

The contributions of African troops to The Second World War must be acknowledged

In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement, serious and honest conversations need to be had. Conversations about the white washing of British and more broadly European history. This includes but is not limited to the history taught in schools, the historical figures we choose idolise and the portrayal of historical events through our cultural mediums. We must question why certain groups continue to be underrepresented or relegated to the margins of our national consciousness. The contributions of black people to British and European society have largely been ignored and in some cases, omitted from mainstream historical narratives. One poignant example of this is the erasure of the contributions and sacrifices of black people in discussion surrounding World War Two (WW2) history.



Black Lives Matter protesters in Leeds, July 2020

This white washing became painfully clear when I began conducting research on WW2, specifically the contributions of West Africans in the French Resistance. Despite being of West African heritage myself and having studied WW2 history all through primary and secondary school, it came as a surprise to my peers and I that black troops played an integral role in the victory of the Allied forces. However, these men and women were not only forgotten, but also actively erased from WW2 history. This is demonstrated through the French government's policy of "blanchissement", which translates as whitening of its

army. This occurred in September 1944 when Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French forces decided to take the weapons and uniforms away from its black soldiers. Instead, giving them to white resistance fighters from mainland France. To make matters worse, these black troops were sent back to West Africa, some without any compensation for their efforts. This was done to emphasize the role of white troops in the liberation, unfortunately at expense of its African troops.

An important WW2 event involving large numbers of African troops, that remains largely forgotten is the Allied invasion of southern France known as the Provence landings. It took place on August 15th 1944, just two months after D-day invasion in Normandy . This assault was codenamed “Operation Dragoon” and played a crucial role in accelerating the liberation of France from Nazi occupation, ultimately leading to the victory of the Allied forces. Whilst the D- day landing is widely known, taught and even celebrated across Europe, for decades the Provence landings have been overshadowed by its predecessor. Therefore is sometimes referred to as “the forgotten D- Day ”.The main goal of this assault was to liberate two key ports in France which would in turn allow fighting forces to be supplied to German occupied France. In total, 450,000 troops took part in this assault from the US, UK , Canada and France however, around 200,000 soldiers - over half of the total troops came from French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. Despite being regarded by historians as the Allies most successful amphibious assaults and its overall importance to WW2 victory, the colonial troops who had a large part to play in it are often left out.



shows French President, joined by the presidents of Ivory Coast and Guinea, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Provence landings in August 2019

More needs to be done to acknowledge and commemorate the sacrifices of these troops. This is especially important as the number of African war veterans continue to deteriorate rapidly. It is paramount their stories are re-inserted into the European collective memory. Therefore, more can and should be done to integrate this part of history into school curricula. European governments also need to officially commemorate and compensate their sacrifices. Although the number of African war veterans continue to fall, educating the current and next generation about their contributions and telling their stories is one way to ensure their sacrifices continue to live on in our collective memory. In Boris Johnson's official speech, addressed to the nation he proclaimed that "we are all right, to say that Black Lives Matter". If that is the case, black people should not be placed at the margins of British history and instead the history we teach and celebrate should rightly reflect our truly diverse and multicultural landscape.

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