Eleven Days in August: The Liberation of Paris in 1944

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For France, 2014 marks not just the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, but the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy and the liberation of Paris after four years of Nazi occupation. Yet while the centenary of the First World War has been marked by consensus among historians and the wider community, the Second World War remains a subject of contestation.

Matthew Cobb’s *Eleven Days in August* largely circumvents the controversy by focusing not on the politics of the occupation, collaboration and resistance, but upon the experiences of ordinary Parisians in the days leading up to the liberation of the French capital. Where more recent historical research has sought to shift the focus to other areas of the country and to the French colonial empire, Cobb puts forward a case for the significance of the capital as a political symbol. Cobb argues that the struggle for Paris was a three-way battle for the future of France, between the allies, the Free French and the resistance, each having their own vision for the future. The liberation of Paris therefore played a decisive role in determining the shape of post-war France.

The book is a narrative history, and as such, its strength rests heavily on the story and the available material. Fortunately, Cobb has rich pickings, especially from the many first-hand accounts by participants and witnesses. Where the academic historian writing for an academic audience might mine these accounts for insights into the political machinations, military developments or social shifts, Cobb’s focus is on telling the story in a way that engages and enlightens the reader. Cobb writes with a compelling fluency and an eye for vivid detail. In one of many memorable descriptions, Cobb describes the so-called ‘passive collaborators’ as
Cobb skilfully weaves together unconnected events happening simultaneously across the city, drawing upon a wide range of accounts. The sudden jumps and interruptions in the narrative give a sense of the complexity of the situation and how the path to liberation in August 1944 was far from inevitable and without immense risks. Despite resistance activities picking up pace in mid-August 1944, in some parts of the city, the deportation of the Jews and members of the resistance captured by the Gestapo continued.

One of the key myths about the liberation, which still holds sway in public memories and in some historical works, is that General von Choltitz, the military commander of occupied Paris, ‘saved’ the city from destruction by the Nazis. After the war, von Choltitz claimed that he did not destroy Paris, but did not mention that he did not have the means to do so even if he had wished to. His version of events got international attention in the 1965 book *Is Paris Burning?* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, and in the film of the same name a year later. Cobb demolishes this suggestion, pointing out that Hitler chose von Choltitz to defend Paris precisely because he trusted him to carry out orders. Indeed, he had proven himself reliable when he implemented orders to liquidate the Jews in Crimea between 1941 and 1942.

As the impetus of the liberation built and the German occupiers started to withdraw from the capital, the Vichy government, which had ruled France for four years, began to fade into distant irrelevancy. While *Eleven Days in August* is about the liberation rather than Vichy’s policy of collaborating with Nazi Germany, Cobb takes an unambiguous stance on Marshal Pétain, the head of the Vichy regime. In his denunciation of the liberation of Paris, Cobb sees Pétain as being on the side of Germany. Pétain was indeed a keen proponent of collaboration, but such an unambiguous characterisation of his position without any qualifying background risks presenting the complexities of the period in rather binary terms. While most historians no longer subscribe to the myth that Pétain acted as a ‘shield’ against the worst excesses of the Nazi occupation while General de Gaulle was the ‘sword’ combatting it, recent studies have highlighted how key figures within the Vichy government retained their hostility towards Germany and remained determined to defend French sovereignty against it. (1)

Keeping a lid on the increasingly impatient and fractious resistance in Paris was a cause of considerable concern in the days leading up to the arrival of the allied forces. One of the biggest fears for resistance leaders was that premature action by Parisian insurgents might trigger the same bloody repression as the Warsaw uprising. For de Gaulle, it was also a critically important political matter. Seeking to prevent an uprising outside his political control was not just a manifestation of de Gaulle’s imperious character, but was driven by a determination that the liberation of Paris should not be hijacked by Communists seeking a political and social revolution. The Communist Francs-tireurs et partisans (FTP) were increasingly frustrated at de Gaulle’s orders to await the arrival of the allies, having issued a call to arms in early August 1944. For all de Gaulle’s fears, however, Cobb argues that the FTP were not a revolutionary threat; they accepted the leadership of de Gaulle, had insufficient weapons to act alone and did not have the support of the majority of Parisians.

Cobb argues that the collapse of the German occupation of France began in earnest not with the D-Day landings in Normandy but with the allied landings in Provence on 15 August. For all the criticism that might be levelled at de Gaulle’s leadership style and policies, he undoubtedly exerted significant pressure on the allied military leadership. As late as 16 August, the allies still had no plans to liberate Paris, intending instead to circumvent the city which they considered to have no strategic value. It was not merely the political symbolism of the capital that made its liberation so important but the mounting dangers of delaying action. Each day that passed was another day that the resistance leaders had to hold off an insurrection. Yet as the mobilisation of men into the Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur (FFI) and the militias stepped up, so did the repression. 42 young members of the resistance were captured and murdered by the Gestapo, including 34 in the Bois de Boulogne.

The lack of weapons held by the resistance meant that the liberation of Paris remained inextricably bound up with the progress of the allies on the western front. By the night of 17 August, the German administration
had abandoned the city, taking anti-aircraft guns with them. German forces had been pushed back from the north-east of France, leaving Paris at the front line of the fighting. Yet despite the German army deciding not to defend Paris, von Choltitz maintained a tough stance, ordering that if his men were fired upon, they would kill all the residents in the area of the attack.

While the resistance leadership in Paris argued over politics, they found themselves out of touch not just with the allies but with their own rank and file as well. As the Comité Parisien de la Libération and the Conseil National de la Résistance (CNR) were meeting to discuss when to launch an insurrection, they saw a tricolour flag being raised over the Ministry of Education. Events had, quite simply, overtaken them. Yet disagreements within the resistance mattered: any division or appearance of division risked tipping France towards a civil war and risked the allies imposing a humiliating allied military government (AMGOT) on France. When de Gaulle arrived in France on 20 August, Eisenhower was still insisting that the allies bypass Paris to avoid unnecessary damage and deaths. But de Gaulle maintained that the resistance could not simply be left to fight alone.

Despite the allies remaining non-committal about entering Paris, on the night of 22 August, the resistance broadcast an appeal for insurrection. The following day, Hitler ordered Choltitz not to surrender Paris unless it had been destroyed. Wild rumours abounded that German bombs had been hidden across the city, including in the sewers. Yet as Choltitz held the telephone receiver out of the window so that his superior officers in Germany could hear the bells sounding the liberation, he was given no orders to defend it. In reality, none of the Germans, including Hitler, thought that Paris was so strategically significant that it had to be destroyed.

Throughout the war, de Gaulle had maintained that the Vichy government held no legitimacy and that he and the Free French were the only true representations of France. De Gaulle therefore refused to follow historical tradition and make a declaration of the Republic from the Hôtel de Ville, maintaining that it had never ceased to exist. The domineering demeanour that de Gaulle had used to great effect politically transferred less graciously to his first encounters with the men and women whose sacrifices had helped him to take power. He alone decided to hold a triumphant march through the ecstatic Parisian crowds. And while he may have been in modest dress uniform without any medals, he orchestrated the event to cement his leadership. His now famous speech of 25 August not only downplayed the role of the allies, but failed to acknowledge the contribution of the resistance to the liberation of Paris as well. In a further blow to the resistance leaders, shortly afterwards, de Gaulle informed the secretary-generals who had been running government departments since the liberation that they would not be part of the new government. Seeking to demonstrate the legitimacy of his government to the allies, de Gaulle wanted to present an image of continuity, as if the Vichy regime had never existed.

Ultimately, Cobb justifies his approach by arguing that the liberation was about ordinary Parisians who rose up against the German occupiers and helped create the circumstances that allowed the allies to pursue their policy of going around Paris. Parisians did not liberate the city single-handedly, Cobb argues, but their courage and sacrifice transformed the situation. Knowing that the allies were advancing gave them the confidence to act. But theirs was more than a military victory: Cobb finishes by quoting the British Government wartime publication Cadran: ‘by liberating themselves, the Parisians showed the world that the soul of a people is invincible’ (p. 367).

In contrast to Cobb’s approach, recent research has tended to move away from the events that led up to the liberation of Paris. A conference hosted by the Institut Français in London to mark the 70th anniversary of the liberation of France included contributions from scholars seeking to shift the focus towards the less familiar role played by the French colonial empire and the landings in southern France in August 1944. Some books have situated the liberation in the context of the political changes that were to shape postwar France. Others have focused upon the politics of the liberation and the complex divisions within the Provisional Government and resistance leadership. Many military histories of the liberation of France focus...
upon the allied advance from Normandy, ending with the liberation of Paris, or only dealing with it in passing as allied forces advanced towards Germany. In Cobb’s evocation of the complex narrative of events and actors, however, we might perhaps find something of the plurality of agencies and multilinearity described by Rod Kedward and Nancy Wood.

The fact that Cobb is not an academic historian, but a Professor of Zoology at the University of Manchester perhaps gives his writing greater freedom and his genuine fascination with the subject is evident throughout. While the book is aimed at a general audience, Cobb has approached his subject with academic rigour. It is meticulously researched, engaging with a range of French, British and American archival sources, as well as numerous first-hand accounts and secondary works. The book does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the liberation of Paris, and in this sense, the narrative needs to be set into the wider context of the history of the resistance, the occupation of Paris and the process by which de Gaulle became the head of the French Provisional Government. Yet Cobb’s book breathes new life into a familiar episode in France’s history, evoking the tragedy, chaos and extraordinary challenges faced by the people of a city so profoundly shaped by its tumultuous past.

Notes


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