Museum Anthropology

INVITED REVIEW OPEN ACCESS

Indigenous Liberators, Vrijheidsmuseum (Freedom Museum), Groesbeek, the Netherlands, May 2, 2025 to November 30, 2025

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ABSTRACT

This review analyses the exhibition *Indigenous Liberators* at the Vrijheidsmuseum in Groesbeek, the Netherlands. The exhibition explores the often neglected role of North American Indigenous soldiers in the liberation of the Netherlands in World War 2. *Indigenous Liberators* shows how Indigenous participation was motivated by diverse factors, from resisting fascism to asserting cultural identity. Despite facing discrimination in the military, many Indigenous soldiers also experienced a rare sense of equality during the war. Additionally, the exhibition effectively positions the Indigenous contribution within colonial histories and the postwar struggle for recognition. Furthermore, personal stories, artefacts, video interviews, and educational materials at *Indigenous Liberators* challenge stereotypes and enriche our understanding of Indigenous agency in global history while contributing to public awareness.

> *Over there, I was free. Being a Cree Indian didn't matter. When I got home, I was a prisoner of war on my reservation, in my own country. I wasn't allowed to leave the reserve without a pass. I tried to join the Legion, but I was told no.*
>
> – Joe Cardinal, Cree, Canada (cited at Roza 2025)

The exhibition *Indigenous Liberators* was found in perhaps an unlikely place, namely the *Vrijheidsmuseum* (Freedom Museum) in Groesbeek, the Netherlands, close to the border with Germany. Unlikely, because this museum is fully dedicated to World War 2. On closer inspection, however, it may not be such an unlikely place: *Indigenous Liberators* highlights the contribution of Native American and Canadian First Nations, Métis and Inuit soldiers to the liberation of the Netherlands in 1944–1945. While over the last few decades there has been increasing attention given to the role of Black soldiers in the liberation of Europe (for which there is some consideration elsewhere in this museum too), there hardly has been any for Indigenous groups. I have to admit that, working with Indigenous groups for almost three decades (mainly in southern Africa), I was also not aware that Indigenous communities played a role in the liberation of Europe. With the exception of some publications (e.g., Innes 2004; Sheffield 2017), it is not a prominent topic in anthropology, history or Indigenous studies, let alone among the general public. *Indigenous Liberators* is in that sense refreshing, not only opening up this field of investigation, but also revealing this important historical gap to the broader public.

Out of 126,000 Canadian First Nations people, around 4000 entered the military service and out of 350,000 Native Americans it is estimated that 44,000 to 50,000 took part. The number of

Métis and Inuit remains unknown and a few hundred of those who joined were female. The latter worked in supportive functions, for instance as nurses, cooks, or mechanics. Doing military service was mostly done voluntarily, as a way to escape poverty and discrimination but also to protect their country, to fight Nazism and fascism, to look for adventure or to rearticulate their identity as warriors. However, at the recruitment stations many were rejected due to bad health, low educational levels, or sheer discrimination. For instance, until October 1943, the Royal Canadian Navy required personnel to be "of pure European descent and of the white race" (cited at Roza 2025). Despite this and more due to expected stereotypes (e.g., about them as warriors), many also experienced a new sense of equality, respect and freedom once in the military.

The often very personal stories by survivors, their descendants or by descendants of the deceased, show the motivations and challenges that these people faced. *Indigenous Liberators* was curated by Dr. Mathilde Roza of the Radboud Institute for Culture and History. It is structured in four main sections all with their own focus. The first one informs visitors about pre-World War 2 settler colonialism and Indigenous resilience in North America, including Indigenous poverty, suppression, discrimination, land loss, spiritual and cultural constraints and the creation of reservations. Second, there is a section about boarding schools and residential schools, in which colonial policies and atrocities to exterminate Indigenous culture are portrayed, highlighting the similarities between the institutionalized discipline at such culturally genocidal institutes and the military. The third section is a collection of stories about battles and defense operations in the Netherlands. It contains many personal stories, letters and quotes, including some that emphasized discrimination: "I was a first scout. Being an Indian and from a reservation you were automatically a first scout... They had been trying to kill us for two hundred years so why change it?" (Clung 2003, cited at Roza 2025). It also shows moccasins and Indigenously manufactured snowshoes that some Indigenous liberators used to be able to move more silently. All this shows how, while serving the military, they were equal, yet in some ways still distinct. This is further revealed in the exploitation and double standards often used regarding Indigenous communities: they were a useful addition to the armed forces on the one hand, but this has generally not led to a broader acceptance, better Indigenous rights, more sovereignty or less discrimination at home. These double standards become particularly clear in their role as 'Code Talkers': although their Indigenous languages were forbidden in their home schools, they functioned very well to transfer radio messages without the risk that a German interception would lead to the unintentional revealing of important strategic military information.

The fourth section concerns postwar life: as Indigenous veterans, many would again be confronted with prejudices and inequality back home. They were often disallowed access to institutionalized benefits for veterans and they were forbidden to join veteran organizations such as the American or the Royal Canadian Legion. This was different in the Indigenous communities, where the veterans were honored in cultural, spiritual and social ways, and many who returned would later take on leadership positions in their communities and beyond. Some of them would continue working to improve the economic, socio-political and legal position of their people: the presence of Indigenous communities in "World War II and its immediate aftermath, [...] reorganized the international political order, [and] crucially reworked the relationship between indigenous populations and their encompassing nation-states" (Poyer 2016, 418). This would later lead to empowering institutes, including the global Indigenous Rights movement. Furthermore, during World War 2, North American media and politicians praised Indigenous commitment, which they took as patriotism and the wish to fully assimilate into society. However, this was largely forgotten postwar, but not by the Indigenous groups, who advocated for official recognition over the last decades. And because friendships and romances occurred between some Dutch citizens and Indigenous liberators, there still are ongoing relations between Dutch families and Indigenous groups. Some descendants held commemoration rituals at Indigenous graves in the Netherlands, one which is described in beautiful detail by Ed Buller, cousin of trooper Edward Buller, in a video at the exhibition. Such rituals by descendants are important for honoring and emotional healing:

> We went to the gravesite of my grandfather [in the Netherlands] and we were able to bring the drum and our ceremony there, I ended up getting really emotional because it felt like I attended his funeral. Because here, every remembrance day honouring him and remembering him, was just a ceremony. But over there, that's where he was buried, we brought the drum, we brought the language, that's what that felt like. I remember being so emotional but very grateful. Very grateful and saying, we need to do this for the other indigenous soldiers that may be buried overseas.
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> – Alison Commando, granddaughter of Robert Simon Odjick, 2024 (cited at Roza 2025)

All sections contain beautiful pictures, quotes and explanatory captions, while video interviews and material artifacts complement this experience. For visiting children there is also a booklet with questions about two Indigenous liberators whose life they can follow by finding the answers. In addition to distressing stories about suppression and discrimination, there are also more heartwarming stories. For instance, about Indigenous–Dutch friendships during World War 2 or about Dutch people who found out that they are a descendant of an Indigenous soldier, and who consequently established a warm relationship with their families on the other side of the Atlantic.

Indigenous Liberators is an important contribution to anthropology, history and Indigenous Studies because it shows the role of Indigenous communities in global history that goes far beyond essentialized, stereotypical representations about Indigenous communities as 'noble savages' or "stewards of nature," a frame that goes back all the way to early colonialism and still strongly affects them today (Ellingson 2001; Koot 2017; Rapp 2024; Redford 1991). Essentialised stereotypes about them as typical warriors (that also thrived in Europe, for instance based on popular books like Karl May's Winnetou) are contextualized well in a video and with informative captions. Instead of reinforcing such stereotypes, that still prevail in public opinion and

sometimes in academic circles (see e.g., Fernández-Llamazares et al. 2024), *Indigenous Liberators* is a small step in the right direction to reshape the public and academic image of Indigenous communities as peoples who played a significant role in global history and modernization.

I truly enjoyed the exhibition. It stimulates thinking about the role of Indigenous people in global history and how the freedom we have in this part of Europe, increasingly under pressure today, has not always led to similar circumstances for everyone. Around the 80th liberation day in the Netherlands (May 5, 2025) there was a national discussion of whether or not the end of World War 2 should also be used as a moment to commemorate and share our support for people who do not live in similar circumstances of freedom as we are currently allowed to do in the Netherlands (e.g., Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine). If there was one thing that *Indigenous Liberators* points out, it is that freedom has many faces, and one's freedom may sometimes only exist at the cost of somebody else's. This is an important message to the broader audience as it also emphasizes that we should not take our freedom for granted and that there may sometimes be very concrete connections between freedom and suppression in different contexts. The exhibition could have benefitted from making the connection with different contemporary faces of freedom a bit more or from providing background about the role of Indigenous communities in warfare globally and throughout history, including in other parts of the world (e.g., Poyer 2016; Stapleton 2014). Having said that, the exhibition was for me personally one of the most interesting ones I have visited regarding Indigenous communities because they were shown outside of the dominant frame as authentic, traditional, stewards of nature. *Indigenous Liberators* is refreshing because it positions Indigenous communities in the context of an important global historical event. I hope more exhibitions will follow about the role of Indigenous groups in global history.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in N/A at https://vrijheidsmuseum.nl/wat-is-er-te-doen/exposities/inheemse-bevrijders. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: Vrijheidsmuseum Groesbeek, The Netherlands, https://vrijheidsmuseum.nl/wat-is-er-te-doen/exposities/inheemse-bevrijders.

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