

H-France Review Vol. 19 (July 2019), No. 140

Julia S. Torrie, *German Soldiers and the Occupation of France, 1940-1944*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xiii + 276 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$105.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781108471282.

Review by Bertram M. Gordon, Mills College.

In *German Soldiers and the Occupation of France, 1940-1944*, Julia S. Torrie makes a highly significant contribution to our knowledge not only of the German military occupation of France during the Second World War but also to our understanding of the experiences of the “ordinary” soldiers who participated in the occupation. Many of these soldiers were young men who had never before left their local towns and villages. In Paris and elsewhere in France, they “were shown a series of things that we knew only in our wildest imaginations.”^[1] Torrie’s account, published as part of the series “Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare,” focuses less on the political and military history of the war and the occupation, though these figure into the story, than on the lived experiences of the soldiers themselves. Based on an impressive array of often hard-to-find diaries and letters, as well as official military records in German and French archives, her book is especially innovative in its use of photographs taken by the soldiers while on duty in France.

Examining the “soft” interactions of the German soldiers with France during the war, *German Soldiers and the Occupation of France* is structured around three basic themes: “the history of the German occupation of France; the history of tourism, consumption, and leisure; and the history of Nazism and World War II” (p. 8). As Torrie points out, the Germans in general regarded the French more or less as equals, in contrast to their views of the eastern European peoples whose lands they also occupied. Consequently, their behaviour toward France and the French oscillated between the severe repression visited upon the Soviets, Poles, and easterners in general and a more respectful and gentle comportment, calculated to show the Germans themselves how civilized and able to appreciate French culture they were. As the war progressed, however, German conduct in France became more brutal, especially as they geared up for a long-term war after their failure to defeat the Soviets in the summer and autumn of 1941. Military personnel stationed earlier during the occupation and for longer periods, having grown accustomed to the benefits of living in relatively peaceful France, tended to be gentler in their behaviour than newer recruits, especially those coming from recent duty in the East, though with human variation being what it is, there were exceptions.

German Soldiers and the Occupation of France is divided into seven chapters, beginning with an introduction in which Torrie suggests that whereas most histories of the German occupation in

France emphasise “high policy,” her work offers “the first social and cultural history of the occupation of France that gives depth and colour to ground-level occupiers” (p. 9). France under German occupation, she adds, was not a “closed system” to be viewed in isolation as many of the soldiers stationed there travelled back and forth between their military bases and Germany, or were transferred to and from other fronts, notably the East. Their privileged position allowed German soldiers, at least on occasion, to live as “God in France,” to borrow the phrase used by the German journalist Friedrich Sieburg, whose interwar book with that title had been published repeatedly in Germany.[2] The value of the German mark vis-à-vis the French franc set artificially high by the occupation authorities also blurred the lines between the purchasing and plundering of consumer goods. German soldiers in France bought goods that they sent back home, consumed tourist experiences, and took photographs (pp. 11-12). As Torrie notes, the consumption patterns that she studies were largely those of men, suggesting the possibility of new historical perspectives when seen from the role of gender, as well as the linkages of tourism and war, too often overlooked by historians of both areas. These patterns help shed light on some of the rewards systems at work in Nazi Germany (pp. 14-17).

In chapter one, “Occupations, Past and Present,” Torrie notes that Hitler and his advisors, apparently surprised by the rapidity of their victory in France, made many decisions on occupation policies ad hoc. Especially important in their thinking was to portray to the French and even more importantly to themselves that, in contrast to the images of previous occupations, such as the French occupation and their use of African troops—often depicted as barbarians—in the Rhineland during the 1920s, the Germans were highly civilized and generous victors, chivalrous and benevolent toward the defeated French, who were pictured in gendered images as the “feminised and infantilised French nation” (p. 50). They would perpetuate this image of civilised and benevolent conquerors through the entire occupation period, though it would be increasingly challenged as the war continued and the position of the occupation soldiers became more perilous. The German high command also wished to have the local French perform as many as possible of the daily chores relating to the occupation, freeing their own personnel for other tasks, especially after the invasion of the Soviet Union when they were needed in the East.

Chapter two, “Consuming the Tastes and Pleasures of France,” addresses shopping and tourism, the latter as displaced consumption. Many of the German soldiers, it should be remembered, had travelled little, if at all, before the war. Their letters home that Torrie consulted showed them now discovering the many “delights” that France offered. The artificially high value of the mark against the franc meant that with the return of many of the French who had fled the initial German invasion in May-June 1940, and the coming of relative normalcy, occupation soldiers could shop for items such as clothing, soap, perfume, and butter, among others, that they then mailed home to wives and other family members (p. 62). Torrie notes astutely that this behaviour represented a shift in gender roles in which men were now shopping for items that they had not usually purchased previously (p. 70). The German men were not alone in buying precious commodities in France during the occupation. Torrie also cites the example of Alice Moats, an American journalist, who entered the country clandestinely to write about it during the last months of the occupation and went shopping for Parisian fashions (pp. 90-91).

In the third chapter, “Touring and Writing about Occupied Land,” the focus is on the extensive tourism of the German soldiers in France, encouraged by the many guidebooks published in German for them. The soldiers’ sightseeing in France facilitated the formulation of their images as representatives of a highly cultured people able to appreciate the past artistic production of

France, while at the same time appreciating all the more *das Heimatland* (“the homeland”), expressing in other words the Nazi perspective (pp. 96-98). Torrie also highlights the ways the literary and pictorial descriptions in the many German-language tourist guidebooks, published ostensibly as books for pleasurable reading during the occupation, contributed to the making of history in creating memories shaped by Nazi values. These books, she writes, posed as factual manuals giving the soldiers a racialized view of the French. They became mementos for the soldiers and their families, enabling the Home Front to enjoy the victory vicariously, and they also “created meaning and shaped memory,” showing the soldiers how defeated France was to be perceived and remembered (pp. 125-126).

“Capturing Experiences: Photography and Photo Books,” the fourth chapter, focuses on visual sources and their expressions of the “normality” of ordinary soldiers during wartime. As Torrie points out, the seemingly banal photographs are reminders of the complicity of the soldiers in a brutal war and occupation. Together with the consumer goods bought by the soldiers and the tours they took, their photographs spoke to the power relationships of the time. Occupying soldiers “captured” the French in their photographs as groups of them were photographed at the top of the Eiffel Tower with “defeated Paris literally at their feet” (p. 142).

The picture of German soldiers changes from relatively benevolent to harsher as the war goes on and chapter five, “Rising Tensions,” documents this shift. As Resistance activity grew and France became a more dangerous place for German soldiers, the contradiction between increased German exactions and danger, on one hand, and the high command’s wish to maintain France as a pleasant place for rest and rehabilitation of their soldiers, on the other, intensified (pp. 167-168). Increasing numbers of soldiers who had seen action on the eastern front were stationed for relaxation breaks in France, with the image of *Westweich*, or the “soft” conditions of life in France, gaining currency among German military personnel both high and low, the subject of chapter six, “*Westweich?* Perceptions of ‘Softness’ among Soldiers in France.” Citing an unprecedented mobility of German soldiers from the eastern front to France and back, Torrie makes the important point that the German occupation in France must be seen as part of their wider war, in which all of Europe was viewed in the Nazis’ perspective. She suggests that the ability to give the soldiers rest periods in France may have contributed to prolonging the war (p. 195), an interesting argument, difficult to prove. At the same time, those serving in France were increasingly seen as exhibiting a soft *Etappengeist*, or spirit of the rear, not contributing sufficiently to the war effort, in contrast to the *Kampfgeist*, or fighting spirit, of those in the East (pp. 195-196). Soldiers, especially those in the SS brutalized by their experience fighting the Soviets, brought with them this *Kampfgeist* when redeployed to France and were responsible for atrocities, such as the murders of civilians in Tulle and Oradour-sur-Glane in the summer of 1944 (p. 204).

In chapter seven, “Twilight of the Gods,” Torrie shows the heightening of the tensions between the earlier view of France as a place to be enjoyed with its culture respected by the Germans and the contempt for them as “soft” held by those brutalized by their experiences in the East. New recruits, she argues, tended to be more violent than those who had grown soft in France, but even the newly arrived soldiers often enjoyed the delights of France and sightseeing trips, which continued through the end of the occupation (p. 224). In summarizing this argument, Torrie notes that in some cases, German leniency spared France the destruction visited on eastern Europe, whereas in other cases, notably during the summer of 1944, the sense that the occupation forces had been too lenient “contributed to radical violence during the German retreat” (p. 248).

In summary, Torrie has written an excellent book, thoroughly researched and well argued, significantly extending our understanding not only of the German occupation in France, but the nature of the Nazi German empire during the war. The attempts by the German soldiers to create a feeling of normalcy while occupying a foreign country during wartime, even if many of the soldiers did not share in the brutality of the SS, links them to the “ordinary” Germans described by Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in their studies of complicity in the Holocaust. In her last sentence, Torrie writes: “Living like gods in France was acceptable only if soldiers did not forget that they were first and foremost Hitler’s men” (p. 251). Addressing the “banality of evil,” Hannah Arendt wrote in 1963 that there were many people involved in the Nazi brutality, who “were terribly and terrifyingly normal.”^[3] The idea of “living like a god in France,” expressed by Sieburg during the interwar years, had resonated in Germany to the point where it helped generate images of a pleasurable France in the minds of many of the occupation personnel. It was no accident that, as Torrie points out, one of Hitler’s first actions after defeating France in June 1940 was to tour Paris, ostentatiously expressing the altered power relationships of the time (pp. 44 and 106).

German Soldiers and the Occupation of France may well inspire others to explore related questions. The Italian occupation of France was far more limited geographically and in time than the German occupation, but it would be interesting to explore the behaviour of the Italian soldiers while in France. Shortly after the Italians arrived in 1940, the *Ente Turismo Costa Azzura di Mentone*, Italy’s Côte d’Azur Tourist Organization, began encouraging Italian tourism to Menton by supporting the distribution of food and other materials to the hotels there. Attempts were made to promote patriotism and youth along the Fascist model in the form of a youth colony and a monument to the fallen among the residents of the occupied territories but little has been written about the behaviour of the soldiers stationed there.^[4]

A few minor notes might be made for attention in a possible future edition. Repetitions appear occasionally, as in the case of Lothar-Günther Buchheim, introduced as the author of the post-war novel that was made into the film “Das Boot” on page 122 and again on page 160. Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel is identified on both pages 166 and 183 as a cousin of the man he replaced as head of the German military administration in Paris. “Dirth” appears instead of “dearth” on page 166. A “t” seems to be missing in the word “that” just prior to the quote in the first full paragraph on page 215. The index is somewhat abbreviated. William Shirer, for example, who appears at least twice in the text (pp. 134 and 141), is not listed there. The women pictured in figure 4.15 chatting with German soldiers in front of the Moulin Rouge are identified as “respectable German” but might they have been French even if perhaps not dancers (pp. 159-160)?

None of these quibbles, however, detract from an excellent book, a very real contribution to the study of the linkages of consumerism and war. *German Soldiers and the Occupation of France* is a must-read for those interested not only in the German occupation of France during the Second World War but also the larger connections of leisure and war that help explain why war is possible, how it continues, and some of the effects it has afterward.

NOTES

[1] Quoted from a soldier from Hamburg in Bertram M. Gordon, *War Tourism: Second World War France from Defeat and Occupation to the Creation of Heritage* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 111.

[2] Friedrich Sieburg's book was originally published as *Gott in Frankreich? ein Versuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei, 1929). It was translated into French as *Dieu est-il Français?* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1930). The German edition was republished in 1930, 1931, and 1932, with a new version and preface in 1935, two years after the rise of the Nazis to power. After the French defeat, it was brought out in a new German edition in 1940, with this edition translated into French by Maurice Betz and once again titled *Dieu est-il Français?* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1942). The 1940 German edition's existence is indicated only in the 1942 French version and more recently listed in AbeBooks.fr, <https://www.abebooks.fr/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=1346075130&searchurl=tn%3Dgott%2Bin%2Bfrankreich%26sortby%3D20%26an%3Dfriedrich%2Bsieburg&cm_sp=snippet_-_srp1_-_title22>, retrieved 29 April 2019. See also Bertram M. Gordon, "Ist Gott Französisch? Germans, Tourism, and Occupied France, 1940-1944," *Modern and Contemporary France*, NS4:3 (1996), p. 296n1.

[3] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977 [1963]), pp. 252 and 276. See also Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992), pp. 159-163 and 188-189; and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pp. 100-101, 248-250, 395, and 401-402.

[4] Jean-Louis Panicacci, *L'Occupation italienne, Sud-Est de la France, juin 1940-septembre 1943* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), pp. 58-59. See also Gordon, *War Tourism*, pp. 17-18.

Bertram M. Gordon
Mills College
bmgordon@mills.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.