EVENTS CALENDAR

Director’s Speaker Series; Co-sponsored by the Department of History

ERIC JENNINGS

“Free French Africa in World War II”

Monday, February 24, 2014, 3:30PM - 5:00PM
Mershon Center for International Security Studies
150 Neil Ave. Columbus, OH 43201

*Please note that Mershon Center lecture times have changed*
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Eric Jennings is professor of history at the University of Toronto, specializing in modern French colonialism. His study of French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon under Free French rule, entitled La France libre fut africaine, is forthcoming with Perrin and will appear in English with Cambridge University Press. It considers the centrality of sub-Saharan Africa for the early Fighting French movement, paying special attention to issues of legitimacy and coercion.

His Dalat and the Making and Unmaking of French Indochina (University of California Press, 2011, translated into French with Payat under the title La ville de l’internet, 2013) is a multi-angled study of a French colonial hill station in Southeast Asia. Its focus lies on place, power, and colonial fault lines. Curing the Colonizers (Duke University Press, 2006, translated into French as A la Cure les Coloniaux) PUR, 2011) was situated at the crossroads of the histories of colonialism, medicine, culture, leisure, and tourism.

In 2001, Jennings published Vichy in the Tropics (Stanford University Press, translated into French with Grasset in 2004 under the title Vichy sous les tropiques) a book that explored the ultra-conservative and authoritarian Vichy regimes colonial politics, and the formation of new colonial identities in the French Caribbean, Indochina, and the island of Madagascar. His other publications include an edited volume with Jacques Cantier, L’Empire colonial sous Vichy (Odile Jacob, 2004), as well as many articles scrutinizing the histories of France, Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Caribbean. He is the recipient of the Alf Heggoy and Jean-François Coste prizes as well as the Palmes académiques.

Abstract

This presentation focuses upon the contribution of African colonies to the Free French war effort of General Charles de Gaulle. Jennings contends that in its early years, between 1940 and 1942, the heart of Free France was not located in London, as standard accounts would have us believe, but rather in what was then known as French Equatorial Africa and French Cameroon. Britain did not provide the movement with the majority of its soldiers, raw materials, national territory, nor even its legitimacy and sovereignty. Territorially, Free France spanned from the Libyan border down to the Congo River, and to the scattered tiny French territories of the South Pacific and India. In 1943, the vast federation of French West Africa ratified what was then being called “Fighting France.” The latter now harnessed an immense territory ranging from the Mediterranean to the Congo. The harnessing was often coercive, and much of the continent saw a marked increase in forced labor and coerced recruitment under Free French rule.

While Free France was African, Africa was anything but free. Jennings shows how Gaullist Jurist René Cassin and Equatorial French African governor Félix Eboué clashed over the latter’s efforts to codify and centralize forced labor. The former feared that the move would give the Free French movement a black eye. The Free French administration also encouraged a return to modes of rubber extraction (the collection of wild rubber in the tropical forests) that had long been decried by the likes of André Gide and Albert Londres, and that had destroyed the Belgian Congo’s rubber reputation. The road such for rubber...
The Congo began to produce rubber, which saw a quadrupling of output. The Congo’s rubber began in 1942, after the fall of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, which together had hitherto produced 77% of the world’s latex. In other words, this story of extraction is directly tied to Allied demands. As important as Free French Africa was to allied transport routes, and for raising troops, its rubber supplies would prove absolutely essential to the war effort. This paper will thus focus on long-neglected African military and resource contributions to the Free French cause.