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Robert Pike, *Silent Village: Life and Death in Occupied France*. Cheltenham: The History Press, 2021. 382pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. £20.00 U.K. (cl.). ISBN 9780750999670; £14.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 9780750991346; £10.39 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9780750997607.

Review by Andrew Knapp, University of Reading.

The tale of Oradour-sur-Glane, a village about twenty kilometres north-north-west of Limoges and the subject of Mr. Pike's book, is oft-told and terrible. At approximately 2 pm on Saturday, 10 June 1944, some 150 soldiers of the first battalion, fourth regiment of the Waffen-SS "Das Reich" armoured division surrounded Oradour, herded the men into barns, garages, and courtyards and shot them, and locked the women and children in the church, to be murdered by a combination of gas, fire, and grenades. The village was systematically looted, then torched.

According to the 1936 census, the *commune* of Oradour had 1,574 inhabitants, perhaps a quarter of whom lived in the 150 or so buildings of the main village and the rest in the surrounding hamlets. By 1944, some had died, and others were prisoners of war, but there had also been many new arrivals--refugees from Alsace, Spanish Republicans, and a handful of Jews. [1] The overall population had probably risen significantly. What we do know precisely is the number who were murdered that day: 643, including, in the church, 255 women and 207 children (a grandmother, Ramona Domínguez, was declared the 643rd victim in 2020). Fourteen people survived of those present in the zone cordoned off by the SS. This was the worst German war crime of the Second World War in the west; on the Eastern Front, where the *Das Reich* division had learned its trade, such barbarism was of course commonplace.

Almost all of the murderers got away with it. The Federal Republic of Germany refused to extradite any, and the general in command of *Das Reich*, Heinz Lammerding (who was not present at the scene but whose orders set the context for the afternoon's killing) enjoyed a prosperous post-war existence at the head of a successful building materials business, dying peacefully in 1971. The most senior SS officer at Oradour, Major Adolf Diekmann, was killed in Normandy on 29 June 1944. Of the twenty-two men who stood trial for the massacre in Bordeaux in 1953, only eight were German. The other fourteen were *Alsaciens*, of whom all but one had been pressed into service with the Waffen-SS and therefore claimed the status of *combatants malgré-nous*. France was thus trying Frenchmen for war crimes against other French people. The sentences given the *malgré-nous* (up to twelve years' hard labour) were immediately overturned by the National Assembly and the thirteen men walked free. Just two death sentences were handed down, to one German and the one volunteer *Alsacien*, Georges René Boos; these sentences were

commuted and both men were free within fourteen years. A trial that might have established the truth instead left a legacy of bitterness, especially between the remaining inhabitants of Oradour and the *Alsacien* politicians who had defended their own. One SS officer present at the scene, Heinz Barth, was tried in Germany in 1983 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Released on grounds of ill-health in 1997, he nevertheless lived another decade.

The destroyed village was designated an official site of memory, to be left unchanged as a memorial to the massacre; today's Oradour is therefore entirely a post-war settlement, built alongside its predecessor. The decision has not gone wholly unchallenged. The inhabitants of post-war Oradour grew up in the perpetual shadow of the massacre; and the ruins increasingly need shoring up to preserve, artificially, their aspect of 1944. But they still stun the visitor to silence.

Among the many accounts of the massacre at Oradour, studies by academic historians jostle for position with eyewitness accounts and more or less journalistic works.[2] Jean-Jacques Fouché, the first director of the Memorial Centre at Oradour-sur-Glane, has produced two authoritative studies,[3] and Henri Ménudier's short article offers a convenient (and free) starting-point.[4] In English, the journalist and military historian Max Hastings produced a general account of *Das Reich's* murderous march northwards four decades ago.[5] Douglas Hawes's study, meanwhile, focuses chiefly on the trial, unsurprisingly for a book entitled *The Final Verdict* written by a retired American lawyer.[6] Shannon L. Fogg offers valuable contextualization on the Limousin during the Occupation, without focusing particularly on Oradour, in her *Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France*,[7] while both Sarah Farmer and Éva Léger have focused on the issues of memory and memorialization.[8]

Pike cites all of these studies (and includes a bibliography and an index, unlike some of his predecessors), and refers to the primary sources you would expect, especially the eyewitness accounts gathered at the Memorial Centre and the archives of the Haute-Vienne, as well as interviews with four survivors still alive in 2019. But Pike is not an academic historian, and it shows. He doesn't review the literature, or examine his sources critically, or explain how his contribution fits into the existing scholarship, or outline his methodology, or set out his own research questions. Instead, his introduction launches straight into the story of Ramona Domínguez, and is followed by no fewer than 86 chapters, each four pages long on average. Of these, exactly half depict the village before the massacre (eleven on Oradour before 1939; five on the period from the outbreak of hostilities to France's defeat; twelve on Oradour as part of the "free zone" before November 1942; and fifteen on the following nineteen months to June 1944). Twenty-eight cover the events of 10 June, twelve the immediate aftermath; three, finally, deal with the trials and analyse the German choice of Oradour as a site of annihilation.

Pike's answer to the obvious questions—Why a massacre? And why in Oradour?—are clear enough. The *Das Reich* division, already steeped in innocents' blood from the Eastern Front, had been given *carte blanche* both from the German High Command and from Lammerding to punish as it saw fit any harassment of German troops by Resistance forces. On re-taking Tulle from the Resistance on 9 June, it hanged 99 men from the city's balconies. The following day, though, Oradour was not punished as a centre of Resistance activity; there were no *résistants* to speak of in the village, at most a handful of Communist sympathisers, Jews, and go-betweens who knew where the nearest *maquis* could be found. Oradour was chosen partly for logistical reasons—it was on *Das Reich's* route north, limiting the use of scarce petrol, and it was easy to surround and

cordon off; partly because it offered attractive prospects for looting; and partly--perhaps chiefly--because without any core of *résistants* among them, the inhabitants were eminently biddable, readily convinced that they were being rounded up for nothing worse than an identity check. The SS men, after all, did not want anyone shooting back as they went about their work. Their purpose was not to punish, but to terrorise the region and the whole of France.

This is a sound explanation but not a new one: indeed, as Pike himself observes, a Resistance pamphlet of 1944 had already offered it. It has been confirmed by successive analyses before Pike's. The same applies to his account of the trial: Hawes, for example, offers considerably more detail. And Pike offers nothing of significance on the question of memorialisation.

But analysis is not Pike's main task. The clearest statement of his goal comes in his very last sentence: "This lively, peaceful village contained so much more than buildings, and this book is an attempt to recognise the many people, young and old, who lived there" (p. 348). In this, he broadly succeeds. His style is pointillistic: each of the chapters is a vignette, drawn from the wealth of eyewitness accounts and memories his sources have to offer. Each leaves questions unanswered. Between them, however, and especially in the first half of the book, the chapters build up a rich and beguiling portrait of the village, all the more poignant as you remind yourself that almost all of the individuals portrayed will soon face a hideous death. His pre-war Oradour is Clochemerle-en-Limousin: one could hardly invent a scenario in which the daughter of the Socialist mayor (Joseph Beau, who held office from 1914 to 1941) should fall pregnant by the son of his right-wing predecessor (Paul Désourteaux, 1906-1919)--and that the two should have to marry and settle temporarily in Limoges until Désourteaux's displeasure had subsided (pp. 40-41).

Pike's Oradour is a place of relative autarky, and of strong ties of interdependence between inhabitants. Farmland stretched right up to the village, men and women from different farms shared their labour at harvest time, and the mixed farming typical of the area allowed it to feed itself to a considerable extent (and to avoid the worst of the wartime shortages suffered by more specialised agricultural regions). But Oradour's economy was not only agricultural. In the late 1930s, it boasted twenty-six workshops and twenty-two shops--"blacksmiths, carpenters, joiners, stone masons, builders, well-diggers and dealers in grains and fertilisers", and cider was made from local apples (p. 56). Almost everything necessary to sustain life was there.

Relatively self-sufficient, Oradour was not, however, insular. Since 1911, it had been an easy hour's tram journey from Limoges, whence people would come to fish, swim, eat, drink, enjoy the pleasant countryside, and even to shop (there was a small, wholly artisanal, glove-making industry, with outlets locally as well as in nearby Saint-Junien). Perhaps this relative openness helped Oradour cope with the influx of evacuees from Alsace, Spanish Republicans (a rudimentary camp for Spanish refugees was set up in Oradour under the Daladier government), small numbers of Jews, and *réfractaires* hiding from compulsory labour in Germany. The only ones to have been positively disliked were the evacuees from Schiltigheim in Alsace, who were regarded as stuck-up, and most of them returned home in August 1940. The rest, if not always welcomed with open arms, were accommodated, sometimes appreciated, and, for the *clandestins*, never denounced.

Pre-war Oradour also had a thriving musical life, with a big brass and wind orchestra which gave a regular Saint Cecilia's day concert, plus a women's mandolin group and a hunting horn band.

There were amateur dramatics, dances, and of course a football club. Much of this activity ended in 1940 and revived partially and sometimes (especially the dances) in relative secrecy. All of this offers a striking contrast with the many twenty-first-century French villages that struggle to preserve jobs, basic services, and a sense of community. Was Oradour as idyllic as Pike suggests? There are allusions to a darker side: he writes of the inter-war *grande misère des campagnes*, of rising rural unemployment, or of the sufferings of Oradour's *pupilles de la nation*. But these are not followed up—a weakness of his pointillistic structure.

In purely factual terms, the coverage of the massacre itself adds little to the existing literature in French, though it is fuller than, for example, Hawes. It is also slightly less harrowing than one might expect, chiefly because much of the focus is on survivors surviving. Even so, there are enough horrific stories, most obviously that of Marguerite Rouffanche, the only survivor from the church: she escaped through a window in the apse, but not before seeing her eldest daughter shot dead and her youngest daughter and grandson fall through a collapsing floor into a raging inferno. But perhaps what Pike captures best is the sense of disbelief among the inhabitants, many of whom had never seen a German before, as Diekmann's men trained their guns on them.

The horror is amplified in the chapters devoted to the aftermath, when survivors enter the village after the departure of *Das Reich* and realise the full extent of the disaster. Here Pike pulls no punches. “Nobody survived from the christening gathering at the Milord household, nor the Roumy engagement party. Of the Hyvernaud family gathered to see the new Joyeux baby, everyone was killed. In the Villatte family, baby Christian and his mother Christiane were among the dead. Those children who had been looking forward to the celebration of the *fête-dieu* the following day by making bonnets, died. Large families were wiped out. Four-year-old Simone Poutaraud lost both of her parents and six siblings...None of the Vichy-installed mayoral team [headed by Émile Désourteaux] was spared...No Parisian families or children placed in the safety of the countryside survived. Nor did the refugees from Alsace-Lorraine or Spain who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Provenance, political belief, age or religion made no difference. The priests were killed, babies were killed, old men and women were killed. Parents who had come to the village to look for their children were killed. Cyclists just passing through on a Saturday ride were killed. Shoppers from Limoges, only in the village because they were desperate to find food, were murdered”—and on and on (p. 310). Pike conveys the human tragedy better than anyone else because he has built up a human picture of Oradour over the preceding 200 pages.

He can also irritate the reader, in several ways. A competent copyeditor might have corrected the use of (almost) the same sentence to open two different chapters. A brief account of an earlier destruction of Oradour, in 1596, is unhelpfully referenced as “Anecdote from a 1606 document written in the hand of Henri IV himself” (pp. 116, 354). Georges Guingouin's *maquis* is described as “the biggest and most *redoubted* in the region” (why not *dreaded* or *feared*?). And beyond his narrow field of research, his touch is unsure. For example, he states that by October 1940, refugees had arrived from the Paris region and “Avignon, Montpellier, Bordeaux, Nantes and elsewhere, hoping to escape, among other things, the regular bombings” (p. 90). In fact, none of these places was bombed before 1943, and until March 1942 Allied air raids were confined to the Channel ports and Brest.

Still, *Silent Village* remains not only a worthwhile account in English, accessible even to student pockets, but also an invaluable contribution to the literature, for two reasons. The first is the

dense portrait he draws of the living Oradour. If you stopped reading at page 200, you would still have a readable, humane requiem, not just for Oradour, but for a whole way of French village life of which only vestiges now remain. Second, because he comes as close as anyone who wasn't there to knowing Oradour, and its cast of characters, from the inside, he is also able to convey the state of mind of the victims as they went to their deaths: surely, this could not be happening, not here. Certainly, Pike explains the "reasons" for the massacre, but others have done so before; where he excels is in conveying a sense of it as beyond any normal human imagination or understanding.

NOTES

[1] Eighteen of the victims of the Oradour massacre were Spanish. Cf. Éva Léger, "Oradour-sur-Glane: On the emergence of a glocal site of memory in France", *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 3(2): <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2014.019>.

[2] Of eyewitness accounts, see notably Albert Valade, *Oradour 10 juin 1944. La page de catéchisme* (Neuvic: Éditions de la Veytizou, 1999), Michel Bauray, *Oradour-sur-Glane. Le récit d'un survivant* (Toulouse: Privat, 2018), and Robert Hébras, *Oradour. Le drame Heure par heure* (Honfleur: Les Chemins de la Mémoire, 1992).

[3] *Oradour, la politique et la justice* (Paris: Liana Levi, 2001), and *Oradour* (Saint-Paul: Lucien Souny, 2004).

[4] Henri Ménudier, "Les massacres d'Oradour et du pont Lasveyras (1944)", *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, Vol. 208, No. 2 (2014):147-169: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-allemande-d-aujourd-hui-2014-2-page-147.htm>

[5] Max Hastings, *Das Reich: The March of the 2nd SS Panzer Division through France, June 1944* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981).

[6] Douglas W. Hawes, *Oradour – the Final Verdict. The Anatomy and Aftermath of a Massacre* (Bloomington: Author House, 2007); *Oradour. Le verdict final* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

[7] Shannon L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[8] Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); *Oradour. Arrêt sur mémoire* (Paris: Perrin, 2007); Éva Léger, "Oradour-sur-Glane: On the emergence of a glocal site of memory in France", *Culture & History Digital Journal*, 3(2). Léger also edited, with Sandra Gibouin and Pascal Plas, the proceedings of a conference: *Oradour: 70 ans après* (Limoges: Les Monédières, 2016).

Andrew Knapp
University of Reading
a.f.knapp@reading.ac.uk

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