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CONFERENCE PAPER • PROF. DR FRÉDÉRIC ROUSSEAU



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The Presence of Colonial Troops in French War Museums

Abstract

This paper sets out to tackle the history and the memory of African troops as they are presented in some of France's major World War I museums, specifically those of Péronne (Somme), Les Invalides (Paris) and Meaux (Marne). It will do so by resorting to museohistory, a method analyzing the narratives of the past, their impact, but also the problems they raise with regard to present-day issues. While confronting the narratives told in museums to historical knowledge, this paper will investigate the devices used in the exhibiting of the past in order to assess the place devoted to colonial troops or to troops from the colonies in the national narrative, to identify the key messages conveyed to the viewers, as well as the recurring images and the lapses in memory. The question underlying this study is the following: is the manner in which the recourse to the Empire is presented in museums aimed at constructing an ethnocentric narrative solely focused on French sacrifice, or does the reminder of the debt France owes to colonized people contribute, in its own way, to weave the fabric of the integration of immigrants originating from countries formerly part of the French Empire?

Profile

Frédéric Rousseau is Professor of Contemporary History at the University Paul Valéry in Montpellier. His research topics include societies at war, the questions of memory, the transmission of memory, testimonies. His books on the Great War include: *La Guerre censurée. Une histoire des combattants européens de 14-18*, Le Seuil, 1999 et 2003 ; *Le Procès des témoins de la Grande Guerre. L'affaire Norton Cru*, Le Seuil, 2003 ; *La Grande guerre en tant qu'expériences sociales*, Ellipse, 2006. On museohistory, he has published: *The Presents of Painful Pasts. History Museums and Configurations of Remembrance. Essays in Museohistory*, Michel Houdiard éditeur, 2012; *Entre Histoires et Mémoires. La Guerre au musée. Essais de Muséohistoire (2)*, (en coll.), Michel Houdiard éditeur, 2013.