

History-Archive-Memory: An Investigative Geography from War-Time France

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The majority of American troops who fought in France during World War One passed through the port city of Brest en route to the trenches of the Western Front. After the war, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the federal agency charged with building and maintaining American war memorials in the USA and overseas, decided to commemorate the American involvement in the European conflict by erecting a large tower overlooking the city's port and dockyards. The structure was destroyed in 1941 during the German occupation of the city and then re-built, to exactly the same design, in the late 1950s. This paper provides an 'investigative geography' of the creation, destruction and re-creation of this commemorative site based on evidence from the official American and French histories, from local and national archives in the USA and France, and from interviews with elderly residents in the city. Several radically different versions of the memorial's construction, collapse and re-construction are identified, each shaped by competing memories and interpretations of the past.