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# The Representation of “Difficult Pasts” in Military Museums

## The Portuguese Colonial War in the Portuguese Armed Forces Museums

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This work addresses how the history of the Portuguese colonial war and its mnemonic productions are (non)represented in the Portuguese Armed Forces museums (Army, Air Force, and Navy). Through an analysis of the textual and visual contents of the exhibitions, activity reports, and institutional communication texts; site visits; and interviews with the museums’ staff, I seek to identify and examine the contexts of creation of these spaces and the production of the exhibitions’ content. I conclude that these spaces manifest the complexity of addressing the colonial war and colonial pasts and communicating “difficult pasts” in military museums. When the topic is addressed, the exhibitions tend to focus on the Portuguese perspective of the conflict and elide its colonial nature. I advocate a reformulation of the colonial war musealization, in order to avoid the normalization of warfare and provide more plural and complex perspectives on this historical phenomenon.

■ **KEYWORDS:** commemoration, liberation struggles, memorial museums, musealization, politics of memory, war museums

The colonial war (1961–1974)<sup>1</sup> was the largest conflict in which Portugal was ever involved (based on the number of soldiers in combat and its uninterrupted duration). The memory of the conflict has been a contentious topic in Portuguese contemporary society for decades, since it represents a “difficult heritage” (Logan and Reeves 2009; Macdonald 2009). This historical event has generated “difficult legacies” (Macdonald 2009) that have shaped the public and private narratives about the war and produced different processes of remembering. The public commemoration and remembering of troubled pasts are challenging, and the way of portraying the colonial war in a museum setting is no exception. When it happens in a military museum, the challenge is even harder, as this article addresses.

War museums (in a broad sense, those museums that address the topic of warfare) do not deal easily with the task of representing trauma (Simine 2013), contested stories (Whitmarsh 2001), painful periods (Logan and Reeves 2009), or the history of colonialism and imperialism (Haymond 2015), although their mission should embrace this challenge, as I will argue. Due to the inexistence of a national museum dedicated to the memory of the conflict, the musealization of the colonial war in Portugal has been undertaken by the armed forces and the veterans’



associations. From the former, just one military museum integrates a large permanent exhibition entirely dedicated to the conflict, which is an expression of the resistance shown by the military community in approaching the event.

The complexity and difficulty of addressing this historical event are also visible in history textbooks (Araújo and Maeso 2015), political speeches delivered by current and former Portuguese heads of state and government, other public and official narratives (Cardina 2020), and what many veterans consider the weak or inexistent state policy of commemoration and remembrance of the colonial war in Portugal (Campos 2017). It took 45 years after the conflict ended for a statute addressing former combatants (46/2020) to be approved on 20 August 2020. This illustrates the difficulties of dealing with the memory of the colonial war and the men who fought in it. The document contains measures of symbolic recognition that had long been demanded by former combatants and measures of material reparation, in addition to those that previous legislation already contemplated.

In many ways, the forms of memorialization of the colonial war are articulated with those of the colonial past. They are “entangled memories” marked by silences, amnesia, strategies of active forgetting and selective remembering (Campos 2017; Cardina 2020), and imperial nostalgia (Caiado 2021). They can be seen as expressions of the “colonial aphasia” (Stoler 2016) that shapes the remembering of the colonial past in Portugal.

The public narratives about the war have been characterized by the elision of its more brutal aspects, namely, the violence and war crimes committed by the Portuguese side. This omission resides in a general difficulty in remembering acts of violence but also in the nonrecognition by the military hierarchy and the Portuguese state, of the war crimes and massacres committed by Portuguese troops during the conflict. Related to this is the fact that the silencing of colonial violence, in a broader manner, has its own historicity, which includes the framing of the colonial war as one of its last expressions (Cardina 2020). These processes can be explained to a great extent by the cult of imperial myths and ideologies, colonial development policies and white settlement in the African colonies, and the efforts to *imperialize* the nation-state that successive political regimes have promoted among the Portuguese population. The public dissemination of ideologies of “historical mission and exceptionality”—the mission to colonize and the mission to civilize—and “Lusotropicalist myths” that portrayed Portuguese colonialism as benign and the Portuguese people as a “good colonizer” have fueled public narratives and private imaginaries during decades and still resonate today (Cardina 2020; Jerónimo and Pinto 2015).

This work contributes to the study of museums that represent difficult, painful, or shameful episodes in a local community’s or nation’s history, and to the subfield of military museums. By focusing on the representation of the colonial war in Portuguese military museums, it aims to expand knowledge and understanding about the challenges posed in the representation of warfare and of colonial conflicts. In addition, it discusses the necessity of reformulating existing exhibitions and creating new ones. Drawing on the concept of “difficult heritage,” according to the definition introduced by Sharon Macdonald (2009), I explore its application to the musealization of the Portuguese colonial war.

This article addresses how the history of this historical event and its mnemonic productions are (non)represented in the museums of the Portuguese Armed Forces (PAF), by taking as case studies the museums run by the Army, Air Force, and Navy.<sup>2</sup> In addition to describing and analyzing the content of the exhibitions and pieces related to the colonial war in these spaces, I address the role of those responsible for designing the exhibitions and the choices they have made, considering their professional situation and the institutional and social context in which they are embedded. To understand why the topic is absent or poorly represented, I spoke with museum professionals and curators responsible for designing some of the exhibitions, and with

military museum heads.<sup>3</sup> I conclude by proposing some ideas for rethinking the musealization of the Portuguese Colonial War.

### **War Museums, Memorial Museums, and Military Museums: A Brief Note on Concepts, Distinctions, and Similarities**

War and military museums (including regimental and corps museums)<sup>4</sup> have some aspects in common. They tend to portray a sanitized version of warfare that frequently demonstrates the difficulty of addressing the topic (Haymond 2015; Jones 1996; Scott 2015; Whitmarsh 2001; Winter 2012). However, given the nature of their collections, the entities that oversee them and their objectives and missions, military museums are usually spaces that pose additional challenges to museology. This is particularly true concerning the history of warfare and imperialism, which requires a range of ethical and political perspectives to adequately portray, as John Haymond (2015) notes of the National Army Museum in London. Speaking also with reference to the British case, Simon Jones notes that regimental museums were created not for the purpose of representing war “but for the specific purpose of instilling and fostering in the regiment the *esprit de corps* which enables it to fight more effectively” (1996: 152). They served to enhance the self-image of the soldiers, to strengthen the bonds of attachment to the regiment, and to promote morale. They can also be exploited by the armed forces in the education of new soldiers and officers.

Thus, these museums are not usually spaces where the social history of conflicts is addressed or which promote an anti-war pedagogy. An anti-war pedagogy would require, for instance, resorting to the use of images that illustrate the destruction and violence caused by conflicts and using a “realistic approach” in the way war is portrayed as an attempt to remind visitors of its horrors (Scott 2015). Although they both may act as memorials (Jones 1996; Whitmarsh 2001) or temples (Cercel 2018) for the restricted communities of those who served in the regiments or the relatives of servicepeople who died, I distinguish military museums from memorial museums (Williams 2007; Winter 2012). The new concepts of musealization that have emerged particularly in the past three decades encompass entities dedicated to remembering wars and historical events marked by mass suffering, death, and violence. Paul Williams defines a memorial museum as “a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering of some kind” (2007: 8).

Military museums and their assets, almost always made up of military collections, archives, and donations (equipment and weapons withdrawn from service, utensils and objects fallen into disuse, old uniforms, trophies, decorations, insignia), were not conceived as spaces to critically address the conflicts in which the associated organizations were involved. They were created to value the history and identity of these regiments and military units, which goes beyond their participation in battle operations. In addition to this challenge, military museums are faced with the difficulty of addressing conflicts and histories that are often controversial, and bring up historiographical, political, ideological, and collective disputes that are difficult to reconcile.

Various circumstances hinder the development of the potential that military museums must address the history(ies) of war(s). The first limitation stems directly from the fact that they are constituted as regimental, corps (Marines, Paratroopers), or branch museums (Army, Navy, Air Force). Moreover, in the cases of the Portuguese Navy Museum and Air Museum, their current scope goes behind the military musealization, as I will explore. Inevitably, this foundation will constrain the scope of the museum, the contents of the collection, and the paradigms of museological development in the future. The second limitation is the difficulty of

conveying within a museum the totality of the experience of war. The museum space provides a one-dimensional representation of the war, while other components of that reality, such as the smells; the sickness; the feelings of fear, danger, and anxiety; the exhaustion; or the lack of hygienic conditions are difficult to transmit (Haymond 2015: 463). To get around this difficulty, recently built military and war museums in Europe have sought to use the architecture and the space to mobilize the materiality of the collection's exhibits, as well as how they are displayed, to generate emotional experiences and feelings of discomfort in the visitors (Cercel 2018; Loxham 2015; Scott 2015; Simine 2013).<sup>5</sup>

## Army Military Museums

The Portuguese Army currently oversees six military museums in Lisbon (including the Buçaco Museum and the Museum of the Armed Forces Movement), Porto, Bragança, Elvas, Madeira, and the Azores (for a general overview of the Army Military Museums, see Borges and Chaves 2017). The first four, located on mainland Portugal, are under the jurisdiction of the Directorate of Military History and Culture (DHCM),<sup>6</sup> while the latter two, located in the Atlantic archipelagos, are run by their respective military zones. Currently, in mainland Portugal only the Military Museum of Porto has a permanent exhibition dedicated to the colonial war, although there are some related collections in Elvas, and there was once a small room dedicated to it in Lisbon. In Azores there is a room dedicated to the conflict and some dispersed pieces, while in Madeira we find a panel and a couple of weapons related to the theme. Both museums cover mainly the participation of the islands' soldiers in the conflict. As these two museums lack a national perspective about the way the conflict is portrayed, my analysis will focus on the first three.

### *The Military Museum of Porto (MMP)*

Created in April 1977 and inaugurated in March 1980, the MMP occupies a large nineteenth-century house that was once the home of a wealthy bourgeois family. The section dedicated to the conflict is outside, in a building that was constructed in 1993 and initially designed to protect the large exhibits but now hosts temporary exhibitions and events. It was in the "pavilion of arms" in which, from April 2000 to March 2001, a temporary exhibition<sup>7</sup> was held entitled *Testemunhos de Guerra. Angola, Guiné, Moçambique: 1961–1974* (Loureiro 2000).<sup>8</sup> The permanent exhibition dedicated to the war, which is currently on display, includes some of the pieces, panels, and objects created for this temporary exhibition, although it only occupies about half of the original exhibition area (Figure 1).

The exhibition includes weapons and artillery vehicles used during the conflict and photographs (Figure 2) dating from the third quarter of the twentieth century that essentially convey a positive image of Portuguese colonization in Africa, in line with the messages disseminated by the *Estado Novo* (New State)'s official propaganda<sup>9</sup>—namely, of public works and enterprises, colonial towns and villages, and of *Ação Psicossocial* (Psychological Action) and other social initiatives undertaken by the military during the war that aimed to contribute to the "well-being of the local populations" (vaccination and literacy campaigns). Not many images confront visitors with the violence and destruction caused by war, both at the physical level in the countryside, and at the human level, as injuries and deaths caused both to belligerents and civilians. The exceptions are two photographs of men, women, and children who were killed during the uprising triggered by the Union of the Populations of Northern Angola (UPA), in North Angola,



**Figure 1.** Core of the colonial war exhibition in the Military Museum of Porto, 2021. Photo courtesy of the author and the DHCM Army.

on 15 March 1961. Most of these images were reproduced from photographs in the museum’s collection and from those donated when the first temporary exhibition was organized. Other items on display denote a concern to portray various aspects of the conflict, namely, aerograms distributed by the Women’s National Movement and sent by the Military Postal Service; badges and emblems; berets of the Special Groups of Mozambique; photos of the revolution of 25 April 1974; a bust of Salazar (the head figure of the New State); and uniformed soldier-mannequins, among many others.

Visitors are provided with information brochures in Portuguese, English, and French. The first, entitled “AFRICAN WAR—Angola, Guinea and Mozambique,” consists of three paragraphs, giving the national and international circumstances that led to the outbreak of the conflict, the specific events that triggered the armed operations in Angola, and a general outline of the type of conflict. However, the introduction is characterized by an ethnocentric perspective that does not contextualize the armed struggle initiated by the liberation movements as a legitimate combat against an ancient and broader structure of colonial domination/exploitation. It also fails to frame the sociopolitical contexts of the massacres of white populations and their black employees generated by the UPA’s 1961 uprising in North Angola. Besides this, saying that around 1.5 million Portuguese soldiers were mobilized during the war seems to be a whitewashing of the fact that around one-third of those men were Black African soldiers integrated into the colonial army.<sup>10</sup>





Figure 2. Panels in the Military Museum of Porto with images showing the Portuguese perspective of the colonial war and colonization, 2019. Photo courtesy of the author and the DHCM Army.

The curatorial work denotes a concern to present a more comprehensive view of the conflict that moves beyond the Portuguese perspective. This is achieved by presenting three small posters containing texts that present the history of the liberation movements in the three countries taken from books on the military history of the conflict. In the same panel, five infographics depicting the guerrillas in uniform and armed, at different stages of the conflict, are shown. Other items related to the liberation movements include African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde propaganda pamphlets or a message from the Liberation Front of Mozambique, the main Mozambican independence movement, addressed to Portuguese soldiers (urging them to desert or surrender to the liberation movement). The “multivocality,” achieved by presenting points of view, facts, and information from different perspectives is seen as positive, albeit limiting, and has incurred criticism due to its (relative) efficacy to contest dominant narratives and because it can be used to convey the impression of neutral interpretation. The introduction of multiple voices and perspectives does not guarantee for itself a cut with established master narratives. In fact, the inclusion of multiple narrators and their stories not always incorporate age, gender, social, and ethno-religious differences (Bull and Reynolds 2021: 294). Moreover, the defense of the “multiperspectivity” as a decontextualized and depoliticized methodology has incurred criticism. In the context of the history textbooks, as Marta Araújo and Silvia Rodríguez Maeso (2015) have shown, this technique has enabled the authors to contrast different narratives about the colonial war without questioning the legitimacy of the colonialism and approaching the connection between race and power. Despite being the only exhibition to have taken this

approach at the MMP, this mechanism shows other fragilities as well. First, it is not framed within a clearly identifiable museum narrative. Furthermore, it is unlikely that large sections of text drawn from academic books and printed on exhibit panels in a small font are reader-friendly and attractive to an ordinary visitor.

### ***The Military Museum of Lisbon (MML)***

The foundation history of this museum dates to December 1851. Currently, the MML does not have any space dedicated to the Portuguese colonial war, although one room was once devoted to the “overseas wars” and another to the revolution of 25 April 1974. These were dismantled in 2006 for “hurting the sensibility” of relatives and former combatants, according to the museum’s director at the time, as quoted by Maria Marques. According to Marques (2016: 62), the rooms “were well documented and included multimedia support with the continuous broadcasting of reports and interviews of the combatants.” Years later, Luís Albuquerque (2021), the museum director between 2009 and 2020, thought it made no sense not to have a room dedicated to the conflict. A small section was then created, mostly of a memorial nature, around a controversy that arose at the time about the last flags that were flown in the colonies, which included pennants relating to each unit. In 2021, I spoke with DHCM’s heads (the entity that oversees the army military museums), and they confirmed their intention to create a room dedicated to the “overseas war” and the international forces deployed, having identified these two themes as current gaps in the museum. However, they conveyed that the idea lacked an effective implementation plan, as it would require renovation in the museum and the freeing up of rooms.

The museum is in a historical building, which places some constraints on the management of spaces, organization of collections, installation of technical equipment and support devices, and accessibility and management of visitor flows. There was also the difficulty of deciding how to approach the subject from a museological perspective. The fact that many participants and protagonists are still alive and the perception that anything they do will always be criticized has discouraged the implementation of the idea. One of the tasks assigned to the new MML director, who took office in 2021, was to change the existing space dedicated to the war, which consisted of the aforementioned room that has since been closed for renovation. In February 2022, DHCM confirmed that the plan had stalled because they did not know how to handle the subject, due to the reasons previously mentioned. The prevailing feeling in this cultural body of the army is that it is still too early to treat this subject with any distance and the sense of historical rigor that it demands.

### ***The Military Museum of Elvas (MME)***

Created in 2006 and inaugurated in October 2009, the MME houses Army collections such as those of the health service, transmissions, harnesses, vehicles, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces dating from the mid-nineteenth century. It is home to a large stock of old military vehicles, many of which are still in working order and are maintained and conserved by the Portuguese Association of Old Military Vehicles. This collection includes some vehicles used in the colonial war. The museum does not have a room or exhibition specifically dedicated to the conflict. A handful of military items and equipment used in the war are displayed in some of its 24 rooms. One room is dedicated to military communications and exhibits transmitter receivers, antennae, field telephones, and a manual generator, that were used during the war. It includes a panel that provides the background to the conflict within the wave of decolonization that arose worldwide after World War II and the country’s refusal to accept the independence of

its African colonies. The same ethnocentric perspective was found in the information brochure that introduces the exhibition of the MMP. In Elvas, the description says, “Portugal considered the African territories as an integral part of the Nation, while liberation movements fought for the independence of their lands and peoples.” There is no mention of the New State, the dictatorial political regime that pursued this concept of the nation, or its responsibility for the refusal to accept the autonomy or independence of these territories and the consequent outbreak of the war.

### ***The Air Museum***

The Air Museum, as the name suggests, is not just a military museum. It is a museum dedicated to the history of aviation in Portugal. Although it was created within the Air Force (AF) and is under military guardianship, the museum has a strong component of civil aviation. Partnerships have been established with the Portuguese national carrier, Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP) Air Portugal, and the Portuguese national airports authority, Aeroportos de Portugal (ANA), which have dedicated rooms in the museum. The history of civil aviation is presented alongside the history of military aeronautics. The history of the Air Museum dates to 1969, when the then-named Aviation Museum was created in Alverca, in an old wing of the Aeronautical Material General Factory. In 2009, the new headquarters was inaugurated in Sintra. The space houses a collection of aircraft that have been withdrawn from service and replicas of historical aircraft. Currently, it is organized across three sites: the main nucleus, at Air Base no. 1 in Sintra, and two satellites, in Alverca and Ovar.

The buildings that make up the Air Museum can be seen as a showcase of technology and military equipment. The history of aviation in Portugal, both civil and military, is presented as the development of technology and aircraft on display. There are contents that address some of the “achievements” and experiences of the pioneers of aviation in Portugal; the history of the creation of AF, TAP, and ANA; and operations in which they participated (the colonial war, in the case of the AF), the routes they operated (TAP), or the construction and growth of national airports (ANA). However, pride of place goes to aircraft, rather than to the people who worked for the three organizations, or to their institutional histories.

The main exhibition area in Sintra includes a historical hangar dedicated to “Military Campaigns in Africa: Training and Transport,” where aircraft used in the three theaters of operations are displayed. In the main hangar, on a panel presenting the photo-chronology of the first hundred years of Portugal’s history of aviation, the AF’s involvement in the conflict is summarized in four paragraphs. These address the beginning of the training, in Spain and France, of the first Portuguese military Paratroopers; the creation of the Parachute Nurses Corps; the exercises carried out by the AF that allowed it to test its projection capacity in the African colonies; the response of this branch to the beginning of the conflict in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique; and the missions carried out during its course.

At the Alverca site, there is a smaller exhibition area, with a room dedicated to the missions carried out by the AF during the conflict. However, the walls are covered by a collection of coins and of miniature aircraft, and the collection associated with the theme that gives the room its name is reduced. In the center of the room two helicopters used during the conflict are displayed, in addition to some pieces of weaponry and uniforms. In the main hangar are a series of panels with photographs of aircraft used in Africa. The maps of the regions and air bases on the continent, between 1961 and 1975, complete the collection dedicated to the conflict. Lastly, the Ovar satellite, the smallest of the three spaces, also displays a couple of aircraft and maps related to the war.





Figure 3. A Fiat G-91 with the painting scheme used in Guinea exhibited at the Air Museum in Sintra, 2020. Photo courtesy of the author.

Despite part of the collection being dedicated to the theme, the Air Museum does not contribute significantly to public knowledge of the AF intervention during the colonial war, and even less to a wider understanding of the conflict. Although maps show the AF bases in the territories at war, there are no details of the number of soldiers and technical and financial resources mobilized during the conflict, the daily routines of this branch of the military during their missions in Africa (whether during active duty or leave), or information on the uniforms, food, or accommodation. The reference to the role played by the Parachute Nurses is also marginal. Although there have been 42 female Paratroopers, their symbolic role goes beyond their participation in the conflict, considering that they were the first women to join the PAF and to serve in a theater of war.

### *Navy Museum*

Created in 1863, the scope of this museum, as with the Air Museum, goes beyond musealizing the history and activities of the PAF branch that oversees it. The museum seeks to portray the Navy (including the merchant navy) in all its aspects, whether military, commercial, fishing, or leisure, throughout centuries of activity. It consists of several rooms dedicated to these themes and exhibits numerous original vessels, as well as replicas. In the room dedicated to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we find a section on the “OVERSEAS WAR 1961–1974,” where an information panel displays a short summary of the beginning and end dates of the conflict, the territories where it took place and the main military events. As in other military museums,

the historical background that led to the outbreak of the conflict is not contextualized and the museum narrative only describes the main military characteristics of the war.

There are showcases exhibiting replicas of ships that served in the conflict, decorations awarded to two members of the Navy killed during the invasion of the so-called Portuguese State of India in December 1961, and a video describing the naval combats that took place there. A second video shows part of the action carried out by the Navy (ships, sailors, and Marines) during the war. As in the other museums, one may find uniforms, standards, and weapons. Another display case is dedicated to the Marines. In addition to this showcase, a temporary exhibition marking the four-hundred-year anniversary of the Marines was on display at the Navy Museum.<sup>11</sup> The temporary exhibition had a strong virtual and audiovisual component, namely, an augmented reality experience. It included pieces from the Marines School's visiting collection and provided an overview of the history of the corps, including engagements, forces, and equipment employed during the colonial war.

In May 2022, the museum's director announced a plan to reformulate the collection and rooms dedicated to the history of the Navy from the nineteenth century to the present. Although he stated the intention to adapt the exhibition narratives to contemporary society by adopting a modern discourse, the planning shows no major allocation of space dedicated to the participation of the Navy in the colonial war (Navy Museum Director José Favinha, personal communication, APOM Prizes 2022 Colloquium).

### **Addressing Difficult Pasts**

The tenuous presence of the colonial war in Portuguese military museums contrasts with the impact that the conflict had on Portuguese society, and on the lives of the people who took part in it, and on their relatives, during its course or in the decades that followed. It is another expression of the "politics of memory" and "politics of silence" surrounding the memory of the war and the colonial past in Portugal (Cardina 2020). In 14 years of war, the PAF recruited more than 1.2 million men, in addition to carrying the burden of sustaining the war effort (during the years of conflict, military spending represented an average of 30 percent of total state spending), and the social and human impact was more than 10,000 dead and 31,000 wounded, only counting military casualties on the Portuguese side (Sousa 2021: 30–95, 97, 261).

The curators, museum professionals, and museum directors responsible for setting up these exhibitions and who are the custodians of the spaces,<sup>12</sup> and with whom I spoke, are aware that they are addressing sensitive and contentious themes, from political, historical, and human points of view. Apart from the inherent weight whenever one deals with war, death and violence, other factors help explain the reticence and subtleties with which they broach the topic. These begin with the fact that many veterans and other protagonists of the conflict are still alive. In these circumstances, military structures may be reluctant to design exhibitions on the colonial war with narratives or representations that could be read by veterans as damaging to their image, and the sense of mission and duty with which they believe they served the country. The plan to create a room dedicated to the conflict at the MML, which has been suspended, is one example of this fear. There is also the "colonial aphasia" (Stoler 2016) that involves the darkest sides of the colonial past, of which colonial violence and the colonial war are parts. Additionally, the politics of the colonial war remembrance and commemoration led by veterans' associations, the armed forces and the Portuguese state have been sustained in two vectors that enable a model of remembrance without raising overly discontented voices: the depoliticization of the conflict

and the heroization of the former combatants as loyal servers of the motherland (Caiado 2021; Cardina 2020).

As such, any alternative narrative that destabilizes this model may be confrontational. The fact that these museums are under the tutelage of the armed forces, an institution with a rigid internal hierarchy and that is quite zealous in protecting its corporate identity and institutional image, also weighs heavily. As two former museum professionals who were involved in the creation of these exhibitions told me in an interview, in approaching the subject they had implicitly taken care not to hurt the image of the armed forces, an institution for which they worked and of which they were proud, since they were military personnel themselves. Yann Araújo, who worked at the Air Museum, mentioned that he never received instructions from above forbidding him from exploring contentious issues. However, he said there may have been some self-censorship, because he thought the strategy of avoiding talking about certain issues had been internalized, that it was something assumed, and he felt he should talk about the conflict in a minimally positive way. He also mentioned that during the guided tours he avoided talking about war, death, and violence. He preferred to pass on a positive message, so he used to speak about science and technology. Cristina Loureiro, who conceived the first temporary exhibition about the colonial war at the MMP, mentioned the care she had to take to successfully reach her academic and professional goals. As she remarked in an interview with me,

I knew that my work was going to be evaluated academically, but I was also going to be evaluated by my military superiors. It was my ambition to get a good grade, but I also had to do it so as not to create personal and professional problems for myself.

The way that many international war museums have found to display exhibits with the most controversial meanings is by resorting to the “sanitisation of museum objects” (Scott 2015; Whitmarsh 2001). The same has occurred in Portuguese military museums. At the Air Museum, this approach is particularly evident. Through this display approach, weapons, vehicles, and combat equipment are presented as pieces of technology (see Figure 3). The aircrafts exhibited usually have informative labels describing their main technical characteristics, dates of manufacture and origin, the period in which they were in the service with the AF, and the main operations they performed. In some cases, explicit praise is given to the quality of the aircraft and the good service they provided. The presentation of the fighter planes mentions technical characteristics, such as the type and quantity (weight) of weapons they could carry, but no reference is made to the operations and places where these weapons were used, their destructive potential, or the actual consequences of their use in the three territories and on the civilian populations. Similar approaches to weapons and artillery vehicles may be found in the army museums.

The aestheticization of the objects and the display of the pieces through a “celebratory approach” (Scott 2015) also help elide the context in which they were used and their belligerent purpose. In the MMP, colorful military scripts of companies and battalions are displayed alongside polished pieces of weaponry. In Elvas, several shells and artillery pieces, some of which served in the war, are displayed on parade, giving a certain “pomp and circumstance” to the outdoor exhibition (Figure 4). In the Air Museum, polished and colorful aircraft (Figure 3), both civil and military, are presented side by side, concealing that some of the latter provided an active (and destructive) intervention during the colonial war.

The way in which the colonial war has been portrayed in Portuguese military museums has avoided touching on sensitive or potentially controversial themes: episodes of excessive violence in which some military personnel were involved or alleged war crimes; operations that resulted in massacres of civilian populations; the AF’s use of napalm; the PAF deserters and draft evaders;



**Figure 4.** Armored personnel carriers and artillery pieces at the outdoor exhibition of the Military Museum of Elvas, 2022. Photo courtesy of the author and the DHCM Army.

the relationships and children that the Portuguese military had with African women; episodes of sexual violence; among others. Moreover, the “Africanisation of the war” (Sousa 2021) is not visible in these exhibitions in anything corresponding to the scale of the phenomenon. This is also true of the monumentalization of war, a process of memorialization that has grown strongly in the past two decades (Caiado 2021). The dilemma of exhibiting silenced histories and inconvenient truths, on the one hand, and preserving the image of the PAF and former combatants, on the other, did not exist, because the possibility of these topics being addressed in these exhibitions was never even considered. According to Yann Araújo, in an interview with me,

As long as these spaces are under military guardianship, the museological discourse on the war will always be as apolitical as possible. It will dodge all the potential conflict and tension that may arise from a war that no one is really interested in discussing.

### **Rethinking the Musealization of the Portuguese Colonial War**

Military museums have traditionally been designed to preserve the history of the armed forces, promote the identity and “esprit de corps” of the units, and cultivate the memory of the soldiers who belonged to them. They are places where exhibits and displays can be presented through a “celebratory approach” (Scott 2015) and signal the presence of a patriotic commemoration of the history, role, and importance of the armed forces. In this sense, they tend to convey a



unilateral vision, from a national perspective, of the history of the conflicts they address. They were neither conceived as spaces intended to present the social and political history of conflicts, nor designed to promote a pedagogy of peace or offer a critical view of war, unlike some war or memorial museums that have emerged in recent decades. The mission of the latter is to become places of contestation and interrogation (Winter 2012). Portuguese military museums face the same constraints as many of their international partners, as this work stresses.

Given that, so far, the idea of building a large national museum dedicated to the colonial war has never been on the political agenda, I advocate the reconceptualization of Portuguese military museums, in line with some of the dynamics implemented by war or memorial museums, as the most suitable way to address the topic. This would enable taking advantage of the existing facilities (and other vacant military buildings) and collections, as well as other military assets: pieces in storage; military archives containing documentation and material with historical interest from the period; and institutional structures and staff already in place. This may reduce the financial, material, and human resources that would be required to implement such projects, which is another obstacle preventing their implementation.

Approaching subjects such as the colonial war and the colonial past and defining suitable tools and narratives to communicate these “difficult pasts” (Macdonald 2009) in the context of military museums requires careful reflection and planning. Besides, the ability to engage with different audiences, such as teenagers or veterans of the conflict, among other profiles, is not simple, since different visitors have distinct expectations. It may imply experiencing innovative tools, using digital and multimedia technologies to draw interactive tours, and offering alternative representations. Furthermore, it implies that the actors involved in this mission are available to deal with criticism, pressure campaigns, and being the targets of personal and moral attacks on traditional media and social media platforms. This has frequently occurred whenever hidden or silenced stories, new historical facts or academic studies about the colonial war, and the different layers of violence associated with the colonial past are brought to daylight.

### **Bringing Proposals to Leverage the Discussion**

By presenting the deeper historical, social, cultural, and political contexts that led to the conflict and the liberation movements of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique that fought against the Portuguese state is the first step to achieve this transformation. To date, this has occurred only in the Military Museum of Porto and with some limitations. In this adaptation, the principle of multivocality—here conceived as representing not simply multiple voices but those with different and contrasting perspectives—should be observed. As Anna Bull and Chris Reynolds (2021: 294) point out, multivocality can be devoid of multiperspectivity and thus, they postulate, the use of “radical multiperspectivity,” which is applied when “the narrators incorporate a wide range of historical actors/characters and their stories are told from different, even contrasting perspectives on the (difficult) past which have the potential to unsettle visitors.”

As the generation who took part in the war effort or were affected by that experience is progressively disappearing, this is the last opportunity to collect their memories and testimonies. In complementarity, the lived experience of the victims and other historical witnesses of the period should be brought to light. Together with other sources, oral history can be a useful methodology to revisit these pasts in museums, although it has some limitations and can be used either to sustain or challenge hegemonic narratives (Bull and Reynolds 2021). Using personal stories to display the suffering, hardship, and trauma of war has been a common feature employed in recently built war museums (Simine 2013). Taking the visitors out of their comfort zones by



provoking emotional responses is another. The use of contemporary and traditional art may also enable this confrontation (Cercel 2018: 18–19). Most of the new projects for war or memorial museums have been created from scratch, taking advantage of the potential of architecture to generate emotional and experiential feelings among the visitors (Cercel 2018; Loxham 2015; Scott 2015; Simine 2013). Even though the personal stories and the firsthand narratives may be more convincing and appealing to the visitors, they call for careful curatorial work, namely, to contain the excesses of stimulating empathy and the focus on individual fate that may suppress the understanding of the social, economic, and political contexts in which processes of violence and oppression occur (Simine 2013: 202) but also, to signal that the “authenticity of direct experience” is fallacious, since the museum setting results from the mediation between the act of remembering and the actual writing which is carried out by curators (97).

The organization of debates involving researchers, journalists, and artists who have worked on the subject would also broaden the public discussion about that past and attract new audiences to museums. This would be followed by temporary exhibitions, bringing many of the pieces kept in the reserve collections into the daylight. However, this time, it would be with different display approaches as an attempt to establish a dialogue between the historical event, its legacies, and its meanings in the present. At a time when memorial and ideological disputes seem to emerge between different actors and movements that mobilize the memory of the colonial war and the colonial past, for the pursuit of their political, partisan, and memorial objectives in the present (Caiado 2021), new tools and approaches to the transmission of historical memory are required. In particular, the rise of right-wing populism has been very active in using the past to support its political rhetoric.

While none of these possible paths is exempt from limitations and criticism, it is no longer acceptable that the misgiving on the possible implications of approaching the subject in military museums may prevent us from doing so. This will largely depend on the ontological positionality of the curatorship, through a critical approach of colonialism and the role played by the armed forces in defending that political project. Otherwise, these exhibitions and spaces will continue representing warfare and, more specifically, the colonial war in a depoliticized and decontextualized manner. This duty of memory and democratic imperative is, therefore, a mission that is as necessary as it is urgent.

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## ■ NOTES

1. I am referring here to the armed conflict that set the Portuguese state against the independence movements of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique and led to the end of the Portuguese Colonial Empire in Africa. Considering that the subject of this work is the musealization of the memory of this conflict in Portugal, I will use “colonial war” or simply “war/conflict” to designate this historical event, to the exclusion of other expressions also commonly used, namely, Guerra do Ultramar (Overseas War) or Guerra de África (War of Africa).
2. There are other museum-like spaces or visiting rooms within the regiments, though I have chosen to omit these from the analysis. Some are commonly referred to as museums for touristic advertising purposes (namely, the Museum of Paratroopers or the Museum of Marines), but they call themselves more accurately *coleções visitáveis* (collections open to visitors), although they are not open to the public on a daily basis, and prospective visitors must book an appointment in advance. Moreover, they tend to be composed of only a few rooms; their mission is to preserve the memory, identity, and traditions of each regiment mainly for internal consumption; and they lack permanent staff with professional skills and training in museology and/or history.
3. The fieldwork was conducted between 2019 and 2022. I visited every museum listed—some of them twice—in addition to other collections open to visitors but that are not analyzed in this article, and took notes and pictures of the exhibitions’ textual and visual contents. In some cases, I was given a guided tour by the museum’s director or the principal museologist. The activities, reports, institutional communication texts, and other data analyzed were collected through information available online or provided by the museums’ administration. I interviewed and had meetings (in person, online, or by phone) with museum directors or the officer in charge (military), the DHCM’s heads (military), the president of the League of Friends of the MME (civil), and museums’ professionals currently working in the museums as civil permanent staff members of the Army or former military museum professionals. I also had informal conversations with other museum staff on site. A total of 13 on-site visits and 11 interviews/meetings were carried out, besides other informal conversations.
4. The regimental or corps museums are dedicated to a single regiment or corps (Marines, Paratroopers) of the Armed Forces.
5. Examples include the Military History Museum in Dresden, Germany, and the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, England.
6. The DHCM oversees the Army’s cultural bodies, such as the Army Library, the Army Historical Archive, the Army General Archives, and several military museums. It is responsible for the protection, conservation, research, and dissemination of historical-military heritage.
7. The temporary exhibition was curated by Cristina Loureiro, second sergeant, who was working in museology at the MMP and attending a postgraduate course in museology at the University of Porto at the time. The design and mounting of the exhibition were the result of her final academic work, and the theme was suggested by Colonel Manuel Pereira de Carvalho, the museum’s director at the time.
8. The exhibition catalog was published with the support of the League of Friends of the MMP.

9. The New State was a right-wing dictatorial regime that ruled in Portugal from 1933—the year when the constitution formally establishing it was approved—until the revolution of 25 April 1974. On this day, a military coup overthrew the former regime and opened the way for the revolutionary process that would lead to the country’s decolonization and democratization. The New State succeeded the military dictatorship that overthrew the First Republic in a military coup on 28 May 1926.
10. According to Sousa (2021), the incorporation of locally recruited Black soldiers in the PAF amounted to nearly 442,000 men.
11. From 12 October 2021 to 18 April 2022, and later extended to the end of 2022. The imminence of the outbreak of the conflict led to the reestablishment of the Marine Corps, on 24 February 1961.
12. Almost all these individuals are military personnel (the museum professionals who are civil permanent staff members of the Army are the exceptions), with some of them having a graduate or postgraduate qualification in history or museology.

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