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Research Article

Who Owns the Past? Symbolic Authority and Heritage Revitalization in Czech Borderlands

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The present article examines how cultural heritage revitalisation processes unfold in the Czech Republic's border regions. It investigates how these processes mirror power struggles and symbolic conflicts over the past. It employs a "memory nodes" approach, which conceptualises the restored objects—such as chapels, churches, and technical monuments—as dynamic centres of memory that function as physical repositories and symbols of cultural identity. In these border regions, marked by historical ruptures following the expulsion of the German-speaking population after World War II, restoring abandoned heritage sites becomes a critical arena for negotiating collective memory. The study highlights how the renewal of these sites is not merely a matter of physical reconstruction but also a deliberate act of cultural reinterpretation, wherein various stakeholders assert their visions of the past. By situating these revitalisation efforts within the broader context of socio-political and historical transformations, the article demonstrates that restored monuments serve as catalysts for preserving historical authenticity and integrating modern narratives. Ultimately, this dual approach underscores the complexity of heritage restoration as an endeavour that reconfigures the past into a living framework, inviting ongoing debates about identity, power, and the ownership of cultural memory.

Figure 1. Maps illustrate the research border area in the Czech Republic; 1 – Karlovy Vary; 2 – Ústí nad Labem

regions; own elaboration.

Highlights

- The ownership of the past in the Czech border regions encompasses symbolic power over history and the negotiation of various versions of the past.
- Revitalized objects can be seen as "memory nodes" – dynamic focal points where the emotions, memories, and interests of residents, holiday homeowners, and tourists intersect.
- Motivations for revitalization combine emotional, pragmatic, and cultural aspects and reflect power relationships among different groups of actors.
- The restoration of monuments strengthens regional identity while simultaneously opening a discussion on cultural heritage, involving longtime residents, newcomers, institutions, and visitors.

Introduction

The revitalization processes in the border regions of the Czech Republic are one of the key factors shaping the contemporary regional identity of these areas. The question "Who owns the past?" thus becomes pivotal, as decisions regarding the form and significance of historical objects represent negotiations over symbols and the region's memory identity.

The current character of these regions was significantly influenced primarily by the forced expulsion of the German-speaking population after World War II and the subsequent resettlement from the interior or abroad[1]. This migratory dynamic disrupted the original social structures. It imposed a discontinuity and "emptiness" on the border space, in which traces of the former (cultural) heritage can still be found[2]. Although the relationship between such a disrupted past and contemporary revitalization activities remains only partially explored in the former "Sudetenland"[3][4], its significance for understanding collective memory and regional identity is undeniable.

Restoring abandoned objects is not only a physical renewal but also a space for negotiating symbolic power over the past. Assmann[5] emphasizes that cultural memory is the result of a collective selection and reinterpretation of historical narratives; in the context of the former "Sudetenland," the restored objects can thus be understood as "memory nodes"[6] – dynamic focal points where various value systems, narratives, and interests of different actors intersect.

In the former "Sudetenland," the revitalization of abandoned objects is not merely physical restoration but also a tool for symbolic negotiation over the past. Cultural memory is a dynamic process in which

different groups strive to assert their own, often divergent interpretations of history[5][6]. In this context, the restored objects can be seen as "memory nodes" – places where the narratives of longtime residents, newcomers, and other actors intersect. This process is evident in urban centres and peripheral regions[7], where the restoration of monuments often represents a key step toward strengthening local identity.

According to Halbwachs[8], collective memory is inextricably linked to the space in which memories are anchored and shared[9]. In the former "Sudeten" areas, power dynamics and negotiations frequently occur around these "nodes" among longtime residents, newcomers, holiday homeowners, and various institutions. Thus, cultural heritage interpretation is closely intertwined with collective memory and the ability to define which stories and memories will be inscribed into the landscape.

Therefore, The present study focuses on analyzing revitalization processes and how they influence the landscape, collective memory, and the future interpretation of local heritage. Assmann[5] emphasizes that cultural memory is a crucial factor in shaping a shared identity, making it appropriate to view revitalization activities as creating new meanings that reflect current needs and values. Approaches to restoration in this context vary—from an emphasis on historical authenticity to incorporating modern elements, illustrating the diversity of priorities and aspirations among different groups.

The article's perspective is based on understanding rural space as a multifunctional area where historical, cultural, and social values intersect with the contemporary needs of its inhabitants. As Proshansky et al. [10] note, the relationship to a place is shaped by its physical characteristics and symbolic dimension. This notion is even more pronounced in the former "Sudeten" areas. In this manner, such dispersed objects serve as strategies for regional development (e.g., tourism) and as vehicles for collective memory[2][11].

Restoring abandoned sites in the border regions raises the question: Who decides how these defunct objects will appear and which stories will be associated with their history? In other words, who "owns the past" today? The answer depends on the influence—residents, heritage conservators, investors, or activists. These actors physically restore monuments and determine how they are perceived and what meanings society ultimately attributes to them.

The main research questions are:

- *Who owns the past in the context of revitalization efforts in the Czech border regions?*
- *Who can decide which past will be preserved and how it will be reinterpreted?*

Empirically, the article is based on a qualitative analysis of narrative and semi-structured interviews (N = 10) and field observations in the Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem regions. The results indicate that the physical restoration of monuments simultaneously creates new symbolic meanings, which residents, holiday homeowners, tourists, and other institutions continuously "appropriate" and negotiate. This dynamic reveals that the question "who owns the past" cannot be reduced to formal ownership; the absolute power to define history is held mainly by those who can mobilize the community around a monument and mediate the region's stories. The article offers regional and municipal policy recommendations and demonstrates how "memory nodes" can be practically utilized to support socio-cultural development and strengthen local identity.

Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 (Methodology) outlines the data collection strategies, including interviews and field observations, and clarifies the analytical methods used. Section 3 (Theoretical Framework: Memory and Space as (Non) static Phenomena in the Process of Revitalization) introduces key concepts from memory studies and spatial theory, highlighting their relevance to the Czech borderland context. Section 4 (Who Owns the Past? Results and Discussion) presents the findings from qualitative interviews and discusses how various actors shape the interpretation and restoration of abandoned heritage sites. Throughout this section, reference is made to Fig 1 (Maps of the Research Areas), Fig 2 (Typology of Respondents), Fig 3 (Respondents' Structure by Age), and Fig 4 (Wordcloud from Interview Keywords) to illustrate the geographic scope, demographics, and thematic emphasis that emerged in the interviews. Section 5 (Conclusion) synthesizes the main arguments, addresses the research questions, and proposes recommendations for both policy and future research. Finally, the References section provides complete bibliographical details of all cited works.

Methodology

The research focused on revitalizing objects in selected border regions of the former "Sudetenland," specifically in the Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem regions. These localities exhibit disrupted cultural continuity and a significant historical burden associated with the post-war expulsion of the German-speaking population and subsequent resettlement. Drawing on memory and critical heritage studies[12] as well as the theory of "restoration of abandoned sites"[13], we examined not only the

technical or institutional aspects of revitalization but also the symbolic and power dimensions in which the restored objects are perceived as dynamic "memory nodes."

The primary data collection method was thematically oriented narrative interviews (TOBI), according to Schütze (1987), which allowed us to capture the personal motivations, memories, and experiences of respondents directly involved in the revitalization process. Semi-structured interviews complemented this approach by addressing specific topics such as the condition of the objects, challenges related to their repair, and visions for future use[14]. This combination of methods reflects the subjective dimension (emotional attachment to the place, familial or biographical ties) and the broader social context (Ramos et al., 2016), including negotiating the past intertwined with the physical restoration of monuments.

The research sample used a combination of purposive sampling and the "snowball" method[15] to capture diverse perspectives. Ten respondents with varied backgrounds (e.g., representatives of local associations, newcomers, or longtime residents) were interviewed. The interviews were conducted primarily in a natural setting[16] —directly at the restoration sites—contributing to the authentic grounding of the discussions in the specific landscape. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic coding[17]. These gradually revealed clusters of meaning—from the motivations for restoration to conflicts or uncertainties regarding the "ownership" of the past. All participants signed an informed consent form[18], which ensured anonymity and protected personal data.

Data analysis was based on an interpretative and contextual approach, linking individual narratives with theoretical concepts of collective memory[8] and "sites of memory"[19]. The concept of "memory nodes" further explains how restored objects become physical and symbolic centres of interaction among various groups that imbue them with different meanings (Passi, 2013). Secondary sources and literary references complemented the field findings, aiding in understanding the post-war and contemporary dynamics and power relations in the border regions.

Typology of Research Subjects

In accordance with theoretical approaches to spatial identity based on the concept of sense of place[20], the theory of place attachment[2], and the concept of topophilia as formulated by Tuan[21], the study delineated five groups of respondents. Each group exhibits a distinctive relationship to the environment, shaped concurrently by generational differences. Magee et al.[20] emphasize the importance of linking the physical, social, and emotional aspects of the environment, Lewicka[2] focuses on the role of

emotional bonds in shaping identity, and Tuan[21] develops the idea of topophilia as a deep emotional attachment to a specific environment formed through long-term interactions. This typology considers diverse social, cultural, and historical (intergenerational) factors that determine how various actors engage in the restoration of objects and interpret their significance for regional identity. Longstanding ties to the region and the degree of active involvement in restoration are considered. The categorization into five groups of respondents (long–time residents, settlers, new settlers, holiday home owners/(new) holiday home owners, and other actors) is based not only on empirical findings but also on theoretical concepts of the relationship to place, which highlight different dimensions of social, emotional, and symbolic bonds with the landscape[20][2][21].

1. **Long-time Residents**

   - They embody the so-called "long-term inertia"[8] in preserving collective memory, as their families have lived in the region since before the war.
   - Their continuous presence in the area supports topophilia[21] —a deep emotional attachment to a specific environment linked with family narratives and long-standing social networks.
   - In terms of a sense of place[20], long-time residents contribute to strengthening regional identity, as they feel morally obligated to preserve cultural and sacred objects considered pillars of local heritage.

2. **Settlers**

   - Their relationship with the place is influenced by post-war resettlement[1], when families acquired properties between 1946 and 1970.
   - Their place attachment[2] initially develops in a utilitarian manner—focused on the functional restoration of objects—but gradually evolves into an appreciation of historical and cultural values.
   - The gradual shift from a practical orientation to a greater recognition of cultural significance corresponds to the concept of "dual anchoring"[22], wherein short-term pragmatic reasons give way to a deeper emotional bond with the place.

3. **New Settlers**

   - They migrated after 1989, often seeking a calmer environment or personal self-realization. Their perception of the landscape is based on an endogenous approach to development[23] that emphasizes local potential and innovation.

- New settlers are inspired by modern or alternative forms of revitalization and introduce contemporary aesthetic, economic, or environmental trends into the region[12].
- Within the frameworks of sense of place theories[20], their active involvement in restoration can be seen as a process of rapid integration into the local community, forging bonds with the environment through specific projects.

4. Holiday Home Owners and (New) Holiday Home Owners

- Their relationship to the place is generally recreational[2]; they arrive in the region after 1970 or 2000 to " escape" urban environments and seek tranquillity or an inspiring landscape.
- They use the objects temporarily yet support the sensitive restoration of monuments and pay close attention to aesthetic and landscape-forming elements[21].
- By the concept of topophilia[21], holiday homeowners establish an emotional connection to the landscape. However, their involvement in revitalization processes may be selective—focusing primarily on locations with which they have recreational or aesthetic ties.

5. Other Actors

- This group comprises experts, volunteers, or patrons who do not reside directly in the region but contribute to revitalization through financial support or specialized expertise[24].
- Their relationship to the place resembles an extended notion of place identity[10], whereby the territory, although not their permanent home, evokes intellectual or professional interest.
- They bring specific know-how or financial resources to the process, which can significantly influence the form and success of revitalization projects, even though they do not constitute a dominant part of the resident community[25].
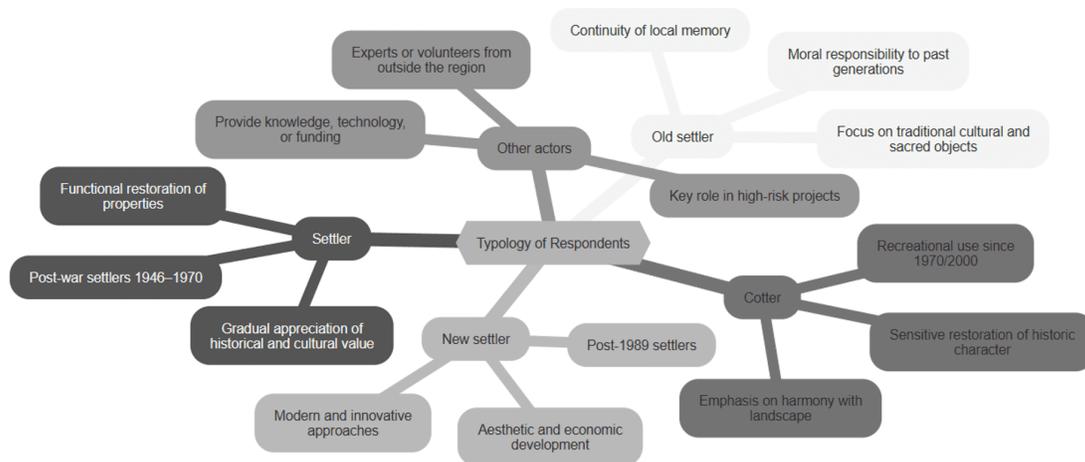
Figure 2. *Typology of Respondents (source: primary data collection, own research)*

The typological differentiation (see Fig 2) reflects various social, cultural, and historical factors[2][21] that influence respondents' relationships with the region and their motivations for participating in restoration. Each group contributes a specific combination of emotional, functional, and symbolic aspects that shape the dynamics of revitalization processes and form regional identity. The restoration process is not uniform. However, it unfolds according to the diverse needs and intentions of the actors— from the effort to preserve the original character to modernization measures responding to current societal and economic conditions.
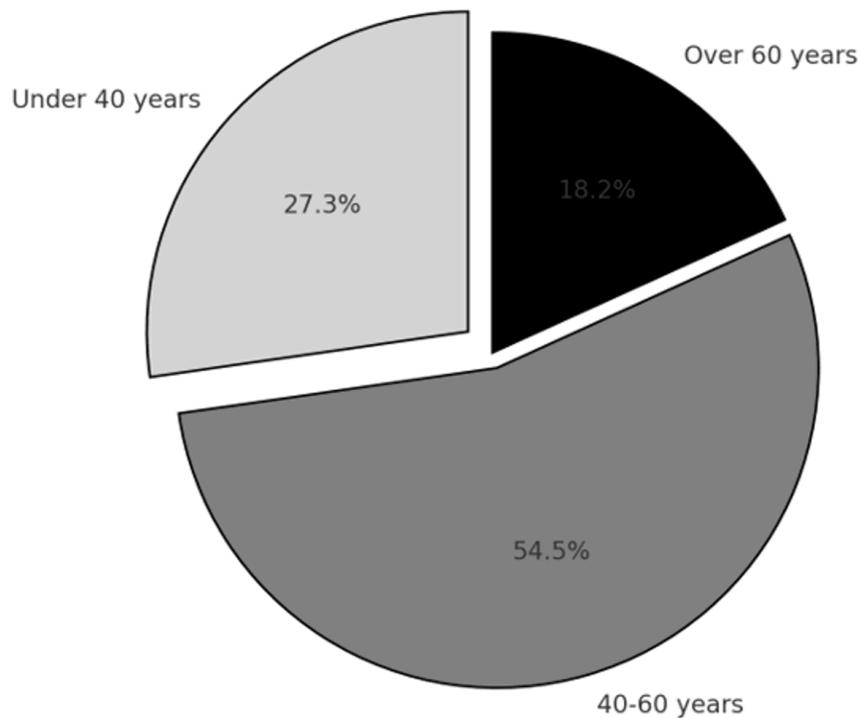
Figure 3. *The respondents' structure by age. (source: primary data collection, own research)*

Analysis of the research sample, depicted in Fig 3, shows that 54.5 % of the actors involved in revitalization in the former "Sudetenland" fall into the 40–60year category. These individuals typically possess the professional experience, financial resources, and social standing necessary for the implementation of projects. Their primary motivation is the preservation of cultural heritage or the practical utilization of specific objects. This trend is followed by the group under 40 years (27.3 %), which often emphasizes ecological sustainability and modern approaches to regional development; they perceive border heritage as part of new opportunities (e.g., community events, tourism). The oldest category of respondents, over 60 years (18.2 %), primarily focuses on preserving family and local traditions. They aim to pass on monuments and historical values to the next generation. This diversity in age and motivation contributes to a sustainable approach to revitalization that combines innovative impulses with rich experience and care for the past.

Most revitalization activities are directed toward objects of significant historical or cultural value, as designated, among others, in the Architectural Heritage Rescue Program of the Ministry of Culture[26]. In documenting minor monuments, a certified methodology was employed[27], thereby confirming the

dominance of sacred buildings—typically Baroque churches, chapels, and small ecclesiastical objects. These characteristic "landmarks" of rural settlements often deteriorated due to changes in ownership and poor maintenance after World War II. The second significant group comprises technical monuments (e.g., water towers) and vernacular architecture (agricultural homesteads, timber-framed houses), whose restoration requires respect for the original architectural style and sometimes negotiation regarding their current functional use.

The "snowball" method led to a higher concentration of revitalization examples in the vicinity of Štědrá, Podbořany, and Toužim. However, the analysis indicates that this phenomenon is typical for the entire study area. A significant challenge is to sensitively balance historical and cultural values with landscape-forming and environmental aspects. In the context of the "memory nodes" concept, for example, sacred buildings become key points where actors' diverse interests—from spiritual and familial significance to tourism or ecological considerations—converge and where contemporary interpretations of the past are negotiated. This dynamic, also evident in other types of objects (technical monuments, homesteads), underscores how physical restoration is closely linked to the formation of collective identity and the symbolic meanings of the region.

Theoretical Framework: Memory and Space as (Non) static Phenomena in the Process of Revitalization

The theoretical framework of this article is primarily based on memory studies that emphasise the fundamental role of collective and cultural memory in shaping social identity and development strategies[8][5]. In the context of the former "Sudetenland," the interruption of historical continuity due to the post-war expulsion of the original inhabitants[1] significantly influenced the formation of new interpretations of history and the nature of contemporary revitalisation processes. Abandoned or lost objects become symbolic "sites of memory"[6], where memories of previous generations intersect with new narratives responding to current socio-economic needs and value orientations.

In such a reconceptualised borderland, the landscape is not merely a passive geographical backdrop but a dynamic "organism" in which social bonds, historical experiences, and power interests intersect[28] (Scholz, 2015). Suppose we deepen this perspective by incorporating Bakhtin's concept of the chronotype[29]. In that case, it becomes apparent that time and space are so interconnected that wartime and post-war events continue to leave their imprint on the present – either through selective forgetting

or, conversely, through critical reflection[30][21]. Thus, the landscape acquires the role of an active bearer of cultural and emotional meanings and a medium for various revitalisation approaches.

With the spatial turn[31], this view is complemented by the notion that revitalisation is not merely a technical and construction intervention but also a sociocultural process in which the landscape functions as a "communicative interface"[32]. Individual actors – long-time residents, new settlers, holiday homeowners, local associations, or volunteers – imbue these objects with their own stories, transforming them into "heterotopic" spaces and thereby (re) producing collective memories[33][34].

From the perspective of an endogenous approach to development[23], the concept of revitalisation activities in the borderlands also encompasses economic and social dimensions. Transforming historical burdens into community events, cross-border projects, or local tourism can reanimate abandoned cultural spaces[24][25]. When we approach these objects as memory anchor points, we emphasise that the landscape constitutes more than just a backdrop for local inhabitants – it becomes an active co-creator of processes that connect the past with the present and raises the question, "Who holds the reins of the local narrative?"

For this article – focused on the ownership of the past in the revitalisation process – it is crucial to introduce the concept of "memory nodes." This idea is based on the assumption that a site of memory[6] is not static but becomes a dynamic node where various value systems and symbolic worlds intersect[8]. Thus, revitalised objects (such as castles, churches, and technical monuments) become focal points where physical restoration intersects with power dynamics and diverse interpretations of the past.

A threefold pillar of the theoretical framework supports the concept:

1. **Memory Studies** remind us that cultural and collective memory[8][5] in the Sudetenland is formed under specific interrupted continuity conditions and renegotiated through revitalisation projects.

2. **The Spatial Turn** emphasises that the landscape and social reality mutually shape each other[31]. The disruption of original communities and subsequent resettlement create power conflicts[28] (Scholz, 2015), which are visibly manifested in who and how objects are restored and interpreted.

3. **Endogenous Development** – This highlights the importance of local involvement ("bottom-up")[23] [35] and respect for original narratives, whereby revitalisation can strengthen community cohesion, shape the local tourism market, or attract new inhabitants and initiatives to the region[24][25].

From the perspective of social network analysis, memory nodes can be understood as central points at which information is accumulated and distributed – similar to nodes in social networks that play a key role in the dissemination and stabilisation of information[36]. Castells[37] further points out that in a network society, time and space are sedimented into lasting patterns, analogous to the "sedimentation of time" process in memory nodes. Granovetter[38] and Wellman[39] also emphasise that even weak ties can contribute to the long-term preservation of information, thereby reinforcing the role of informal structures. This interdisciplinary approach allows us to understand better how local actors, who occupy central positions in informal networks, can effectively mobilise the community and advance their narratives within the revitalisation process.

The relationship between these pillars underscores that revitalising abandoned objects in the borderlands is a multi-layered process in which the material, emotional, social, and symbolic dimensions intersect within dynamic memory nodes. The extent to which the past is "owned" depends on who can mobilise shared narratives, feelings of belonging, or financial and institutional resources around these nodes. Thus, it is not merely a matter of preserving cultural heritage or restoring buildings but also a negotiation that shapes the contemporary identity of the region and gives the past a new, often controversial or hybrid meaning.

Who Owns the Past? Results and Discussion

Figure 4. *Wordcloud from Interview Keywords*

Empirical research in the former "Sudeten" regions of the Karlovy Vary and Ústí nad Labem areas confirmed that formal cadastral ownership (by municipalities, churches, or state institutions) does not determine who decides on the preservation and future form of historical objects. Although the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic[26] and other official bodies formally commit to heritage protection, interviews with revitalisation actors indicate that practical care and interpretation primarily emerge "from below"[40][35]. This discrepancy between official and actual "ownership" of the past illustrates a central thesis of memory studies—that collective memory is continuously reconstructed through social interactions and active engagement with narratives[8][5].

Interviews revealed that informal leaders—primarily representatives of local associations and initiatives —play a key role in revitalisation by mobilising the community around heritage sites. These actors function as "memory nodes," connecting diverse interest groups and actively shaping the interpretation of the past. One of the narrators involved in restoring a chapel in Vroutek emphasised that the process was not merely technical but also "a battle over which story will become associated with the chapel." According to him, every sacred monument—whether a cross or an image of the Passion—carries a specific story that should be reflected and preserved through archival research and expert documentation. For this reason, the restoration efforts focused on physical repair and a systematic analysis of the historical context. Similarly, another narrator, engaged in revitalising a castle in Štědrá, noted that the process was a technical undertaking and a complex negotiation regarding its future role within regional identity. A key aspect was deciding which elements of historical heritage would be prioritised and what discourse would shape its significance in the collective memory of the inhabitants. Both cases correspond to social networks[36], where key individuals determine which information and values become dominant.

Interviews also revealed that in the former "Sudetenland," the motivations for restoring cultural objects are multi-layered:

1. Personal Narratives and Family Memory − A discovery of post-war documents or stories passed down by older generations sparks interest in a deteriorating church, cross, or castle.

2. Community Efforts for Positive Regional Transformation − The aim is to overcome the image of a "neglected borderland" and offer functional public spaces imbued with a unique atmosphere (a "genius loci").

3. Cross-Border Connections – Monuments and memories are also revitalised through the efforts of descendants of the original inhabitants who, despite forced expulsion, retain a long-lasting emotional bond with the region[1][4].

These three dimensions often intertwine, leading to both negotiation and collaboration and occasional disputes or controversies. The physical restoration of objects thus runs parallel to a process of memorisation—reliving and reinterpreting the past, particularly in the context of post-war discontinuity. Some official institutions, however, may resist addressing "undesirable" topics that could undermine tourism potential[30]. In contrast, civic associations often emphasise that rehabilitating the cultural value of a place is impossible without an honest reflection on the controversial chapters of history[41]. A fragile balance, therefore, emerges between "marketing" historical heritage and engaging in open discussions about post-war violence or expulsion.

From a theoretical standpoint, two main lines can be distinguished:

Memory Studies[8][5]: Collective memory is formed in social interactions, which in the former "Sudeten" areas reinforces the post-war expulsion and interrupted continuity[1].

Endogenous Approaches to Development[23][25]: Local resources and spontaneous "bottom-up" initiatives play a decisive role. While formal owners (the state, churches) sometimes provide only irregular support[26], the real drivers of restoration and the new narrative of the past are often passionate volunteers or associations.

At the level of social ties, long-time residents, new settlers, and holiday homeowners increasingly engage in restoration, discovering a powerful emotional charge in seemingly "neglected" objects[2]. Repairing churches, crosses, and sometimes entire abandoned villages retroactively reshapes collective memory: physical acts (such as roof repairs, installation of informational displays, or organising community events) go hand in hand with an awareness of the past[6]. This gives rise to the concept of "memory nodes," where diverse interpretations of history collide—from attempts to obscure painful episodes to openly acknowledging unsavoury chapters. Some interviews illustrate that excessive disclosure of post-war violence might jeopardise the "rural paradise" image for visitors. At the same time, untold stories often prove crucial for preserving the memory value[27][4]. Activities such as digitising and publishing documents concerning the disappeared inhabitants effectively co-create the interpretative framework of what is remembered and omitted[30].

From an architectural and urban planning perspective, voluntary and community initiatives often transform neglected or "rootless" spaces (an abandoned cemetery, a dilapidated chapel) into hubs of new social and symbolic ties[32][40]. This means a previously unused area can come alive through concerts, exhibitions, or cross-border meetings, transcending its initially narrow status as a historical monument[31][28]. Sites once associated with the German community thus acquire a dual function: while they formally belong to new owners (the state, municipality, or church), they are symbolically revitalised by those who infuse them with contemporary social content[12].

Another significant factor is integrating the past with current economic and ecological needs[24]. The rescue of buildings is often connected with their use for tourism, environmental education, or local craftsmanship. This creates a hybrid identity that encompasses German roots, post-war settlement, and efforts to revitalise rural areas[2][20]. Interviews indicate that formal ownership recedes into the background in favour of the physical and symbolic energy of those who keep the heritage alive – thus co-determining how the past is narrated. Primarily, the concept of care, interpretation, and sharing decides which stories endure and how they are integrated into a new context. Revitalisation projects, ranging from small sacred buildings to vast castle complexes, demonstrate that actors seek to reconcile a once "problematic" past with the region's current needs[11]. The formation of collective memory here depends more on the strength of social and symbolic networks than on what is recorded in property registers.

This process creates a new culture of care for historical heritage, in which the differentiated roles of owners and users are gradually blurred: communities, experts, enthusiasts, and invited public institutions progressively share responsibility for the physical rescue and interpretation of monuments. In many cases, the sharp boundary between "caretakers" and "the public" disappears as community events actively involve residents in the restoration process. The role of "owners" of the past is assumed by those who can mobilise human resources, financial support, and collective narratives of a given place. In contrast to older models of state-run heritage care, participatory heritage[42] is increasingly being applied, preserving historical authenticity and fostering new meanings that organically connect the past with the region's present needs.

Conclusion

The study's findings confirm that "ownership of the past" cannot be reduced solely to the formal possession of monuments or archival sources. Although state institutions, churches, and local

governments possess the legal framework and financial backing, their interventions represent only one aspect of the revitalization process. The actual revival of cultural objects and their symbolic reinterpretation primarily emerge from informal "bottom-up" initiatives, in which diverse groups of actors—from local associations and holiday homeowners to newly arrived residents, volunteers, and patrons—actively infuse historical objects with new narratives[40][35].

From the "memory nodes" concept perspective, revitalization is not confined to technical restoration. However, it constitutes a dynamic negotiation over which stories and values will be associated with specific sites. Our data indicate that absolute power over the interpretation of the past stems from formal ownership and the position of actors within informal social networks. Just as central network nodes have a greater capacity to disseminate and stabilize information[36], key local actors exert more significant influence over collective memory. Even weak ties can play a crucial role in preserving the continuity of shared memories[38][39].

In terms of regional development and heritage care, successful revitalization of border localities thus requires flexible models that combine formal institutional support with an informal "culture of care" and a strong network of local actors. Such an approach enables the preservation of historical heritage and allows for its dynamic reinterpretation and adaptation to contemporary socio-economic and cultural needs. For future research, it is essential to monitor how diverse interests—economic, ecological, local patriotism, or tourism—intersect and influence one another within these "memory nodes" and how this dynamic contributes to forming a hybrid and innovative regional identity.

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Declarations