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Alice Kaplan, *The Interpreter*. (New York and London: Free Press, 2005). 256 pp. \$25.00 US (hbk). ISBN 0-743-25424-4.

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In recent years historians of modern France have turned increasingly outward, considering the nation's relations with the rest of the world. This new global vision of French history, addressing the histories of colonialism, immigration, and transnational cultural and diplomatic interchanges, has broadened our understanding of national history, and indeed of what it means to be French. Not surprisingly perhaps, Franco-American relations in particular have recent a great deal of attention from historians based in North America: issues ranging from foreign policy to race relations have prompted considerations of the similarities (and differences) between the two great republics.[1]

With *The Interpreter* Alice Kaplan brings a new perspective to the intertwined histories of France and the United States, one that builds upon her earlier work. Professor Kaplan is already well known for her eloquent studies of French collaboration during World War II; in both *French Lessons* and *The Collaborator* she gives an intimate view of the evils of fascism and anti-Semitism in occupied France. In this new work she turns her gaze to another form of bigotry: the racism of the American Army in liberated Brittany at the end of the war. As with her previous studies, Kaplan has shaped *The Interpreter* around both a determination to confront prejudice and a refusal to simplify it. The result is a book that not only illuminates an obscure corner of the history of World War II, but also forces us to reconsider some popular ideas about "the good war."

Above all, *The Interpreter* explores a simple problem. As Kaplan puts it, "The American Army executed 70 of its own soldiers in Europe between 1943 and 1946. Almost all of them were black, in an army that was overwhelmingly white." [2] As during the first world war, the American armies that liberated Europe from Nazism included African American soldiers, but segregated them into separate units and frequently treated them with distrust and contempt. [3] In both conflicts, US military authorities wanted to ensure in particular that contacts with white French civilians did not accustom black soldiers to a more egalitarian standard of treatment than that available or acceptable at home. Yet *The Interpreter* is not just a history of American military racism, but equally of the ways in which the French perceived and reacted to it. The central figure in this story is Louis Guilloux, a noted Breton writer and intellectual whose home city was occupied by American troops in August, 1944. Guilloux took part in the Breton resistance, and when the Americans arrived they hired him as an interpreter to help them deal with the local population. Guilloux, who had translated works of American literature into French, spent the immediate postwar years working closely with American soldiers, and in many cases coming to admire their dynamic culture. His novel, *OK Joe!*, portrays this fascination with American slang, friendliness, and views of the world in general. At the same time, the novel records the disturbing contrast between the treatment of white and black soldiers accused of crimes against the civilian population, one where whites were usually exonerated while blacks were usually condemned and imprisoned or executed.

In investigating this history, Alice Kaplan both analyzes U.S. military justice in liberated Brittany and also discusses Guilloux's reactions to it. She provides a detailed discussion of the cases of two American soldiers accused of crimes against the French. The first involved Private James Hendricks, an African American accused of murder and attempted rape. The defendant in the second was Captain George

Whittington, a white officer put on trial for shooting a French soldier in a bar. Whereas Hendricks was convicted and executed at the age of twenty-one, Whittington was acquitted and went on to enjoy a long and distinguished life. Kaplan takes both cases apart, showing how in many respects that against Whittington was far more straightforward than that against Hendricks (for example, whereas Hendricks had fired his gun blindly without intent to kill, Whittington had deliberately shot his victim). While clearly demonstrating the racism of the American Army, Kaplan also explores the complexities of postwar military justice, so that one is left with a story without clear-cut heroes or villains. Instead, aided by her capsule biographies of all the principal participants in these trials, both American and French, she gives us a nuanced portrait of two nations (and subcultures of each) entwined in a close yet uneasy embrace. This ambivalence and complexity characterizes the reactions of Louis Guilloux in particular. Loyal above all to his French compatriots, he also admired Americans and sympathized with the plight of black soldiers; he had in fact translated into French a seminal novel of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, which begins with a portrayal of U.S. military racism in Brest during World War I. Guilloux could thus see the perspectives of all sides, and in *OK Joe!* he records the events as he witnessed them, refusing to conclude or condemn. Guilloux wrote *OK Joe!* in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of both declining Franco-American relations and the civil rights and Black Power movements of the era. Kaplan uses his text to provide insights into the history of the memory of the era, tracking down relatives and descendants of participants in the postwar events, both French and American. Much recent writing on the history of memory has presented the paradox of discussions of transnational events (like great wars and the Holocaust) from a primarily national perspective. Here, Kaplan offers a model for how to approach memory on a global scale. The story ends as it began: a web of histories that intersect but are not resolved, let alone reconciled.

The Interpreter thus offers readers a very different history of wartime France and World War II in general. It certainly challenges traditional triumphalist narratives of the defeat of Nazism. At the same time, and perhaps more interestingly, it calls into question the ways in which historians have often conceptualized the war as an event in national histories. Historians of modern France have long viewed France's liberation in 1944 as less the rosy dawn of a new era and more a period of renewed (if transformed) national conflicts, and various overseas events (such as colonial conflicts and the onset of the Cold War) certainly played a central role in the troubled beginnings of the Fourth Republic. But Kaplan offers us something new, a history of events in France that illustrates the internecine conflicts of both the French and the Americans. This is global history brought down to a very small scale, and as such represents an exciting innovation in how we conceive of the relationships between local, national, and world history. Tellingly, her history of events in Brittany a half century ago winds up a few miles from her home in North Carolina, as she interviews James Hendricks' surviving relatives. With this study Kaplan makes the point that the history of France (as well as that of the United States) is not just crafted within its national boundaries.

Kaplan's focus on specific case studies and individuals gives her history of American military racism and the French reaction to it an immediacy and poignancy hard to achieve in more traditional histories. It also has its disadvantages, at times leaving the reader with a sense that more could be said about the problem. There is a curious disconnect between Kaplan's nicely nuanced study of these two trials and the brutal differences in the ways white and black GIs were treated. Near the end of the book she visits James Hendricks' grave, in a French cemetery reserved for the "dishonorable dead." Eighty of the ninety six soldiers buried there were black (including Louis Till, whose son, Emmett Till, was murdered in Mississippi ten years later). Such statistics make one wonder to what extent the mistreatment of black GIs was a matter of sheer racist brutality, and to wish for more overt expressions of that racism to make sense of them. Another question concerns the paucity of black voices about the situation in postwar Brittany. Hendricks did not testify at his trial, on the advice of his lawyers, and in general one gets little insight into how African American soldiers viewed their predicament. This silence also featured centrally in *OK Joe!*, so that it seems that only by going outside the immediate parameters of the trials

in Brittany can one gain access to the complete range of perspectives on these events. French witnesses and victims do speak at the trials, but it would be interesting to learn more about how villagers in Brittany regarded both black soldiers and the American Army in general. Finally, I would like to see Kaplan say more in general about the implications of her approach to history for our understandings of World War II, race and racism, and national identity as a whole.

In sum, *The Interpreter* is an experiment in microhistory whose scope is also global. It speaks to a wide range of interests, including military history, the African American diaspora, the history of memory, and most centrally the wartime history of France. It presents in the person of Louis Guilloux a fascinating and very sympathetic individual, an engaged provincial intellectual whose life and work addressed a number of issues central to the history of modern France. Most important of all, it unearths a somber history that has remained literally buried for over half a century in both France and America, a tribute to these soldiers that underscores the tragedy of World War II.

NOTES

[1] See the essay by Jan Goldstein, "The Future of French History in the United States: Unapocalyptic Thoughts for the New Millennium", *French Historical Studies*, 24/1 (Winter, 2001): 1-10. Among the many recent works considering the history of France from an international or colonial perspective, see Harvey Levenstein, *We'll Always Have Paris: American Tourists in France since 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: the Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: the National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Irwin Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

[2] Cited on the front of the book jacket.

[3] There now exists a substantial historical literature on the history of black Americans in France. See Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: African American Writers in France* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Arthur E. Barbeau and Henri Florette, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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