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# European Cross-Border Heritage Projects: Borderless Memories, Shared Destinations

*Moreno Zago*

## Abstract

This article explores the role of memory tourism in European borderlands, with particular attention to processes of cultural valorisation and cross-border cooperation in contexts shaped by the legacy of the world wars. Following a brief theoretical framework based on key concepts from the sociology of memory and border studies, this article presents a selection of significant European projects in which wartime heritage has been transformed into sustainable and participatory tourist itineraries. In these cases, national memories and divergent narratives have become opportunities for dialogue and development. In response to these challenges – such as the risk of sensationalism, exclusion of minority memories, and divisive governance – the author proposes an “Ethical Code for Memory Tourism” based on principles such as respect for historical dignity, narrative inclusion, engagement of local communities, civic education, sustainability, cross-border cooperation, and impact monitoring.

## Keywords

*Closed and open borders, Weak and strong memories, Memory tourism, European projects, Code of ethics*

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## 1. Introduction

We Europeans have a fondness for borders. We like to draw them. We like to erase them. We like to rebuild them. We like to move them. We like to move people from one side to the other. We like to defend them, even to die for them – and despite all this, we also like to reconnect with those who live on both sides. One needs only look at the border transformations on the European continent over the last twenty centuries to understand how significantly borders can affect everyday life: education, values, belonging, migration processes, and social and economic relationships<sup>1</sup>. Borders define our essence, our sense of belonging. As the sociologist Simmel (1908: 528) reminds us: “Boundaries are the frame of our identity.”

Today, more than one third of the European Union’s population lives in border regions – around 170 million people. Through Territorial Cooperation Programmes, the European Union, often in partnership with the Council of Europe, funds projects that not only contribute to the economic development of these frontier areas through forms of nature and cultural tourism, but, according to the principles of cross-border cooperation, fundamentally work to reconnect the people and communities that history has divided (Medeiros 2018).

Memory tourism – described as a set of tourist practices focused on places connected to traumatic or conflict-related historical events – is taking on an increasingly significant role in Europe’s border regions, particularly those shaped by the two World Wars. In these frontier areas, once scarred by conflict, the rediscovery of wartime heritage has become central to initiatives of cultural enhancement and cross-border cooperation, aiming to transform divergent national memories into shared opportunities for dialogue and local development.

Therefore, this contribution focuses on the following key concepts: collective memories, borders and frontiers, cultural tourism, and cross-border cooperation, leading to a proposed taxonomy of war-related tourism projects and an ethical code for memory tourism.

## 2. Basic concepts

The sociology of memory provides the fundamental concepts for understanding memory tourism (Beccalli 2015; Migliorati 2014; Vignola *et al.* 2025). According to Halbwachs (1925, 1949), a pioneer in this field, collective memory is socially constructed:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y\\_1Z5YQw-c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y_1Z5YQw-c)

memories are never purely individual but are formed within shared social frameworks (Montesperelli 2011). In post-conflict contexts, these collective memories often take on divergent national forms – each community or nation tends to remember wartime events selectively, emphasising its own narratives of heroes, martyrs, victories, or sufferings. Such partial or one-sided memories may come into tension in border regions, where different groups have long lived side by side and where political boundaries have separated communities holding opposing recollections of the same historical event. However, memory border studies suggest that processes of remembrance in these zones are neither static nor confined within national boundaries (Naef and Ploner 2016). On the contrary, processes of remembrance now occur through and beyond borders (Dirk Moses and Rothberg 2014; Migliorati 2023; Ricœur 2004), generating complex transnational constellations of memory. In other words, with the end of divisive regimes (such as the Iron Curtain) and through European integration, the possibility has emerged for shared cross-border memories, the result of dialogue and negotiation between formerly opposing communities.

In the field of tourism, these theoretical developments translate into new practices: memory tourism becomes both a vehicle of memories and a geopolitical actor. It not only mobilises memories but also shapes relationships between groups and nations. As Lefort and Chevalier (2021) note, it is a doubly geopolitical phenomenon: on one hand, memory tourism recalls intrinsically political histories (wars, genocides, dictatorships); on the other, its practice requires agreements and cooperation among different actors, often across national borders. Unsurprisingly, memorial tourism practices linked to past conflicts have spread increasingly in recent decades and have gained such weight in contemporary political spheres that public institutions and private organisations now actively promote them as a genuine territorial resource (Hertzog 2018).

A painful past can thus be *recycled* into a resource for local development, but, as Lefort and Chevalier (2021) caution, the enhancement of the memory resource for tourism presupposes a preliminary phase of pacification and negotiation through the recognition of historical facts and their underlying causes. During the Cold War, divisive narratives along the European borders were exploited in opposing national propaganda. Today, however, there is an effort to create transnational narratives capable of including multiple perspectives. Scholars discuss a growing “post-national dimension” in the practices of tourist memory (Pocecco and Pascoli 2021; Young 2020). For example, the contemporary narrative of the First World War tends to be “anti-rhetorical and transnational”, integrating counter-memories and aspiring to a universalist dimension of remembrance. Indeed, one of the explicit aims of many memory tourism projects is to “transform the collective memory of that war into a shared and participatory representation, overcoming national memorial policies” (Pocecco 2020: 113). This does not mean erasing different

perspectives but rather placing them in dialogue: guides and tourism professionals in historically contested cities learn to recognize the sensitivities of foreign visitors, aware that people have grown up within different narratives, hearing different versions of history (Pfoser 2017).

Some research refers to “hopeful tourism”, meaning practices in which old hostile boundaries are reinterpreted as meeting places based on empathy and solidarity (Gelbman and Dallen 2010). The use of memory for tourism purposes in the absence of dialogue can reinforce stereotypes or conflicts (e.g. some partisan/unionist tours in Belfast that propagate biased views, sometimes exacerbating sectarian tensions) (McDowell 2008). It is therefore crucial to adopt a participatory and shared historical approach, in keeping with European initiatives (such as the 2005 Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society) that promote the enhancement of the past through the participation of local communities and respect for all memories. Such a reflective approach allows tourism to become a space of transnational encounter, where previously irreconcilable memories can coexist – and even enrich one another.

Border studies also highlight how border regions can benefit from such initiatives in social and economic terms. The border, once a line of division, becomes a bridge: marginal territories – once impoverished national peripheries sealed by political barriers – can reinvent themselves as joint destinations, drawing on their shared historical heritage. The Council of Europe, and especially the European Union through its Territorial Cooperation Programmes (Interreg), support projects that reinterpret former hostile frontiers as places of encounter based on dialogue, empathy, and solidarity, while promoting the preservation of historical memory also through tourism.

In recent years, tourism to sites linked to the First and Second World Wars has considerably grown, partly fitting into the broader trend of “dark tourism”. Defined by Lennon and Foley (2000) as visits to places associated with death, disaster and suffering, dark tourism includes destinations such as battlefields, war cemeteries, memorials, Holocaust museums, bunkers and so on (Duncan 2017; Miles 2015; Stone 2006; Zago *et al.* 2015).

Certain quantitative trends help to gauge the scale of the phenomenon. During the Centenary of the First World War (2014-2018), visits to the main battlefields and memorials of 1914-18 reached significant numbers. In France, in 2018, there were over 3.9 million visits to Great War sites by around 1.5 million visitors, including many school groups and international tourists. In Belgium, the Flemish region (the scene of battles such as Ypres) attracted around 3 million visitors during the Centenary period. It is interesting to note that Second World War tourism is even more popular: for example, in France, the Second World War battlefield tourism market (think of the Normandy landing beaches) is estimated to be about twice that of the Great War in terms of visitors and

revenue (Romain 2021). In 2022, all French memorial sites welcomed 11.4 million visitors (Hertzog 2025). However, this growth is not uniform across all European memorial sites. For example, the Eastern Front of the First World War – despite having had the most devastating effects in terms of casualties – has attracted very few tourists. Similarly, in Italy, despite the fact that the country was also a theatre of war, tourism related to the Great War has remained more limited: the famous Redipuglia memorial and the Vittorio Veneto museum attract tens of thousands of visitors annually, modest numbers when compared to the million people who visited Verdun in 2016 for the centenary of the battle (300,000 in 2022). In 2023, the Kobarid/Caporetto museum in Slovenia attracted around 50,000 visitors. This depends in part on the different weight that world wars have in national memories and on the related commemorative policies. For example, countries such as Turkey, Great Britain and Australia – where the First World War plays a strong role in national identity – have invested considerable resources in centenary commemorations, organising events and promoting visits. In Turkey's case, up to 2-3 million people per year visited Gelibolu during the centenary, driven by a patriotic narrative of national unity. Tourist demand for war sites is therefore closely linked to the weight of war in the national collective memory and the promotional efforts dedicated to it.

Alongside the macabre or gloomy aspect (thanatourism), however, there is a strong cultural and educational component too: many visitors to these sites seek to understand history, pay tribute to victims, or rediscover their family roots (e.g. the grandchildren of fallen soldiers visiting military cemeteries) (Chevalier and Lefort 2016; Hertzog 2017; Rapson 2014; Winter 2019). At the same time, elements of spectacle and commercialisation have emerged: during the WWI centenary, sound-and-light shows were staged in the trenches of Verdun, Ypres, and Goritian Karst; in war museum shops, souvenirs range from vintage postcards to pop-style gadgets (toy helmets, keyrings, and so on) (Tizzoni 2016). In the Sukiennice covered market (Krakow), there are statuettes depicting Polish Jews, reminiscent of the popular caricatures of the 1930s with hooked noses and bags full of gold (Chevalier 2020; Rami *et al.* 2019).

Another significant trend, however, is the diversification of experiences offered. Today's memory tourist does not limit themselves to static visits of monuments or museums but engages in experiential activities: walking along historic trails, joining guided re-enactment tours, attending remembrance ceremonies, or following thematic routes that combine landscape, history, and gastronomy. It is precisely in border areas that a number of innovative initiatives have been launched in this regard, such as the *EuroVelo 13*, the Cultural Route of the Council of Europe since 2019, also known as the *Iron Curtain Trail*, is a route with a length of about 11,000 km that connects twenty different nations from the north (Barents Sea in Norway) to the south (Black Sea in

Bulgaria)<sup>2</sup>. This slow itinerary combines historical memory with green tourism, signalling an interest in more sustainable and participatory forms of enjoyment: cycling and walking through historical sites encourages direct and meditative contact, unlike traditional museum visits.

In summary, tourism linked to the world wars is now a growing and changing sector: from an *élite* pilgrimage to a mass phenomenon, from a national-patriotic experience to an international meeting platform, from a simple passive visit to an enriched and personalised experience. It constantly oscillates between the need for authentic commemoration and the logic of tourist consumption, seeking a balance between respect for the past and the involvement of contemporary audiences.

### 3. Cross-border memory tourism matrix

To understand the different strategies for cultural enhancement in cross-border contexts, I propose a 2 x 2 theoretical matrix that combines two key dimensions: borders and collective memory, preferring the adjective 'collective' to 'historical', that is, a memory based on living memories shared by a social group in defining its identity, as opposed to a memory based on the critical study of sources (Rossi 2023).

#### A. Border dimension

- *Closed*: the project addresses or inherits a condition of rigid separation (former militarised borders, walls, no man's land), maintaining the logic of gatekeeping (even if the border is now effectively open).
- *Open*: the project develops in a context of permeability (Schengen or consolidated cooperation) and works on the border as a bridge (daily crossing, shared governance).

#### B. Collective memory dimension

- *Weak*: fragmented or developing memory (conflicting counter-memories, low tourist visibility, heritage development at an early stage, poor narrative infrastructure).
- *Strong*: salient and institutionalised memory (stable museum/archival networks, mature commemorative policies, consolidated tourist demand, shared transnational narrative).

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.eurovelo.com/ev13>

To position a new memory valorisation project within the border and memory matrix, it is useful to assess a series of diagnostic indicators. Below are the main ones for each dimension:

#### *A. Border dimension*

- *Border regime*: are customs or passport controls in place? (e.g. a Schengen border vs. a non-EU border requiring a visa). The more freely and routinely the border can be crossed, the closer it is to an open border condition.
- *Existing cross-border cooperation*: are there EU programmes (Interreg, IPA CBC) or active bilateral agreements between border regions? If joint projects are ongoing and regular cross-border commuting occurs, the context can be considered relatively open.
- *Physical barriers and infrastructure*: the presence of walls, fences, or militarised buffer zones – or conversely, numerous road crossings, open transnational train stations, or cycle routes crossing the border – clearly indicates the degree of permeability.
- *Political tensions or ongoing conflicts*: a high level of tension (border closures, recent clashes) classifies the frontier as closed, even if it is formally passable. Conversely, stable diplomatic relations point towards an open status.
- *Everyday interaction between communities*: indicators such as the number of cross-border workers, mixed marriages, and the use of shared languages in the border area show whether the frontier is lived as a barrier or not. A closed border typically corresponds to communities with minimal interaction.

#### *B. Collective memory dimension*

- *Presence of memorials and museums*: a high density of monuments, plaques, well-maintained war cemeteries, and active local history museums indicate strong memory. Few or abandoned sites suggest weak memory.
- *Local commemorative rituals*: the existence of public ceremonies, anniversaries, and historical re-enactments with broad community participation. A deeply felt recurrence (e.g. annual battle commemorations or liberation festivals) reflects living memory.
- *Intergenerational transmission*: if local schools teach the area's history, if associations of veterans or local history groups are active, memory is being kept alive. Conversely, historical silences or taboos indicate weak memory.

- *Shared or conflicting memorial narratives*: strong collective memory may be fragmented (different ethnic or cultural groups remembering the same events in different ways, even conflicting). It is important to assess whether a shared memorial narrative exists within the community. If locals struggle to tell their own story or show indifference towards it, memory is weak.
- *Identity value attributed to the past*: to what extent does the community’s wartime past shape its current identity? If residents define themselves in relation to those events (e.g. martyr city, land of heroes), then collective memory is strong and integral to local culture.

By combining these indicators, it becomes possible to position a project within the appropriate quadrant. For example: if a proposal concerns two EU countries with an open border but where the few existing monuments are neglected and younger generations know little about the local past, it most likely falls into Quadrant “Open border, weak memory”. Conversely, a project between an EU region and a non-EU area with a difficult frontier but still-vivid commemorative traditions on both sides would fall into Quadrant “Closed border, strong memory”<sup>3</sup>.

Table 1 – Dimensions and quadrants of cross-border memory tourism matrix

| <i>Dimensions</i>    | <i>Weak collective memory</i>      | <i>Strong collective memory</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Closed border</i> | I<br>Fragile threshold             | II<br>Heritage under tension    |
| <i>Open border</i>   | III<br>Construction site of memory | IV<br>Memory bridge             |

*Quadrant I – Fragile threshold*

Quadrant I (closed border and weak collective memory) represents the most critical scenario: border areas marked by difficult relations and fragmented or suppressed memory, where cooperation is hindered both by political barriers and by the communities’

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the proposed matrix was not constructed on the basis of a sample of case studies; rather, for each quadrant, a couple of projects were identified, developed in border areas that met the definitions of ‘border’, ‘collective memory’, and the diagnostic indicators given above.

disinterest or unease towards their own past. Here, the transmission of remembrance has been interrupted by wars, migrations or regime changes, and monuments to memory are often forgotten or perceived as *uncomfortable*. Yet precisely in these contexts, memory tourism projects can become instruments of identity reconstruction and reconciliation, provided they are conducted with sensitivity, creativity, and international support.

A key example is the *Balkan Monumental Trail*, launched in 2020 across the Western Balkans with the support of the Regional Cooperation Council and EU funding<sup>4</sup>. The initiative connects around forty modernist monuments (*Spomenik*) built between the 1950s and 1990s to commemorate the anti-fascist partisan struggle in former Yugoslavia, now located in six countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). These include iconic sites such as Tjentište and Kozara (Bosnia), Makedonium in Kruševo (Macedonia), the Kadinjača monument in Serbia, etc.

All these sites hold significant artistic and historical importance (Naef 2015). Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the monuments – originally emblems of unity – were largely abandoned or deliberately dismantled for political reasons. The project seeks to revive them as a collective cultural and artistic legacy, not through a single fixed itinerary but via a conceptual network promoted collaboratively at international tourism fairs and on digital channels. By bringing together local stakeholders and tour operators, it develops integrated travel packages that span sites across several countries, helping to navigate and soften still-delicate borders. Leveraging digital tools – such as interactive maps, multimedia narratives, and social media content – along with the active participation of young people, the initiative functions as a living post-conflict memory lab, turning overlooked locations into powerful drivers of regional dialogue and understanding.

Alongside this, memorial projects in symbolic cities are also worth mentioning. Sarajevo, for example, is rich in places of remembrance: from the Latin Bridge (where the assassination that triggered the First World War took place on 28 June 1914) to the numerous signs of the 1992-95 siege (Kassouha 2019; Naef 2013). The city is developing itineraries that integrate the different historical layers: in a single trip, tourists can confront the tragic beginning of the 20th century in Europe and the equally tragic end of the same century. Sarajevo's guides, aware of the sensitivity of these still sensitive issues, adopt an empathetic and multi-voiced approach so as not to offend visitors from all backgrounds. Thus, the place where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated is presented not only as “where a Serbian nationalist killed the Habsburg heir”, but also as part of a discourse on the ethnic tensions of the time, which helps to understand

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.heritagewalk.net/balkan-monumental-trail-bmt>

those that followed and the Tunnel of Hope is explained both as heroic resistance by the Bosnians and as a universal warning about the absurdity of fratricidal wars.

A second example is *TOUR-HUB – Digital Enhancement of Cultural Heritage and Tourism* (Interreg IPA Greece-North Macedonia, 2025), which seeks to recover the memory of the First World War along the former Salonika Front<sup>5</sup>. In an area where the border remains relatively closed and local memories have faded, the project combines physical restoration with digital valorisation: in Novaci (North Macedonia), historic sites are being restored and a VR/AR centre created, while in Almopia (Greece) an interactive multimedia centre is being developed. Common web platforms and apps allow the sites to be virtually connected across the border, making memory accessible even without physical free movement. The initiative trains young people and local communities in digital and cultural tourism skills, fostering a renewed historical awareness from the ground up.

The study of Quadrant I highlights that these projects must serve as pioneers: success cannot be judged by visitor statistics, but rather by meaningful, qualitative achievements – such as the restoration of abandoned sites, the establishment of local collaborative networks, or active youth involvement in memory-related initiatives. The core element is community empowerment, achieved by partnering with schools, local associations, and artists to revive and strengthen shared identity. Reinterpreting heritage is crucial: for example, presenting Yugoslav-era monuments as significant works of art and design rather than purely political symbols, or connecting memory to current issues like environmental protection, peacebuilding, and human rights to make it resonate with younger generations. International backing plays a vital role: supranational institutions, such as the EU or the Council of Europe, offer the necessary neutrality and credibility to enable cooperation in delicate, sensitive border areas. From a tourism standpoint, the focus should be on digital promotion, compelling storytelling, and immersive, creative experiences that can overcome physical barriers and lingering mistrust. Over time, the reinforcement of collective memory and local ties may pave the way for a gradual softening of borders, turning these once-divided territories into genuine laboratories for reconciliation and cultural renewal.

### *Quadrant II – Heritage under tension*

Quadrant II (closed border and strong collective memory) describes frontier contexts where local communities preserve a deep, shared collective memory, yet the border that divides them remains closed or difficult to cross. These are often external borders of

<sup>5</sup> <https://greece-northmacedonia.eu/project/tour-hub>

the European Union or areas marked by political tension, where customs barriers, visa regimes, or mutual distrust hinder direct cooperation. Nevertheless, it is precisely the strength of this shared memory that motivates institutions, cultural organisations, and international bodies to develop symbolic cooperation projects, in which culture and heritage serve as instruments of diplomacy and reconciliation.

A significant example is that of the fortresses of Narva and Ivangorod, twin cities separated by the River Narva on the border between Estonia and Russia<sup>6</sup>. The two medieval castles, once part of a single defensive complex, are powerful identity symbols and witnesses to centuries of shared conflict. Despite the EU's external border remaining tightly controlled, between 2011 and 2015 a joint project funded by the Estonia-Russia ENPI/ENI programme was implemented, aimed at restoring and promoting both sites as a single cultural and tourist complex. The project was re-proposed in 2019-2023. Bastions and courtyards were restored, new coordinated exhibitions were opened, and joint marketing campaigns and combined ticketing were launched. Estonian and Russian historians collaborated on research and the production of bilingual materials, creating a unified narrative of the two fortresses and organising shared events and publications. In this way, the common memory became a channel of cross-border dialogue, helping to sustain positive relations even in times of political crisis.

A second example concerns the former border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. During the *Troubles* (1960s to 1998), the line was militarised and communities deeply divided, despite intertwined historical roots<sup>7</sup>. In the 1990s, through the Interreg EU PEACE Programme, cultural projects were developed that used memory as a vehicle for reconciliation: museums, heritage trails and educational workshops enabled young people from different traditions to confront and discuss their shared history – from the First World War to Ireland's civil conflicts. Furthermore, the Programme has funded projects addressing the needs of victims and survivors, young people, small and medium-sized enterprises, infrastructure and urban regeneration, while also promoting immigrant inclusion and ethnic diversity. Although the border is now formally open, the tensions rekindled by Brexit show that strong memory remains a sensitive terrain, where cultural tourism must operate with balance and narrative care. In the 2021-2027 period, the PEACE PLUS Programme will provide a total investment of € 1.1 billion coming from EU ERDF funds, and UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland financial contribution.

The analysis of Quadrant II highlights that these projects have a value that goes well beyond tourism: they function as forms of cultural diplomacy. Because physical

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.estoniarussia.eu/projects/narva-ivangorod-castles-2/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.seupb.eu/peaceplus>

borders restrict mobility, digital tools are often prioritised – such as online exhibitions, bilingual websites, joint publications – or symbolic events held directly at the frontier. Their success is not measured in visitor numbers, but rather in the capacity to strengthen institutional and community ties, fostering mutual trust. From a management perspective, such projects demand flexibility and political resilience: they must adapt to changes in international relations and rely on robust institutional partnerships to ensure continuity. Strong memory, therefore, represents both a resource and a risk: it can inspire cooperation, but it can also fuel tensions if instrumentalised in nationalist terms. For this reason, projects within Quadrant II must pursue an inclusive, balanced, and universalist approach, focused on the shared safeguarding of heritage and on promoting a message of peace and intercultural dialogue.

### *Quadrant III – Construction site of memory*

Quadrant III (open border and weak collective memory) describes border territories that are now integrated and barrier-free, yet where the memory of past conflicts is faint, forgotten, or fragmented. In such contexts, the wars of the past have left tangible traces – fortifications, cemeteries, and military infrastructures – but these have never fully entered the collective consciousness of local communities, often due to demographic changes, political suppression, or simple indifference. The opening of the border, however, presents an opportunity: to reactivate dormant memory through joint projects that enhance shared heritage and transform it into a cultural and tourism resource.

A notable example comes from the Lithuania-Latvia border, where an extensive system of German fortifications from the First World War remained largely unknown for decades<sup>8</sup>. The project LLI-501 *WWI Heritage Tourism Route* (Interreg 2021-2023) connected the regions of Daugavpils (LV) and Zarasai (LT) through a single cross-border itinerary dedicated to Great War heritage. Thanks to cooperation between the two countries, more than one hundred sites were identified, cleaned, and signposted with multilingual panels; two twin museums were established in Turmantas (LT) and Medumi (LV), and young people were trained as local guides. Digital marketing initiatives, apps, and outreach materials in six languages brought visibility to places previously unknown even to locals, while joint events and shared exhibitions helped build a common narrative between the border communities.

Another example concerns the former frontier between Austria and the Czech Republic, once divided by the Iron Curtain<sup>9</sup>. In the years following its opening, the memory

<sup>8</sup> <https://ww1route.eu>

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.eurovelo.com/ev13/austria>

of the Cold War here was weak or ambivalent. Thanks to the European Green Belt initiative and the *EuroVelo 13* – Iron Curtain Trail, the *no man's land* has been reinterpreted as a landscape of memory and nature. Old military roads have been converted into cycle paths, and bilingual panels now tell the story of the border and of regained freedoms. In this way, historical memory merges with ecotourism, attracting visitors interested both in biodiversity and in recent history.

The analysis of Quadrant III reveals that the main challenge here is to build memory rather than preserve it. Projects often begin with historical research and oral history collection to reconstruct a shared narrative, supported by physical infrastructure (museums, visitor centres, signage) and digital dissemination tools (apps, augmented reality, interactive storytelling). Crucially, the active involvement of the local community is essential: residents need to see themselves reflected in the rediscovered heritage. Training local guides, organising public meetings, and fostering citizen participation help build a strong sense of belonging and pride, turning inhabitants into active guardians of memory. In summary, Quadrant III represents a context in which the open border becomes a catalyst for remembrance: the absence of barriers allows for the integration of separated histories and the creation of new cross-border routes that revitalise peripheral regions and strengthen historical awareness through cooperation. Even if initially weak, memory thus becomes a driver of cultural, educational, and tourism development.

#### *Quadrant IV – Memory bridge*

Quadrant IV (open border and strong collective memory) describes border contexts where historical memory is deeply rooted and the frontier, now open (as in the internal Schengen borders), enables intense transnational cooperation. In such areas, freedom of movement facilitates projects that intertwine once-opposing identities and narratives, transforming borderlands into laboratories of reconciliation and shared cultural development.

The first significant case is the Iron Curtain Trail (*EuroVelo 13*), an approximately 11,000 km cycle route following the former East-West divide of the Cold War<sup>10</sup>. Here, the memory of Europe's division merges with the environmental enhancement of the Green Belt, transforming a once-separated space into a symbol of reunification and sustainability. The European Union has supported this initiative as a heritage route – a leading example of historical-ecological tourism on a continental scale.

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.eurovelo.com/ev13>

On a continental scale, *Liberation Route Europe* represents another major example of shared remembrance<sup>11</sup>. Tracing the route of Europe's liberation during the Second World War – from the D-Day landings in Normandy to Berlin and Italy – this network, now certified by the Council of Europe, connects museums, war cemeteries, and personal testimonies into a transnational narrative of resistance and freedom. Thanks to open borders across Western Europe and a strong local culture of commemoration, the route fosters a European sense of identity grounded in historical memory and liberty. In projects such as this, political borders are now little more than lines on a map, while shared heritage unites territories in a common narrative of liberation from Nazi-Fascism.

A paradigmatic example is the *Walk of Peace (Pot Miru)* between Italy and Slovenia, created along the former Isonzo/Soča Front<sup>12</sup>. This 500 km long itinerary, supported by Interreg, links museums, memorials, and trenches from the First World War, reinterpreting sites of conflict as “landscapes of peace.” Managed by a binational foundation, the project has received European recognition and aims to become a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, symbolising a shared Italo-Slovenian memory and a model of educational and sustainable tourism.

The examination of Quadrant IV reveals that the effectiveness of these initiatives lies in the powerful combination of open borders and living memory. EU-supported cross-border cooperation enables the integration of museums and thematic routes, allowing visitors to experience the territory as a single, unified space. Shared memory turns into a platform for dialogue and reconciliation, giving rise to joint events, festivals, and cultural initiatives that reinforce European identity and social cohesion. Economically, these itineraries have breathed new life into peripheral areas – such as Kobarid/Caporetto or former border zones of Central Europe – by generating heritage- and memory-based economic opportunities. In the end, Quadrant IV embodies the ideal model: historical memory, nurtured by open borders and cultural collaboration, becomes a genuine engine for peace, identity, and sustainable development.

### *Design recommendations*

In Quadrant I (closed borders and weak collective memory), initiatives must begin at the grassroots level. Small-scale, community-driven projects – such as art workshops, oral history collection, and educational programmes in schools – are key to gradually rebuilding historical awareness in politically sensitive or fragile environments. Collaborations with respected international bodies (UNESCO, ICOMOS) lend credibility and

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.liberationroute.com>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thewalkofpeace.com>

legitimacy to these efforts. Progress happens step by step: modest heritage restoration projects, virtual links between communities, and the creation of digital archives lay the foundation for eventual long-term reconciliation and the slow, gradual reopening of borders.

In Quadrant II (closed borders but strong collective memory), the challenge is to balance bold goals with careful diplomacy. Formal agreements and the involvement of international mediators help maintain cooperation despite ongoing political difficulties. Jointly managed historical sites can promote unity through carefully coordinated parallel initiatives – such as mirrored exhibitions, twin-site restorations, or collaborative digital projects. Virtual platforms and online portals enable cross-border access to heritage without physical movement. Transparent bilingual communication and a long-term commitment to building trust are absolutely vital.

In Quadrant III (open borders combined with weak collective memory), the main focus should be on reviving dormant heritage through participatory mapping, storytelling sessions, and initial pilot restoration projects. The openness of borders facilitates cross-border exchanges among schools and cultural organisations. Digital tools – such as mobile apps, augmented reality, and virtual reconstructions – help bridge gaps in collective memory, while training young local guides secures long-term sustainability. These rediscovered sites can then emerge as distinctive, environmentally sustainable tourist destinations.

Quadrant IV (open borders and strong collective memory) provides the most promising environment. In this context, enthusiasm and collaboration thrive thanks to joint management committees, seamlessly connected cross-border itineraries, and major cultural events. Inclusive storytelling acknowledges all victims and advances peace, while multilingual signage and innovative formats – like “two countries in one” travel packages – highlight shared heritage and strengthen a unified European sense of identity.

The four quadrants of the matrix show how memory tourism needs to adapt to different political and social realities. In Quadrant I, transformation starts from the bottom up: modest, community-led initiatives gradually rebuild historical awareness and mutual trust, with valuable support from international partners. Quadrant II calls for careful diplomacy and symbolic gestures of cooperation, relying on shared heritage sites and digital platforms to keep channels of dialogue open despite ongoing division. Quadrant III emphasises rediscovery – through participatory research, digital narratives, and active youth engagement – to bring forgotten histories back to life and reinforce cross-border unity. Quadrant IV offers the most favourable conditions, where deep collaboration, inclusive forms of remembrance, and well-developed transnational cultural routes transform shared history into a powerful force for European unity.

Together, the quadrants demonstrate that memory tourism is more than heritage valorisation; it is a form of cultural diplomacy. By linking remembrance to cooperation, it transforms former frontiers into bridges of dialogue, peace, and sustainable development.

## 4. Conclusion

This contribution has underscored the vital importance of memory tourism in Europe's border regions – areas marked by profound historical wounds but also by a rich shared cultural legacy. On the one hand, the sociology of memory and border studies allow us to view these initiatives as powerful tools for grassroots geopolitical reconciliation: when thoughtfully managed, memory tourism can convert sites of past division into spaces of meaningful encounter. On the other hand, the case studies analysed – ranging from the *Walk of Peace* in the Alps to the *Iron Curtain Trail* and the cross-Balkan routes – clearly show that the joint promotion of wartime heritage brings widespread benefits: it enriches collective memory by incorporating diverse viewpoints and transmitting it in vivid, living ways to future generations; it supports local communities through sustainable economic growth in often remote territories; and it strengthens Europe overall by deepening cultural connections among its peoples and reinforcing the fundamental values of peaceful coexistence.

A common thread links the various projects described: the desire to convert national memories and divergent narratives into opportunities for dialogue and development. Initiatives such as the *Euro Velo 13* or the *Liberation Route Europe* perfectly embody this spirit: former enemies working together, previously conflicting stories told in a single itinerary. The sociological results are significant. Consider the change in identity: communities that were once focused on their own national victimhood now see themselves as part of a broader, European and universal narrative, in which all victims are honoured, and common lessons are learned. This reflects the evolution towards a post-national memory that researchers talk about. Furthermore, meeting in places of remembrance creates new shared memories: when schoolchildren from different countries take a journey of remembrance together, they build a positive collective memory (the journey itself) that is grafted onto the tragic memories of the past, almost as if to rebalance them with a message of hope.

One element that emerged was the importance of sustainability: physical (walking and cycling routes, protection of the historical environment), economic (local development, community involvement in maintaining sites) and social (inclusion of all voices, accessibility for different audiences). Well-executed memory tourism aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: it educates for peace (SDG16), preserves heritage

(SDG11.4), promotes responsible local economic growth (SDG8) and encourages global partnerships (SDG17).

Another common feature is the use of memory as a tool for healing and *repair*. One could say that bringing tourists to places where violence and hatred once occurred is a form of *cultural healing* of wounds: remembering together, creating beauty (a museum, a trail) where there was destruction, is an almost therapeutic act for communities. The European Cultural Routes, established in 1987 (including those mentioned above), had precisely this ambition: “repairing” the cracks in the European construction (Gaillard 2017; Guérin 2008).

The sociological dynamics analysed confirm that memory tourism is not simply looking back at the past, but is a radically contemporary phenomenon, embedded in the way we seek meaning and connection today. In an era of rapid and sometimes disorienting globalisation, returning to the places of one’s origins or history appears to be a personal and collective exploration that allows us to rediscover what makes us unique. Paradoxically, this journey into the past serves to better understand the present and plan a better future: by learning from historical mistakes and being moved by past suffering, visitors develop a critical conscience and values of peace that then accompany them in their daily lives. In this sense, memory tourism within Europe is also a laboratory for European citizenship: every time citizens of different nations share an experience of remembrance, they build a small bridge of mutual understanding. By multiplying these micro-experiences, we can build a common European culture based not on forgetting our differences, but on recognising and overcoming them through dialogue.

### *Annex I. Ethical Code for Memory Tourism*

Memory tourism occurs at sites that are simultaneously treasures of cultural heritage and painful scars of history. Its goal is never mere spectacularisation of the past, but rather the promotion of critical reflection, reconciliation, and active and democratic citizenship. This Code outlines the core principles, practical commitments, evaluation indicators, and protective measures required to plan, interpret, and visit such places with dignity, inclusivity, and full responsibility.

1. *Scientific accuracy*: all curatorial and interpretive activities must be firmly rooted in reliable, scholarly sources and overseen by independent scientific committees. A clear separation must always be maintained between verified historical facts, scholarly interpretations, and individual testimonies, guaranteeing transparency, intellectual honesty, and methodological accuracy.

2. *Plurality and inclusion of memories*: projects must recognise and embrace the multiplicity of memories present at any given site. This involves deliberately amplifying

voices that have been historically marginalised – including those defined by language, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other identities. Curators should openly acknowledge historiographical uncertainties, gaps in documentation, and ongoing scholarly debates. All communication must be multilingual and fully accessible, incorporating plain language, sign language interpretation, audio descriptions, and other tools to ensure every visitor can engage with the content on an equal footing.

3. *Respect for the dignity of history*: memory tourism must be grounded in deep respect for the dignity of past events and the individuals affected by them. All victims and civilian lives should be honoured without any glorification or aestheticisation of violence. Representations of suffering, death, or destruction must never be sensationalised. When reconstructions, replicas, or reproductions are employed, they must be clearly and prominently identified as such to preserve authenticity and prevent any confusion between original and recreated elements.

4. *Co-creation with local communities*: local residents are not mere spectators but active co-creators of memory. Communities, schools, associations, survivors, and witnesses must be meaningfully involved in research, interpretation, storytelling, and decision-making processes. The economic and symbolic gains generated by memory tourism – including jobs, local crafts, guiding services, and cultural programmes – must be equitably distributed to strengthen local ownership, pride, and long-term viability.

5. *Civic education and historical awareness*: visits to memory sites should actively contribute to civic education, encouraging reflection on human rights, democratic principles, and the foundations of peace. Educational content should go beyond chronological facts, inviting visitors to grapple with complex questions, moral dilemmas, and historical debates. Open-access, evidence-based resources should be provided to foster historical literacy and support the development of responsible, critically aware citizenship.

6. *Cross-border collaboration*: when memory sites are linked to shared histories across national borders, cooperation becomes indispensable. Interpretive frameworks, narratives, and visitor standards should be aligned and developed jointly, ensuring equal representation and visibility for all involved territories or nations. Transparent, multi-lateral governance structures – such as binational or multinational committees – should be established to embody mutual trust and equitable partnership.

7. *Holistic sustainability*: sustainability must be comprehensive, addressing environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions simultaneously. This includes encouraging low-impact travel, carefully managing visitor numbers, supporting local economies, reinforcing social cohesion, and safeguarding the physical integrity of heritage assets. Every site should define and enforce its carrying capacity to avoid overuse, degradation, or loss of authenticity.

8. *Responsible application of digital technologies*: digital innovations – including augmented reality, virtual reality, mobile applications, and artificial intelligence – should be employed to enrich critical understanding, not to entertain or simplify. Their use must be fully transparent, with clear source attribution and strict adherence to data protection and privacy regulations. All generated or modified content must be clearly marked, and the application of deceptive technologies, such as deepfakes, is strictly forbidden.

9. *Do no harm and trauma-informed care*: memory tourism must actively prevent re-traumatisation of both visitors and local communities. Staff, guides, and educators should be trained in trauma-informed approaches, providing content warnings, safe spaces, and the explicit right for anyone to pause, step away from, or leave emotionally intense experiences. Sites of particular sensitivity – such as cemeteries, mass graves, and places of worship – demand especially careful, respectful handling and management.

10. *Ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement*: ethical stewardship demands regular evaluation and adaptation. Managing institutions should publish transparent indicators related to inclusion, quality of interpretation, equitable distribution of economic benefits, and social and environmental impacts. Systematic feedback from both residents and visitors must be collected and analysed, with findings used to refine practices, enhance accountability, and drive continuous ethical improvement.

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