

War and Liberation in France: Living with the Liberators

Review Number:

430

Publish date:

Monday, 1 November, 2004

Author:

Hilary Footitt

ISBN:

415250161X

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£47.50

Pages:

237pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Lynne Taylor

When one thinks of the Liberation of France after World War II, one generally thinks of those weeks as ones of a transition from German control through a short, if intense period of anarchy and chaos to the establishment of centralised control by a new, if provisional, French government, with law and order soon firmly re-established by the new French authorities. In fact, as Hilary Footitt has so ably demonstrated in *War and Liberation in France*, that version of the story of the transition is misleading and the smoothness of it was by no means a sure thing. Even as the Americans landed in Normandy, it was not certain exactly what the post-war administration would look like, or whether it would even necessarily be French, let alone led by Charles de Gaulle. Those weeks and months following the Normandy landings, as the Germans were pushed back into their own country, were marked by considerable administrative confusion and improvisation at the local level, with important implications for both the local French population and the Americans.

Complicating the story was the presence of the Allied forces, who effectively, if temporarily, acted as another occupation force, while they drove back the German forces. It meant that the relationship between the liberated and the liberators was a problematic one, as the French were torn between gratitude for their escape and frustration with the Americans' seizure of control. Footitt's book explores this tension-ridden relationship and its implications for the French, as they sought to reassert their national identity and regain their national dignity.

It is well known that there was little love lost between President Roosevelt of the United States and Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces and head of the external French resistance. Each deeply distrusted the other. However, it is less well known the depths to which their enmity shaped the plans for the post-Liberation period in France. Roosevelt had always insisted that, having recognised the Vichy regime as the legitimate French government, he could hardly offer recognition to any other claimant until after France

was liberated and the French had been able to express freely their own opinion about who they wished to govern them. For this reason, he refused to consider recognising de Gaulle's organisation as the successor to Vichy until after Liberation. Indeed, Roosevelt stubbornly refused even to decide on what the nature of the future administration would be or when the liberators would transfer control to an independent French government until after France was liberated. This ran counter to the advice of many who surrounded him, as well as the advice of Winston Churchill, all of whom were convinced that de Gaulle was the only viable alternative. Thus, when the Americans arrived in France in June 1944, they did so without any kind of direction or model for post-liberation administration. Instead, the forces in the field were instructed to improvise – pragmatism and empiricism ruled. The result was a very diverse Liberation experience, Footitt argues, shaped by the nature of the immediate circumstances of the specific military situation, the balance of fighting forces and the needs of the Allied forces.

By exploring the Liberation experience in five different parts of France (Normandy, Cherbourg, the south (focusing on Marseille), the Pyrénées-Orientales and Reims), Footitt dramatically illustrates the variety of experiences. In Normandy, the Americans, once they had landed and pushed the Germans back, moved through the region swiftly. Their chief impact on that region was the extensive physical devastation resulting from heavy fighting. But the Allied presence was actually very fleeting, as the troops quickly pushed through. Footitt describes the interaction between the American forces and the locals as distant and unequal – the French taking a rather passive role in their liberation; the Americans sympathetic, but also frustrated with the French who just seemed to create logistical problems for troops keen to move on.

Cherbourg, a key port on the English Channel, destined to be a major entry point for American supplies and troops, experienced liberation very differently. After a fierce battle, which reduced much of the city to ruins, the Americans took control, with the primary objective of restoring the port and facilitating the easy movement of supplies and troops off their ships and to the front lines. Thus, rather than moving on, the Americans settled in for the foreseeable future. For the Cherbourgeois, this meant that their city, while liberated from the Germans, had been re-occupied – this time by the Americans. And like the Germans, the Americans' objectives for Cherbourg did not necessarily match those of the French, who wished to return to their homes and businesses and begin the process of rebuilding. Instead, they found themselves under a foreign occupation again, subject to the needs of the American forces for housing, office space, power and fuel, food, a functioning harbour and a clear run to the front lines. Inevitably, the tensions between the local population and the Americans mounted.

The story was somewhat similar in Marseille, except that the Americans arrived to discover that much of the work of liberation had already been accomplished by the local Resistance, and that an effective and articulate left-wing French administration, Resistance-based, had already been put in place. Initially, this worked well, and the Americans and the French administration cooperated effectively. However, Marseille's formidable port was key to the Allied war effort and the American presence would be considerable and sustained. Compounding this was the American decision to use the coastal area for a large "rest and relaxation" area for troops on leave. Although initially good, relations soon became strained, as they had in Cherbourg. In this case, however, the French administration was able to protest more effectively than in Cherbourg, where the local administration was much weaker.

The Pyrénées-Orientales was a region of little concern to the Americans, being tucked up against the Pyrenees and a long way from the fighting. Here, the needs of the Americans did not figure nearly as strongly as the threat from Franco's Spain and the presence of a large number of Spanish Republican refugees, who had played an important role in the local Resistance and in the region's liberation. The Republicans hoped to parlay the goodwill earned by fighting for France into support for carrying the war against fascism into Franco's Spain, even going so far as to plan an invasion across the border. It was a vain hope as, instead, Paris stabilised relations with Franco and the border with Spain. With the support of the British and French, Spanish Republicans in the Pyrénées-Orientales ultimately found themselves once again marginalised and isolated, their contributions to France's liberation forgotten.

The final case study, Reims, was an extreme example of what happened in Cherbourg and in Marseille.

Here, the Americans established their headquarters for SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) and the city became the Allied Command's military forward base. So the department and the city became the epicentre for the concentration of an enormous number of Allied, mostly American, troops and equipment. It remained so even after the war had ended, used as a staging area for the re-deployment of troops. When the Americans first arrived, they had been welcomed enthusiastically, but the sheer size of the American forces and the all-consuming needs of the war machine stretched the city's and the department's physical infrastructure, and the population's goodwill, to breaking point. Friction between troops and the local population was soon manifested in a growing number of physical clashes. By mid-1945, the hostility on both sides was thick, and the tensions became increasingly politicised.

In each case, Footitt argues, local circumstances shaped the relationship between liberated and liberators, which is quite true. However, Footitt also tacitly acknowledges that there were certain common elements to the story of the French-Allied relationship at the time of Liberation which, when put in the various local contexts, resulted in different experiences. This is not a contradiction. Perhaps a more effective way of explaining it might be that there was a set of commonalities to the liberation experience across France which gave rise to different liberation experiences because of the way in which they interacted with local circumstances. It is an important, if nuanced, observation.

First, the French found themselves in the awkward position of ostensibly playing host to guests (the Americans) they had been forced to invite into their home (an analogy Footitt uses effectively). Yet, the dynamics were not those of the usual host-guest relationship, where the guest is dependent upon the host and the host is the dominant force in the relationship. In this case, while the hosts (the French) had the *de jure* control of the 'space' (the resources and the infrastructure belonged to the French), the guests (the Americans) had *de facto* control of it. Nothing required the Americans to concern themselves with French wants or needs other than a sense of moral obligation. The French found themselves in a rather ambivalent position: once invited in, their guests could hardly be thrown out. Although they needed the Americans' help and aid, they resented being put in the position of supplicant. No matter what corner of France they came from, the French expected that Liberation would mean an opportunity to re-establish their national identity, affirm their national sovereignty and reconstruct a viable nation-state, beginning with their own locales. They were desperate to rebuild and restart their lives, but unable to begin without reclaiming the physical space that they had lost to the Germans, something denied them in many instances by the Americans' commandeering of that same space.

The Americans, on the other hand, had very different objectives which clashed with those of the French in at least some parts of the country. For the Americans, the focus was on the war with and in Germany. France quickly became a mere staging-post, a means to an end, rather than the end result. The Americans sought to secure territory, and then to occupy enough of that territory to ensure the successful prosecution of the war, and then they intended to move on. There was no interest in being involved in the cultural or social reconstruction of France, only in the physical reconstruction necessary to support the war effort. Those parts of France that were not essential to military progress were ignored by the Americans, resulting in a Liberation experience in which the Americans played only a fleeting role. In territory essential to the war effort, the Americans established a massive, dominating presence which distorted, and sometimes crushed, French efforts to rebuild according to French needs.

The common theme, then, to these case studies is the clash of two cultures, two solitudes – French and American. In those parts of the country where the two did not meet (and they really did not in Normandy), there was no opportunity for the differences to manifest themselves. On the other hand, in those places where the French and the Americans were forced to cohabit, even in Marseille where there was perhaps the most interest in and sympathy for the Americans' technological and logistical prowess, what is striking is how little each understood the other, and how little they wanted to understand the other. Instead, the French retreated into bitter disillusionment, and the Americans into baffled frustration and impatience with French ingratitude. In each case, the one dismissed the other as an ignorant foreigner who did not appreciate what the other had to offer.

A final concern is the manner in which 'Allies' is elided with 'Americans' in this work. If we are talking about a clash of cultures, surely the fact that there were British and Canadian forces involved in the liberation of France is a factor that should be taken into account. Footitt seems to use the words, 'Allies' and 'Americans' interchangeably and, for all practical purposes, has focused on the American forces' interaction with the French. For this reason, 'Americans', rather than 'Allies' has been used in this review. It would be interesting to know if the Liberation experience differed according to the nationality of the liberating force, as well.

Comparative studies like this one have the weakness of not having the space to provide the reader with the details of a particular region's liberation experience. However it has the important strength of highlighting differences and reinforcing commonalities between the different regions' liberations, as well as helping to overcome the danger of a single case study and the question of its representativeness. As such, *War and Liberation in France* has made an important contribution to our understanding of this period in French history.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/430#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2394>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>