

# H-Net Reviews

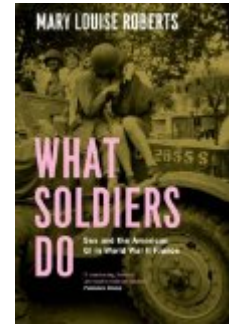
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Louise Roberts. *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xii + 351 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-92309-3; \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-92311-6.

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Mary Louise Roberts's *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* is a provocative cultural history of the American military occupation of France from D-Day until 1946. Like Paul Fussell's studies, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1990) and *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-45* (2003), which challenge the "good war" narrative that still pervades much of the popular memory of World War II, *What Soldiers Do* exposes an element of the American wartime experience on the margins and only briefly acknowledged by past histories and presentations of the war. It also offers a stark contrast to many earlier histories of the war by using gender and cultural analysis in a topic where operational historians still hold the ground.

Roberts argues that a combination of remembered tales of lustful behavior by American "doughboys" in World War I and semiofficial propaganda disseminated by the newspaper *Stars and Stripes* and other outlets raised expectations among GIs that France would become an erotic playground after they invaded the country. Once on the continent in June 1944, American soldiers quickly entered into every manner of sexual relationship with French women. While some of these relationships were entirely consensual, Roberts identifies the liaisons between soldiers and prostitutes as the defining cultural encounter between the French and the Americans. Senior army leaders proved reluctant to openly acknowledge or control the sexual trade in France lest the American public—especially American women—learn of the debauchery. As a result, the protests of local French politicians to American military leaders to better regulate soldiers' behavior fell on deaf ears.

The accounts and anecdotes offered by Roberts are extremely illustrative and at times quite amusing, but beneath the surface of licentiousness is a dark undercurrent of exploitation. The U.S. Army's materiel largesse proved irresistible to the French who had only known depravation since the German invasion. Complicating the situation was the seeming dearth of French men; many had been killed or were forcibly detained by the Germans, thus causing massive civil dislocation and inadvertently encouraging the GIs to take advantage of the gender imbalance and to perceive France as a feminine country with absent or weak men. In this environment, the soldiers found it easy to turn their money and goods into sex offered by a bevy of French women. As a result, many women turned to prostitution to support themselves or their families and completely upset the orderly, regulated system of prostitution that the French had long tolerated.

Roberts also tackles the subject of sexual violence. Allegations of rape of French women by American servicemen surfaced soon after the Allied invasion and persisted until the last soldier departed from Le Havre in 1946. The rapid Allied advance in the late summer of 1944 offered sexual predators numerous opportunities to prey on French women. Army leaders, as they had with the prostitution issue, chose to ignore the scope of the problem. Instead, many rape accusations were directed at the African American soldiers serving mostly in rear-echelon positions during the war. As Roberts documents in a survey of rape courts-martial from the period, African Americans suffered from a much higher conviction rate than their white counterparts. This systemic bias seemingly confirmed the racial stereotypes of the period of black men as hypersexual and predatory and

provided the army with a scapegoat for the larger rape problem.

*What Soldiers Do* is a strong book with a compelling argument. Roberts relies on an impressive array of sources, including archival sources, oral histories, memoirs, and periodicals. She uses the soldiers' newspaper *Stars and Stripes* as the most important among many cultural signifiers of the GI experience, although some historians may quibble with her definition of the paper's relationship to the U.S. military. The footnotes are invaluable due to their level of detail, but the publisher unfortunately failed to include a full bibliography.

One of Roberts's larger points is the specificity of American behavior in France during World War II, but this observation raises many questions. For instance, she argues that the GI's behavior in France partially stemmed from American inexperience with political stewardship, but by 1944 the United States had been the regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere for decades and had frequently interfered with the affairs of Latin American nations, aspects of which have been analyzed by historians in gendered, paternalistic terms.[1] Also, while Roberts quite convincingly demonstrates that the mythos of a sexualized France affected the GI's behavior, she gives little indication whether the problem extended beyond this part of the conflict. Indeed, both Britons and Australians famously characterized American fighting men in their respective countries as "overpaid, oversexed, and over here." [2] Does the American experience in France have any analogue in Italy—another country with a specific cultural mystique—or in the Pacific and China-Burma-India theaters? Did the long pre-invasion buildup—longer than most other similar operations during the war—allow the soldiers' sexual expectations to heighten? Most important, do the trends described in her book have any relationship to American notions of sex and masculinity of the period; i.e., was the sexual conquest of France and other nations by GIs a reaction to the extreme emasculation that the Great Depression wrought upon American men? [3] These questions remain unanswered but would provide useful information for readers to assess the American experience in France within the context of larger historical and cultural currents. If anything, Roberts leaves the reader wanting more, and this is not necessarily a problem.

The thematic structure chosen by Roberts often, but not always, causes her to treat the whole of the American experience in France from 1944 until 1946 as a single unit of time. This system of organization underplays how

the end of the fighting in May 1945 may have physically and psychologically affected the soldiers and their sexual behaviors. When discussing the criminal activities of American soldiers, she states that theft and assault cases peaked in the summer and fall of 1945, but Roberts only attributes the spike to access to alcohol and the brutalization of war while completely ignoring that the post-VE Day force confronted more lax standards of discipline amid the drudgery of occupation duty. A specific criminal incident in July 1945 mentioned later involving soldiers attacking French policemen attempting to arrest a pair of prostitutes likewise escapes any attempt at temporal contextualization by the author. Only when discussing allegations of rape along the post-breakout front of 1944 does Roberts explicitly link aspects of her broader argument to specific phases of the military campaign in northern Europe. Roberts's choice to organize her work thematically does not fatally undermine *What Soldiers Do*, but it gives readers a less-nuanced portrait of American soldiers than of the French people and their culture. It is an unfortunate choice in an otherwise smartly executed work.

*What Soldiers Do* is a valuable contribution to World War II historiography and should open new avenues of historical research into the cultural engagement that accompanies America's overseas military campaigns. Most important, it serves to showcase the possibilities for incorporating more cultural and gender analysis into military history. It may be controversial, but it deserves a wide audience.

#### Notes

[1]. See Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900–1930* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2004).

[2]. The exact origins of this phrase are obscure, but have been used in reference to both Britain and Australia in the decades since.

[3]. Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 127-146; and Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 3-23, 186.

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