

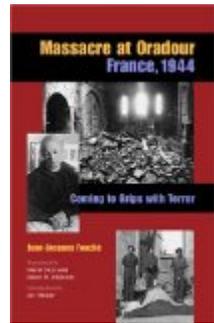
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Jean-Jacques Fouché. *Massacre at Oradour, France, 1944: Coming to Grips with Terror*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. xvii + 269 pp. \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87580-601-3.

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The Horror of the Strange Defeat: The Shock and Awe of Warrior Barbarians

Marc Bloch's famous work *Strange Defeat* (1942) was the first to try and make sense of France's capitulation to the Germans. Now another French historian, Jean-Jacques Fouché, the first Director of the Centre de la Mémoire d'Oradour, has attempted to come to terms with the horror and legacy of this "strange defeat." Fouché's work is an excellent new history of a very old memory. Many readers will likely be familiar with Sarah Farmer's wonderful monograph *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (1999) that told the horrendous story of the massacre of 642 French civilians in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane late in the war by the Waffen-SS. The events are well known. On June 10, 1944, the "Das Reich" division of the Waffen-SS arrived at the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Massif Central area of France. Apparently motivated by a recent execution of a SS battalion commander by the Maquis (resistance fighters) the SS rounded up the 642 villagers, separated the men from the women and children, and systematically murdered them. Then these hardened killers took the atrocity to an incomprehensible level by locking the women and children in the town's church and setting it ablaze. Farmer's book also recounted the history of the collective memory of the event, made all the more painful because no one was ever brought to justice for the crime. (The Alsatian "forced volunteers" of the SS were tried and convicted in 1953 and granted amnesty by General de Gaulle in the name of national unity, while members of the SS Das Reich Division were convicted in absentia).

These same readers might wonder if they need to read Fouché's new book on the massacre. They should. Farmer's work is a wonderful exploration by an American interested in the history of France's collective memory of the event, while Fouché—who was born and raised in the region and even visited the ruins of Oradour as a child in the 1950s—gives us an insider's view. As the translators state, Fouché's work is remarkable because it maintains "the best balance between deep personal feeling and scientific objectivity" (p. xiv). Fouché's work appropriately follows Farmer's because he takes us one step further in the unlayering of a traumatic memory, coming closer to fully uncovering the actual historical reality of the massacre. On the issue of memory, he provides a profound insider's view of how the massacre at Oradour became an "archetype of memory" by being "instrumentalized" for cultural and political reasons into the mythical status of France's Auschwitz (p. 211).[1] No doubt Fouché is indebted to Farmer's pioneering book. However, his work clearly surpasses Farmer's, principally because his position as director of the museum gave him access to new archival information in France and Germany—including investigative records leading up to the trial before the 1953 permanent military tribunal of Bordeaux authorized by the Ministry of Defense. He is the first to have "consulted, analyzed and cross-referenced" these records "in their entirety" (p. 13). Fouché's principal discovery is that this new information could not be fitted into the Oradour community's "grille de lecture" way of reading the events because on both the

communal and national level the memory underwent a process of “massification” that led to the victims’ identities being subsumed into a collective (p.160). Fouche does an excellent and profoundly moving job of uncovering the individual humanity of the victims and then pointedly argues that a “community that did not exist before the massacre was formed in and by the cult of its dead” (p. 177). On the national level Fouche follows Farmer and describes how the “Vichy Syndrome” led Oradour to become “emblematic of the regime that, undergoing external events, presented itself as a victim. Measured by these ‘great, silent sorrows,’ the martyrdom of Oradour became that of Vichy” (p. 159).

Finally, Fouche further surpasses Farmer because he frames his work within the new historical insights generated by Omer Bartov and others that has explained the barbarity of the eastern front and the subsequent “Nazi war culture” by focusing on the educational and political background of the junior officers who were the central actors. These factors, in combination with a deep understanding of the extent of National Socialist indoctrination, help explain the criminal activities of the German army in Russia. Fouche has an entire chapter on the war culture of the Waffen-SS and consistently makes references to the military practice of the east. Since the SS Das Reich Division that committed the atrocity had been recently transferred from the eastern front it follows that they brought the techniques of “total war” to western Europe. Indeed, if such massacres were the “norm” for the Nazis in the east, Oradour is unique in western Europe, which is why it is not completely hyperbolic to conceive of the massacre as “France’s Auschwitz.”

Given his insights, professional position, and discoveries, it is clear that Fouche embarked into a politically treacherous minefield, and this reader empathizes with his embattlement. For example, in the central chapter “Conflicting Accounts”—which might be more aptly titled the “politics of memory”—Fouche takes on the “victims’” question of why Oradour? All Holocaust scholars who enter this historical/philosophical terrain run the risk of either normalizing the atrocity by making it comprehensible, or worse yet, pardoning the perpetrators by presenting them as victims of circumstances without agency. For these reasons, silence has often been suggested as the appropriate response to the question of why. However, we now know that path only leads to oblivion. In constructing his explanation, Fouche is very careful to undermine the official SS version of the events that claimed the massacre was a reprisal for the ambush and killing of an SS officer by the Resistance. This is es-

pecially important for Fouche because this version has been recapitulated by the “negationists”—France’s version of Holocaust deniers/revisionists—in order to rehabilitate the far right (p. 183). In response, Fouche states, “the practice of arbitrary, systematic, and discriminatory violence against Communist and Jewish ‘bandits’ designated as partisans and absolute enemies was a constant of the Nazis’ war in the east” (p. 201). Thus, just as they had done in the east the Nazis murdered the inhabitants of the village to pacify the population through a campaign of terror, and then, as in the east, cynically make the victims appear responsible by labeling them as bandits and partisans.[2] By drawing this connection so powerfully, Fouche reveals the SS Das Reich Division as the barbarians they had become, and completely undermines the negationist’s empty apologetics.

Nevertheless, the author’s deep personal and professional immersion in the memory of the massacre has drawbacks. At times there is a feeling that this is the “official history.”[3] For one example, Fouche quickly dismisses the local rumor in the community’s remembrance of the event that the Nazis had confused Oradour-sur-Glane with the Oradour-sur-Vayres that was nearby and in the heart of the underground Resistance movement. Fouche asserts that the rumors “do not hold up under historical scrutiny” (p. 8). The problem is that historical scrutiny does not occur in a political vacuum. For example, it is only in a footnote we learn that the only “no” vote to invest the Vichy government led by Marshall Petain with full powers was cast by Leon Roche who represented the district that contained Oradour-sur-Glane and was also the mayor and parliamentary representative of Oradour-sur-Vayres (p. 78, n. 33). My suspicion is that here (and in other places) Fouche’s narrative honorably tends to downplay the pervasive Resistance in the region in order to avoid adding fodder to the negationist’s arguments who, following the SS, want to argue the massacre was somehow a justifiable reprisal against the Maquis. However, if my reading (intuition?) is correct and the concern exists, it does not make any sense to me. Along with the apparently haphazard decision to murder the male inhabitants of the village, which could have been done to any of a number of villages in the region to pacify the general population, the most horrendous aspect of the massacre is the burning alive of nearly 200 women and children (and apparently a gang rape, see chapter 6, “Account of the Massacre,” especially pp. 145-146). In light of this radical evil, the concern that “honor” could somehow be restored to the Waffen-SS is farcical. In addition, the SS’s and the negationist’s accounts try

to suggest that there was a cache of arms in the church that justified the burning. To his credit, Fouche reveals this claim to be a fallacy and thus leaves their arguments as pathetic apologetics and serves only to exemplify the depth (and intellectual perversity!) of their barbarism.

In a similar fashion, Fouche informs us that the Allied invasion, which according to him “was very slow in coming,” led to the SS Das Reich Division being called to the front (p. 98). However, he does not connect the occurrence and extremity of the massacre (which occurred four days after D-Day) with the impending feeling of anxiety and possibly doom the Nazis must have been experiencing given the invasion. It seems a fuller explanation would reflect that under the crisis created by the invasion, and already short of supplies, combined with the conditioning in the east and the immoral worldview of the Nazis, an atrocious massacre was implemented in the hopes of securing the mountainous region of the Massif Central. Under these circumstances I agree even more with Fouche’s contention that the selection of Oradour-sur-Glane was more or less haphazard and likely on the crossroads to the front.

In conclusion, read in conjunction with Farmer, Fouche’s work gives an excellent example to students of how the craft of history moves forward as new archives are accessed and new historical approaches and insights develop. His book—marked by deep humanism and augmented by his insider’s view—is an excellent, albeit spiritually troubling book. The translation is excellent, but I disagree with the editorial decision to put the original prologue that describes the opening ceremony of the Centre de la Memoire d’Oradour as the afterword. The decision makes chronological sense, but the origi-

nal “prologue” makes the intent of the book very clear. Fouche describes the poet Paul Celan and his companions’ visit to the ruins in August of 1964 and then laments; “There was no one to tell them about a schoolmistress who, in this place loved German literature; nor of Albert, the Resistance fighter and photographer who was born in the United States; Robert, the Sephardic Jew born in Bayonne, France; two Josephs, one born in Budapest and the other Kokern, Germany; Sarah, born in Kalisz” (p. 212). This passage makes Fouche’s intent clear and I wish I had read it first. Finally, and this is clearly Fouche’s perspective, Oradour is one more piece in *humanity’s* memory of the Holocaust. On this universal human level Oradour is an extreme example of a reality that is not only European but rather seems to be the fate of our modern world, extreme experience of war, especially—but not only—perverts humanity and turns people into barbarians. How long until the lesson is learned once and for all?

Notes

[1]. For cultural and political reasons the topic helps to come to terms with the legacy of Vichy France and the particular needs of the traumatized survivors.

[2]. Fouche also uncovers that the victims were not only French but also Spaniards, Alsatians, and even one American-born who was clandestinely in the Resistance.

[3]. There is also a respectful dialogue with Farmer. For example Fouche chides Farmer for describing the community as a “unique and distinctive community,” which he rightfully perceives as much more diverse (see p. 101). Also, see the discussion of silence, memory, and Farmer’s work on pages 204-205.

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