

Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action (LIA) Reflection

Stella Grover



From 2nd September to October 13th I undertook my 'Leadership in Action' placement with the French Ministère des Armées under the branch of ONaCVG (l'Office national des combattants et des victimes de guerre). By a long way, this placement has been the most difficult and yet rewarding undertaking I have completed. My role within the organisation as a 'médiatrice culturelle' consisted of conducting outreach programs and leading tours around the 'Hauts Lieux de la Mémoire Nationale' (HLMN) with the primary goal of educating and communicating the themes of each memorial to the public. The memorials included Fort Mont-Valérien (former execution site of Resistance fighters during German occupation of Paris), Mémorial des martyrs de la Déportation (Memorial and museography site commemorating the 170,000 from France interned in German concentration camps and executed at death centres), Monument aux Morts pour la France en opérations extérieures (commemorating all those who died on foreign soil and have been endowed the 'Mort Pour La France' honour since 1963) and Mémorial de la guerre d'Algérie (commemorating those who died during the Algerian war from Marrocco, Tunisia and Algeria). Whilst working alongside the HLMN team, I saw how national memorials are not only preserved, but the number of commemorative ceremonies taking place to embed the memory of war in the public psyche. It has altered my attitude towards memorials, statues and even military ceremonies - a particularly stark realisation in the face of discourse surrounding statues in recent years.

Figure 1(LHS below) Mémorial du Mont-Valérien



Figure 2 Delivering a tour to a group of military enthusiasts from the UK at MV.

The outreach workshops facilitated an alternative and more creative educational route to talk about the history of France with children. Elements of history were simplified but not undermined nor diminished. Children were able to comprehend the magnitude of topics like German occupation and the Holocaust and thus were able to communicate emotional and intelligent responses in the form of creative projects. Oftentimes they designed their own memorials based on a cause of their choosing. Sometimes they would have a workshop after a tour and reflect on certain key players using sources (like personal letters from the archives) to complete creative writing tasks. Though taking a different educational approach, it was insightful to witness the effectiveness of these conversations and confirmed a belief that school syllabuses should not shy away from difficult elements of colonial or military history.

My tours were delivered to both French nationals and international tourists. They would vary from school trips, veterans, firefighters, cadet groups and sometimes a group of zealous history fanatics. Communicating the history to the public has been an invaluable experience. It afforded the opportunity to have considered, emotionally intelligent and compassionate conversations about extremely difficult moments of history. At the beginning, I believed that I benefitted from entering these conversations as an outsider, a British person. For the most part, I believed it was not my history that I was relaying to the public and therefore could talk impartially and one step removed. However, during these six weeks I have realised that it is in fact a collective history of war, totalitarianism, fascism and colonialism that has touched countries not only in the West but globally. I am not from North Africa, but I was still touched by the involvement of Maghrebin guerrilla soldiers who helped to liberate France during German occupation. I am not Polish nor Jewish and still struggled with the history of mass deportation of human beings to death centres. And it was a privilege to create spaces for sensitive discussions, as a member of the human race – not just a white British university student in the 21st century.

The history and politics surrounding these national sites of memory became all consuming, particularly due to the current political climate. I was forced to reflect constantly on the rise of fascism in Europe in the 20th century as I talked intensely and incessantly about the sophisticated operations carried out by Nazis and collaborative agencies in France between 1940-1944. It has cemented a preoccupation in unpacking the rise of the Far Right and the importance of creating

compassionate spaces for thoughtful discussions – rather than polarising forces causing the breakdown of current and future conversations between left, right and centrist actors. I found myself writing extensively, reflecting on the recent elections and the current political climate, tracing similarities and comparisons between 2024 and the early-mid 20th century. To say that working on these sites has had an impression on me, would be an understatement. I felt incredibly privileged to have these conversations with other people who devote their professional life to understanding this moment in history better. But also, and this is perhaps most important, communicate the events in an accessible, empathetic and thought-provoking way.

Figure 3 (LHS below) Here I am at MOPEX on the Journées européennes du patrimoine in Paris. A holiday every year to celebrate national heritage and where those working in culture open their doors to discuss their work with the public.



Figure 4 (RHS above) MOPEX, Monument aux morts pour la France en opérations extérieures, in Balard, Paris.

It was a warm, empathetic and assiduous working environment, one where I was immediately welcomed and trusted to follow my own judgement and interests. When conducting the tours, especially to a native English crowd, I was able to infuse my own interests and thoughts into the tour. For example, at Mont-Valérien, when arriving at 'le cloche' (a memorial in the shape of a bell with the names of all the fallen men of Mont-Valérien) I made sure to point out the names of colonial soldiers from French Indochina, Algeria, and Communist fighters from Poland and the Soviet Union. It was important for me to contextualise the atrocities which took place at Mont-Valérien within a wider global history. I understood it would also capture the interests of an international crowd more effectively. At Charles De Gaulle's commemorative plaque, inaugurated in 1959, I always chose to highlight how the language was not inclusive of foreign fighters nor the political status of hostages. Not all tour guides chose to do this, but it was important for me to reflect how attitudes have changed since 1959, not only towards colonial fighters but also how discourse surrounding a more victimising narrative has altered. Arguably, we now have a clearer idea of the operations at Mont-Valérien which are less clouded by Gaullist judgement. At this point, I drew similarities between Charles De Gaulle and Winston Churchill – again to stir interest amongst international tourists who may have been more familiar with Churchill than De Gaulle. I found this effective in demonstrating the complicated history with political leaders who become the

‘writers of history’ – notably Charles De Gaulle and his turbulent relationship with Communists. I noticed the parallels between conflicting attitudes towards both political leaders and ensured I remained sensitive and impartial when describing respective attitudes.

Carrying out my ‘LiA’ project has had an enormous impact on me personally. Spending a significant amount of time in a foreign country has been both exhausting and rewarding as I adapted to linguistic and cultural differences. Though I have studied French for many years, its application in a professional setting was a difficulty I couldn’t have anticipated until I arrived. Long working days on my feet, walking around the sites and being exposed to the elements as the weather gets colder and wetter was not so much an adversity but another thing to consider. My attitude towards recuperation and fuelling myself well enough to work hard during the day was an unanticipated but necessary adaptation - something I continue to grapple with. It became clear that the importance of balancing personal and social life (making the most of living in Paris) as well as having the energy to carry out the job to a high standard, introduced another element to consider. Indeed, concessions were made either side and I was forced to accept that a perfect balance wasn’t always achieved.

Upon reflection, my SMART goals were helpful to navigate my first few weeks. They helped to ground me with the task at hand when I was overwhelmed by my new environment. As identified by these goals, cultural differences were in fact a problem I encountered. But I was supported well enough by my colleagues who ensured I was comfortable. They encouraged me, recognised my position as an outsider and catered to that accordingly. Plenty of resources to facilitate my workshops were readily available and if I needed to be creative or seek advice for ways to create stimulating and thought-provoking projects, I could ask for help and inspiration. I made particular note to include anecdotes and cultural references in my tours. I thought this might help convey a more emotive and sensitive tour as my main goal was to avoid a robotic and mechanical reformulation of the history. This was a challenge, though not impossible. A lot had been absorbed by osmosis through cultural exposure and by witnessing tours and workshops delivered by my colleagues.

Fundamentally, though, the difficulties I encountered were not the ones I anticipated. In order to earn my place within this tight-knit team, I had to navigate new professional relationships in a way that was amicable, open-minded but also forthright and outgoing. From previous Laidlaw training and other life experiences I was confident in offering help, being a team player and supporting my peers in an English-speaking setting. Navigating this in French was something completely different. When words failed, I had to rely on body language and facial expressions to communicate basic gestures I would otherwise take for granted. I became acutely aware of my position as an outsider and desperately wished to replicate a work ethic that reflected my respect for the organisation and my colleagues. General meaning could always be communicated, but my personality, compassion and comradeship was not always a given.

Sometimes when my body language might have seemed unclear, I would check in with colleagues. I communicated with my team both emotionally and logistically – the former incredibly important when dealing with such sensitive topics on a regular basis. They also checked on me to ensure I understood – this varied from health and safety instructions or a joke around the kitchen at lunchtime. These moments I found special. Whilst the LiA serves as an opportunity to experience cultural immersion, I was lucky enough to be a peer who communicated in my colleagues’ native language. Indeed, at times it was difficult to allow myself to be accepted. Initially feeling like an outsider and someone who could not foresee fitting into this team, it took time and energy, and a

lot of talking myself round when I had mentally disengaged from exhaustion. But I started understanding more and wanting to cement my place amongst such an impressive group of people.

This was perhaps the biggest leadership skill I took away from this experience. That in some rooms I will be replaceable. That I may be useful but not integral and it's not for a lack of trying. I learned that my experience at OnaCVG will facilitate leadership elsewhere, without being a leader here. And through this, I learned that leadership skills are not in fact exclusive to leaders but carried by all of us. The aspiration to be active listeners, compassionate, hard-working, and informed is as integral to leadership as confidence and effective communication. In fact, with just these latter traits we are not automatically entitled to leading status. It would have been inappropriate for me to serve as a leader in this environment. Whilst I was a tour guide and 'led' tours, I was also a novice. I was learning from my peers and, most of all, exercising my French – something I will take away and will no doubt serve me in my future. My LiA was an opportunity to polish my soft skills, to listen and to learn. It was in these moments that I reminded myself that leadership wasn't a personality trait but a reward. We are not born leaders, but we must earn that privilege. So, in accepting that I could only do my job so well, I had to strip myself of ego. I had to forget my usual formulaic approach which serves me well in academic contexts and English-speaking networking scenarios. I had to observe and allow my leaders to guide *me*. I maintained a warmth and politeness when meeting new people, when to smile, laugh and ask questions. But I wasn't integral, and I certainly wasn't the centre of attention.

Figure 5 (LHS below) Journées européennes du patrimoine at the Mémorial national de la guerre d'Algérie et des combats du Maroc et de la Tunisie



Figure 6 (RHS above) Delivering a tour, at the 'cloche' and retelling stories of men who were executed at Mont-Valérien.

Though only the other side of the English Chanel, cultural differences were slight but apparent. I noticed how mealtimes were sacrosanct. An extended lunch break enabled colleagues to carve out quality time to 'catch-up' and take their time to eat a warm meal and recuperate before starting work again in the afternoon. It seems that, by contrast, for us in the UK we have less work-life boundaries – this often results in less opportunities to create such ties with our peers in professional settings. Quality time like this is not so much of a priority in the UK, but I bore witness to its benefits.

OnaCVG is a governmental organisation and therefore my experience has been unequivocally political. I have learnt about the French parliament, political discontentedness amongst French left-wing voters and the attitudes towards the current French Head of State, not least because my colleagues were civil servants. I appreciated the opportunity to access such an environment as an understanding of the French political system was a priority for me here during this period.

I witnessed various military ceremonies commemorating various causes. Some paid homage to Resistance fighters, others had colonial ties or were French army soldiers. Before arriving, I was averse to these settings. I regret that I perceived such ceremonies as pageantry and didn't understand the uniforms, the trumpets and the long silences. And, instead of learning more, I became entirely incurious. I have since spoken to veterans, pieds-noirs (French descendants who were displaced after the Algerian war) and family members of Resistance fighters and victims of mass deportation to German camps. My previous cynicism was turned on its head. And I wrestled with this too. After speaking to my peers, my personal conclusion is that my generation struggles to overlook the negatives of war and its symbolism. For me, the ceremonies were a legacy of colonialism. For others, the military had become synonymous with violence and masculinity. But during these ceremonies and having spoken to the actors themselves, the answer became clear. I understood that these ceremonies afforded a language to a generation of people who lack the vocabulary to describe what they had endured. I understood the importance of remembering; not just so traumatic events weren't repeated in humanity's timeline – but as a coping mechanism. I realised that Remembrance Day in the UK doesn't facilitate talking about how or why we remember certain individuals. At school, it was a matter of abiding by tradition for the sake of tradition – I don't recall being told what British soldiers died for in any of the World Wars nor the circumstances of their conscription. And it was a privilege that I didn't have to contemplate these things gravely either. I haven't lived through war on my home shores, I have never had to cower into a bunker during a bomb raid and I certainly haven't witnessed extreme violence up close. It is easy for those of my generation to not understand the legacy of military ceremonies and subsequently call into question why we continue to remember in this way. It is inevitable for political trends to invite these questions again and again, it is certainly necessary that we ask why the role of women and non-white actors was invisible. And yet, we risk developing a cynicism which overshadows remembering altogether. My time at OnaCVG was witnessed through the lens of the actors who lived and died during German occupation of France - first and foremost. For this short period of time, I was predominantly concerned by those who were caught up against a wave of fascism: both French and international men, women, and children. This was most visceral of all in the lead up to political elections which took place in the autumn of 2024.

My role at OnaCVG has been formative and the lessons I have learnt here will most certainly carry me through my career. I remain devoted to a career in law and legal policy. My time here has cemented an interest in migration in particular and, most of all, has been defined by the political climate of 2024 and its ceaselessly contentious nature in Western politics.

I feel I also have had the opportunity to build skills used for a career in law that I otherwise wouldn't have fostered. I navigated communication in a professional setting, made use of reading and research skills, exercised teamwork, and grappled with self-confidence and the ability to trust my own judgement. Having worried about this experience in the build-up, then having lived it and thrived I know not to shy away from nerve-wracking and unknown environments as I have witnessed how fruitful they can be.

Most of all, the foundations of this experience were set in the process of completing my Laidlaw research project in the Summer 2023. Titled 'Identifying Southeast Asians in the French Resistance' it was thanks to this research project that I explored the notion of immigrant status and the geopolitical and colonial contexts which bring young individuals to Western shores. I was fortunate that my research project afforded time to explore and contemplate a topic which already captured my interest.



Figure 7 The Clearing, the site where 1,003 Resistance fighters and hostages were executed by German soldiers between 1941-44.



Figure 8 Ceremony when the Préfet of Île de France arrived at Mont-Valérien



Figure 9 National remembrance ceremony for those who died during the conflicts in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, 5th December 2024.



Figure 10, Mémorial des martyrs de la Déportation, Île de la cité. Architect, Georges Henri- Pingusson, Commissioned by Réseau du Sovenir.

Figure 11 Early mornings at the Mémorial des martyrs de la Déportation



After delivering a tour for the University of London Paris Institute, I was invited to talk at the university about my research and my experience working as an education outreach officer at ONaCVG. The final title of the lecture was 'Communicating narratives of heroism in France: how society navigates memory of violence'. Through this lens I discussed my research on Indochinese soldiers in the French Resistance and the need to decolonise military archives and mainstream historical narratives. My talk was littered with anecdotal references about the memorials of which I am involved in and this led to a discussion on the dissemination of memory, memory of war, the erection of war memorials and the effectiveness of those memorials. Public reaction to war memorials became a huge talking point as we delved into conversations about why war memorials are inaugurated and who they are for. We discussed the phenomenon of taking down statues of colonial figures and the nature of their funding. I was grateful to have been invited by ULIP to explore these ideas with fellow undergraduates who quizzed me and questioned my judgement. It was both thrilling and enlightening and I realised how much I had missed the academic environment.

How does France React to Aspects of its History that do not Communicate Narratives of Heroism?

The Thought Forum
Special Edition

Stella Grover

- 3rd year History and French student at Leeds University
- Tour guide for the Office National des Combattants et des Victimes de Guerre
- Undertook the undergraduate research project: "Identifying South East Asians in the French Resistance"
- Works to secure posthumous military recognition for cryptologists who formed the PC Bruno, PC Cadix, and Agency Africa groups

When?
Friday 31st of January at 3pm

Where?
Room 106

I thank the Laidlaw Foundation for the support in completing this LiA project. Not only was I generously funded to live in Paris but I received pastoral support from the team at University of Leeds before embarking on this nerve-wracking adventure. I thank also the team at ONaCVG and Hauts Lieux de la Mémoire National who welcomed me, accepted me, and taught me so much about this moment in French history as well as myself. I am grateful to have had a truly unique experience in the country's capital and to have experienced something so enriching both culturally and personally.

Scholar

Name:	Stella Grover
Faculty:	School of Languages, Cultures and Societies
Email address:	ml22s3g@leeds.ac.uk / stellamgrover@gmail.com
Title of LIA Project:	'Educational Outreach at Paris' War Memorials'