the rules you agreed on with the participants at the start of the tour. Remind participants that, as the guide, you can ask a person to leave the tour if you think they constitute a risk and/or threat to the group.



At the end of the tour, open a space for reflection so that participants can think about what they have learned and how it has impacted them.

If you know or suspect that some participants might not be comfortable sharing with the rest of the group, this reflection can also be facilitated anonymously. This can help them feel more comfortable and ensure they can provide you with critical feedback about the content and delivery of the tour.

Ideally, these comments will be complemented by your own feedback as the tour guide. If a group has shone a light on new perspectives, it can be helpful for your future tours to take some notes about how you dealt with these issues or what you would do differently. Finally, you can also provide a short list of several accessible resources for participants to do their own further reading or research after the tour. Make them as varied as possible, mixing different formats like books, articles, podcasts, and films.

Between the last spot and the bus, there is also a walk. So it's a little bit like the curtains are down, but then we can also have a little non-official discussion towards the bus, and I think that these last 10 minutes of walking are great because people are breathing and commenting and we can turn towards other topics.

Miško Stanišić

Ideally, to finish a tour, I reconnect to what I did in the beginning, and that depends a bit on the group. So taking up something that maybe was mentioned in the beginning, something that came out during the questions or that someone asked me why we were walking from one station to the next. It's something that opens up for further reflection.

Aline Sierp



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