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Must Dias Fall? The politics of settler heritage in Southern Africa

The Rhodes Must Fall Movement has sparked a global conversation over colonial violence and its aftermath in relation to ongoing political struggles for history and heritage making “from below.” While rooted on the South African context, these demands are also transnational in nature, as claims for decolonization “of space” and heritage more generally now gain force around the world, from the US South to several European contexts. In this paper, I want to interrogate why a particular form of heritage in Southern Africa has remained apparently uncontested, i.e., the monuments associated to early modern European sea voyages, in particular those pertaining to Bartholomeu Dias, often credited as the first European to “conquer” the maritime route to India through the Western Cape. The fact that Dias’ legacy remains undisturbed in a political and intellectual climate increasingly committed to decolonization deserves further attention. In this presentation, I argue that Dias can be productively seen not merely as a symbol of pre-apartheid early European colonization, but more crucially as part of a larger apartheid narrative of settler colonialism in Southern Africa. I proceed to explore the history and politics underpinning the invention of a Dias mythology in 20th century Southern Africa. I look at the political, intellectual and diplomatic ramifications of that invention. I argue that Dias played into white South African narratives of European pioneerism in Africa, and served to cement politico-diplomatic solidarity and friendship between white-ruled states in the region. As a conclusion, I dialogue with political theories of settler colonialism to suggest that Dias and his legacy be seen not as an event (or as symbol of a historical marker), but as a process (of continuing settler colonialism). I hope this paper will convince readers that Dias must also fall.



'The flags fall away', Cape Argus, 12 March 1960. Diaz statue is unveiled int eh Public Gardens, Cape Town