

H-France Review Vol. 7 (May 2007), No. 51

Jean-Jacques Fouché, *Massacre at Oradour, France, 1944: Coming to Grips with Terror*. Translated by David Sices and James B. Atkinson. Introduction by Jay Winter. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. xvii + 270 pp. Maps, photographs, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-87580-601-5.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, University of Missouri-Rolla.

Many scholars who study France during the Second World War are familiar with the basic outline of the story of the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane: on June 10, 1944, the Das Reich division of the Waffen SS entered the small Limousin village and rounded up its residents. The men were separated from the women and children and forced into barns and garages scattered throughout the town. The German troops opened fire on the men with machine guns and then set the buildings on fire. The women and children, locked in the church, were also brutally killed. The entire town was then set ablaze. Six hundred forty-two men, women, and children died that Saturday, just four days after the Allied invasion of France. The reasons for the massacre remain shrouded in mystery. Jean-Jacques Fouché attempts to explain why the residents of this so-called ordinary village were murdered in *Massacre at Oradour, France, 1944: Coming to Grips with Terror*.

Fouché, as curator of the permanent exhibit at the *Centre de la Mémoire d'Oradour*, has a personal connection to the subject. The ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane were preserved after the massacre as a national monument, a commemorative process that Sarah Farmer has carefully reconstructed in *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane*.^[1] In 1994, Fouché became the first director of the museum and visitors' center established at the memorial site. It is from this vantage point that he approaches the topic. The structure of the book is somewhat untraditional, although probably influenced by the author's position at the memorial. Rather than beginning with an account of the massacre, Fouché begins in the town's ruins, before turning to an analysis of the Waffen SS and its activities, followed by a description of the war years in Oradour. The massacre and its victims are the focus of the last half of the book before Fouché returns to his main question: why Oradour?

While Fouché does examine the massacre's commemoration in the book, his main focus is on the brutality of war culture. He places the actions of the Waffen SS in Oradour within the broader context of atrocities committed by the Das Reich division within France, as well as its previous activities on the war's Eastern Front in order to explain the massacre. This is both one of the book's strengths and one of its weaknesses. Fouché provides the organizational background of the Das Reich division, a history of its wartime actions, and the regiment's demographics. The author thus demonstrates that the Waffen SS participated in the murder of civilians in Eastern Europe and argues that this foreshadowed their activities in Oradour in 1944. The contextualization of the division's activities provides a plausible explanation for the massacre—the unit was habituated to using murder and terror as a war tactic. For Fouché, the division simply transposed its activities in Eastern Europe to a new environment. These ingrained responses (reinforced by discipline and fear) required little provocation, according to the author.

Such an argument would be more convincing if Fouché was also able to demonstrate a continuity in personnel. Instead he tells the reader that, by the time the Das Reich division reached France, it was made up mostly of new, young recruits, including forced inductees from Alsace. Fouché discusses the

Waffen SS as a group with an organizational memory rather than as individuals, a choice that leads to a heavy reliance on overgeneralizations and oversimplifications. For example, the author asserts, “The Nazi regime suppressed every possibility of opposition” (p. 17) and “Very quickly the soldiers grew incapable of distinguishing between matters of discipline and acts of barbarity” (p. 25). He also ignores the cultural and political differences between eastern and western Europe. Fouché’s interpretation lacks the nuances required for a study of a military unit’s participation in atrocities, such as the research conducted by Christopher Browning on Reserve Police Battalion 101’s activities in Poland during the war.[2]

Fouché largely dismisses one commonly-advanced explanation for the massacre: the Germans mistakenly attacked Oradour-sur-Glane rather than Oradour-sur-Vayres, a center of Resistance activity. Fouché documents the increase in Resistance activity throughout the Limousin in the wake of the Allied landings in Normandy, as well as the Das Reich division’s participation in “combing” activities intended to “segregate the Resistance and terrorize the populace” (p.49). However, he dismisses a connection between these activities and the “real” motivation for the massacre. Although the *maquis* were extremely active in the Limousin, there were no *maquis* in Oradour-sur-Glane. Instead, Fouché sees the attack on Oradour as a premeditated, brutal attack intended to show Nazi strength and prevent a Communist takeover in the region (p.58). Rather than believing German troops were motivated by a desire to destroy the Resistance, Fouché concludes “The SS invented their justification for the massacre even before they carried it out” (p. 179). The author further asserts that by justifying the action as anti-Resistance, the SS made the massacre justifiable to the participants.

Central to this portion of Fouché’s argument are the actions and statements of SS General Lammerding, the man in charge of the Waffen SS division that attacked Oradour. Lammerding’s group received an order on June 9 to leave the Limousin and head towards the Normandy front, but the division was in disarray and lacked the vehicles and fuel to make the journey. The General sent an angry letter detailing the situation to the German command and also complained, “Unless someone takes firm control, the situation in this zone will be dangerous to a degree that has not yet been appreciated to its full extent as of the present time” (p. 53). In Fouché’s interpretation, Lammerding’s desire to take “firm control” through a “brutal operation” precipitated the attack on Oradour on June 10. Fouché claims Lammerding decided to apply tactics from the Eastern front to France. Yet, the real motivation for the massacre was never communicated to the men who carried out the orders to kill the villagers.

This line of argument often seems undermined by Fouché’s own evidence about the Resistance. The difference between official and popular beliefs presents an opportunity for an interesting discussion and analysis, but it is never fully explored. Also, Lammerding and his beliefs seem to be the key to Fouché’s argument, but to be fully convincing they need to be more developed. This effort appears to be hampered by a lack of archival information related to the General. Fouché has delved into multiple archives and records in his quest to reconstruct the actions of the Das Reich division including the *Archives de la justice militaire* and the *Service historique de l’Armée de Terre*. Lammerding, however, was not among the men tried in France for the massacre in 1953. Fouché bases his interpretation of why Lammerding acted as he did on only a few letters written during the war.

In the end, Fouché must offer his own suppositions. He believes the Waffen SS directed their acts of terror against areas with Communists and Jews rather than specifically at the Resistance. This particular focus, then, helps explain why the Das Reich division targeted Oradour. Again, this assertion is not entirely convincing. The *maquis* in the Limousin were largely Communist, so an attack on a town with strong ties to the *maquis* might have been more effective in achieving Lammerding’s goal of preventing the establishment of Communist governments.[3] Furthermore, Fouché believes the French and the Germans had different definitions for the term “bandit.” For the French, this represented the Resistance; for the Germans, it meant “Judeo-Bolsheviks.” But there was not a particularly heavy concentration of Jews in Oradour-sur-Glane either. Fouché’s conclusions thus may leave readers feeling

unsatisfied. For him, the massacre “was the result of a culture of violence, an institutionalized practice of brutality, a particular context of war, but also a combination of circumstances” (p. 199). This reader finished the book and still wondered “Why Oradour?”

One cannot help compare Fouché’s study of Oradour with Farmer’s. Fouché’s book explicitly states that it “complements an earlier study of the incident by Sarah Farmer” (p. vii) and when “read alongside” Farmer’s work, provides new insights into the event. However, much of the material in *Massacre at Oradour* on the massacre itself, victims’ memories, and the commemoration’s meanings can be found in Farmer’s book. In fact reading Farmer’s book first would provide a concise but thorough explanation of the massacre, the subsequent commemoration, and the continuing legacy that would provide ample background for *Massacre at Oradour*. Fouché assumes a certain familiarity with the event, the aftermath, and the Limousin region. The translators have attempted to provide the necessary background in the endnotes, but readers new to the subject may need more information. The two books may work well together in a graduate-level course as an example of different interpretations of a single event, but overall Fouché provides little in terms of new material. Approaching the topic from the perspective of war culture is promising, but Fouché’s book has only begun the process.

NOTES

[1] Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999).

[2] Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

[3] On the Communist *maquis* in the Limousin, see Farmer, “The Communist Resistance in the Haute-Vienne,” *French Historical Studies* 14:1 (1985): 89-116; H. R. Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); and Georges Guingouin, *Quatre ans de lutte sur le sol limousin* (Paris: Hachette, 1974).

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ISSN 1553-9172