

Steven Lehrer. *Wartime Sites in Paris: 1939-1945.* New York: SF Tafel Publishers, 2013. 335 pp. \$12.30, paper, ISBN 978-1-4922-9292-0.



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Perhaps no city in Europe keeps its secrets as well as Paris. A visitor to the city can stroll the chic avenue Foch and admire the lovely mansions of some of the city's wealthiest residents. No sign will point them to the house where the Gestapo had both torture chambers and elegant reception rooms for hosting VIPs. The Germans tortured journalist and French resistance leader Pierre Brossolette in that mansion on the avenue Foch for three days. He threw himself out of one of its windows and onto the cement three stories below rather than reveal the names of any of his comrades.

Across the city, at the spacious place Denfert-Rochereau, a visitor can stand on top of the network of metro tunnels that Henri Rol-Tanguy used to direct the uprising of Paris in August, 1944. Rol-Tanguy had worked in those tunnels and knew every passageway and every place he could hide weapons, snipers, and communications. Today the place is perhaps best known for the Lion of Belfort statue that dominates the square, but underneath, the liberation of Paris

played out in the hands of the determined and charismatic Rol-Tanguy.

Some wartime sites remain strictly off limits to tourists and residents alike. On the Île de la Cité, not far from Notre Dame Cathedral, thousands, maybe millions, of people pass annually by the imposing Préfecture de Police. An artistic memorial reminds any who bother to stop that the Paris police started the liberation of Paris in mid-August by going on strike rather than obey German orders to turn in their weapons. Around the corner is a plaque commemorating the daring mission of a Free French pilot who flew over the Préfecture on August 23 as the Germans were closing in on it and dropped a note reading, *Tenez bon. Nous arrivons* (Hold on. We are coming). Brave members of the French Resistance threw homemade bombs, filled with chemicals mixed by Marie and Pierre Curie's son, to stop German tanks from firing on the police inside. Yet because it remains a police headquarters, visitors cannot go inside. Nor can they go inside the Caserne Vérines on the place de la République, today

home to the French Republican Guard, but in World War II the main German army barracks in the city and one of the last German strongholds in the city to fall in 1944.

Unfortunately, none of these and dozens of other powerful stories appear in Steven Lehrer's odd book, *Wartime Sites in Paris*. Lehrer complains three times in this small book about the absence of Americans in French official memory and history of the Second World War; he assumes the French are just too ashamed of their participation in the war to want to open it to others. He may have a point, and the French surely have much to be ashamed of in this war. But they also have a great deal to be proud of as well. Regrettably, Lehrer focuses only on the former.

Ironically enough, he gives us a book about Paris that is largely devoid of Parisians and the French more generally. Or, rather, the French are there, but they are not really actors in their own history. Parisian women, however, appear repeatedly, and Lehrer's obsession with their sexuality is jarring at times. Frenchwomen (and foreign women living in Paris) seem to all be bisexual or lesbian or else they are courtesans, secretly directing the politics of the men whose beds they share. He is right to note the sometimes pro-fascist, self-serving, and anti-Semitic views of famous Parisian women like Gertrude Stein, Coco Chanel, and the actress Arletty, but the attention he devotes to them and their lovers is unusual to say the very least.

More disturbingly, the book is really about the experiences of foreigners in Paris. The cover features (surprise, surprise) the famous photograph of Hitler standing on the Trocadéro with the Eiffel Tower in the background. This may be a marketing decision, but it is also revealing of the book and its central themes. Hitler may appear in the book's index more often than any other individual, yet he spent just three hours in the city, not even staying long enough to eat a meal. Also appearing prominently are American ambassador

to France William Bullitt, Winston Churchill, Ernest Hemingway, and Hermann Göring.

By contrast, the French themselves are virtually absent. Pierre Brossolette, Henri Rol-Tanguy, and Albert Camus do not receive a single index entry between them. Lehrer might have used this book to tell the fascinating stories of Parisians such as the collaborationist mayor Pierre Taittinger, the resistance leader Maurice Kriegel-Valrimont, and Frédéric Joliot-Curie, who emptied the wine bottles in the Préfecture and turned them into Molotov cocktails. Instead, Lehrer is content to keep Paris, and the Parisians, in the background as anonymous figures more acted upon than acting. As a result, he completely misreads the role of the Paris police strike in August, 1944, the significance of de Gaulle's *Te Deum* at Notre Dame after the liberation, and the role of many of Paris's collaborators.

The end of the book starkly reveals this bias. Le Mont Valérien receives a few perfunctory paragraphs no more in-depth than a sub-standard Wikipedia entry. It is, however, a crucial "site of memory" for France and the Second World War. Charles de Gaulle consecrated it as such on June 18, 1945, notably the fifth anniversary of his famous broadcast from London. The site marks the place of execution for more than 1,000 Frenchmen at the hands of the Germans. Lehrer might have noted the significance of the date and the site; he might at least have noted that this most important of all sites sits outside the city and is off the beaten path for most Parisians, to say nothing of tourists.

Instead, he devotes the next ten pages to Lisbon and the Pan Am Clipper that flew there from New York City. In doing so he has marginalized the French and kept the focus on the foreigners trying to escape from France. He even, for some reason I cannot fathom, reprints the scene in *Casablanca* (1942) between Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains about why Bogart's character

came to Casablanca. By contrast, Le Mont Valérien receives just four brief paragraphs.

The book suffers from other problems as well, including a consistent absence of accents in French words and names. The bibliography is almost impossible to use and is missing several key works, notably those in French. Disturbingly, Lehrer does rely on works by David Irving, whose writing has been tied to anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. Lehrer is right that Paris, and France more generally, still has not fully come to grips with its years of occupation and collaboration. This book, however, does not wrestle with the real issues of those years, nor does it help a reader understand their context. As a result, it does not do what it might have done to reveal the secrets of Paris at war.

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