

**Mary Louise Roberts.** *D-Day through French Eyes: Normandy 1944*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 211 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-13699-8.



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Seventy years after the end of the Second World War, writers have only recently begun moving past the heroic liberation narrative that has dominated the American view of the Normandy landings in 1944. The standard story, familiar to readers of works by authors such as Cornelius Ryan, Stephen Ambrose, Carlo D'Este, and Douglas Brinkley, essentially pits the virtuous Allied infantry against the evil Nazi occupiers on the beaches and beyond. Good triumphs over evil, the American, British, and Canadian forces secure the beaches and the drop zones, and then the march of liberation across France begins. Patton leads the way and, alone and unafraid, stops the Germans in the Bulge and leads the charge across the Rhine. In the end, the Band of Brothers celebrates in the remains of Hitler's Eagle's Nest and the world is safe for democracy. Missing from this standard, satisfying, narrative is a discussion of the fate of those French, Belgian, and Dutch citizens who found themselves caught in the battle area between the increasingly powerful Allied forces and the degenerating, but still powerful,

German Wehrmacht. Fortunately, this simplistic narrative has begun to change as authors such as William I. Hitchcock, Rick Atkinson, and Anthony Beevor have begun to introduce the experience of the ignored civilians into the story. While French historians have begun collecting and publishing reminiscences from those who lived during the invasion experience, few civilian narratives have found their way into English-language publications.

One historian who has sought to give an English voice to the French experience is Mary Louise Roberts. Her previous book, *What Soldiers Do* (2013), is a controversial look at American soldier sexual behavior towards French women. Although most military historians have long known about the sexual escapades of the American soldier, this story has escaped inclusion into the standard narrative. Certainly, it was not the story most of the Greatest Generation told their mothers, wives, and girlfriends. Holding a doctorate from Brown University, Roberts is currently a professor of French and gender history at the Univer-

sity of Wisconsin-Madison, and continues to write and teach on these different remembrances of the war experience.

In Roberts's view of the invasion, the French were far from being passive observers in the battle. Civilians participated more than American historians acknowledge. They were not simply invisible during the battle, but were agents of their own liberation and suffered appropriately. It probably comes as a shock to the general, especially American, reader that Normans suffered more than three thousand dead in the first two days, generally equal to the Allied losses during the same period. Roberts argues they helped paratroopers when injured and gave others advice on German locations. Some helped American infantry locate enemy artillery and infantry concentrations, while others hid pilots who had parachuted from their downed planes into their cellars and barns. Resistance fighters often fought alongside American infantry and behind enemy lines. She limits her story to a discussion of actions in the American sector that centered on Utah and Omaha beaches, and the paratrooper drop zones at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula.

The resources of the research library at Le Mémorial de Caen provided much of Robert's material. For almost thirty years, this wonderful facility has collected the unofficial papers, diaries, and *témoignages* (testimony) of those who experienced the occupation and invasion. This is a unique archive that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been replicated in other parts of France. The author augmented the moving personal commentary found in these documents with an array of French and English secondary sources. The result is a rich view of the invasion from the perspective of those who shared space with the two combatants.

Organized into six chapters, the book begins by explaining the Norman feelings and emotions on the night before the landings. To the citizens of the small cities and towns in Calvados and La

Manche, the environment was a confusing whirlwind of noise and visual effects. Roberts describes the effect of the lights and explosions on civilians as the Allied air forces began bombing and shelling the German defenses. She uses individual testimony to describe events such as the interchange between a young woman and a lone paratrooper, a pathfinder, dropping into a farmyard. Through French eyes, Roberts describes how local citizens watched planes fly overhead and begin dropping things that might be bombs, but turned out to be American paratroopers. Personal stories describe how most Normans reflected disbelief that invasion had begun, while others lamented that it was taking place on their coast, rather than in the Nord. Other commentators note the attitudes of those who had staked their future on the Germans and the Vichy Government, now faced with the reality their time might be up. Some commented on the preparation of the Resistance to take action while other testimony noted shock that Americans were bombing nearby towns, such as St. Lô and Valognes, and concern for the fate of family living there. And, more than anything else that first day, Roberts helps convey the feeling of ignorance as no one, especially those who lived away from the coast, really understood what was going on around them.

In the next five chapters Roberts weaves these personal accounts into a vivid portrayal of the Norman experience. Letting the witnesses, all survivors, tell their own stories, she blends their perceptions with the well-known narrative of the invasion. She allows them describe their encounters with Americans and their fear of being caught between them and German soldiers hunting them down. Women explain the value of the silk parachutes to a population that had been without such luxury for many years. Others describe what it was like to see an aircraft shot out of the sky and the crewmen parachute to earth--and what it was like to rescue one and bring him to safety. Other testimony describes what it was like to be in the path of desperate German sol-

diers trying to get away from the increasingly lethal Allied troops moving off the beach. Unknown to most on this side of the Atlantic are the descriptions of French civilians cowering from the bombardment from the thousands of American aircraft in the sky that day and the nature of their shelters. Of course, Roberts includes stories of the aftermath when they emerged from safety only to find friends and family dead or wounded, and the places they knew destroyed. She adds stories that give us insight into the experience of looking for family members whom the invasion had scattered in another part of the battlefield, and the pain of losing a parent or child during those days of chaos. She goes on to explain the confusion and apprehension of the first meetings between the two, at the time foreign, cultures. She continues by describing the role of local civilians in helping with the wounded and identifying the location of German defenders. Likewise unknown to most in the United States are the many contributions of the French Resistance in the Normandy area in assisting the landings by derailing reinforcement trains, cutting communication lines, and ambushing reserves moving to the front.

Roberts has filled this short volume with a host of moving testimony describing the difficulties of surviving in an environment where two armies are trying to destroy each other. One of the incidents most tragic and illustrative of the complexity of the situation was the massacre at Granignes. A small sideshow of the larger invasion, it was one of the many stories the official history and most other accounts of the invasion was unable to cover. About 180 men from the 3rd Battalion, 507th Parachute Regiment, 82nd Airborne division, found themselves behind German lines, about ten miles southeast of Carentan. Using the town of Granges as a base and, supported by its citizens, the paratroopers began to raid passing German units. On June 10, the Germans decided to destroy the sore in their rear. From the reports of French residents, we have a birds-eye view of the struggle that resulted in thirty-two American

dead, priests and other civilians massacred, and the town burnt to the ground. This is a powerful story, among many, from the French perspective that makes this book required reading for anyone who claims to be a historian of this operation. The book concludes with a discussion of Normandy, now a logistics base, after the fighting passed. Americans' bad behavior was an unfortunate blight on the generally positive invasion experience. American attitudes mixed poorly with the region's physical and emotional scars.

This short review does not do justice to this fascinating, well-written book. Military historians will glean interesting insights concerning the hidden environment over which the Allies and Germans fought. Of course, Roberts does not claim to be a military historian so occasionally she makes a comment that will raise eyebrows among those in the know. As anyone familiar with the war in Russia knows, the Norman civilians were not witnessing a contest "between the two most powerful armies ever assembled" (p. 121). She may be forgiven for not realizing that by the middle of August, Omar Bradley was commanding the 12th Army Group, and not the First Army (p. 161). These are quibbles that do not detract from the quality and importance of the book. This reader's main concern is that Roberts does not go far enough. The Allied invasion affected French civilians across the country, from those in the north under attack as part of Operation Fortitude to those living near rail yards outside of Paris to those unfortunates living in towns near bridges along the Seine and Loire. Hopefully, Roberts will continue her work to provide English speakers with a more complete view of the war through French eyes.

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