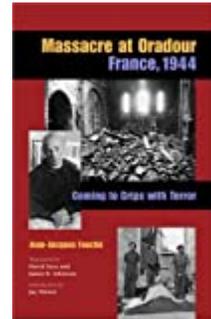




Jean-Jacques Fouché. *Massacre at Oradour, France, 1944: Coming to Grips with Terror*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. xvii + 269 pp. \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87580-601-3.



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An Atrocity Out of Place?

On the morning of June 10, 1944, elements of the Second Armored Waffen SS division “Das Reich,” under the command of Colonel Otto Weidinger, converged on the village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Limousin region of west central France. Prompted by the disappearance and subsequent execution of an SS battalion commander by resistance forces two days earlier in a nearby town, the soldiers of the division, which included Alsatian recruits, began rounding up the inhabitants of the village. They separated the male inhabitants from the women and children, who were placed in the village church. They then systematically murdered most of the villagers, setting fire to the church and burning alive most of those inside. A total of 642 people died in the massacre. In the intervening years, the destruction of Oradour has assumed a central place in the imagery of horror from the Second World War, but its iconic status has tended to conceal some of the unusual circumstances of the crime. At the same time, the designation of the victims as martyrs has effaced their individual identity and clouded the context of the massacre.

A dry recitation of “the facts” does little justice to the events of that day at Oradour, but Jean-Jacques Fouché’s excellent study, originally published in France in 2001, delves beneath the surface of the “martyred village” and examines the background of those events, addressing the causes of the massacre as well as the subsequent growth of the legend of Oradour. As first director of the Centre de la Mémoire d’Oradour, Fouché had access to a wide array of sources, many of them unavailable to previous investigators of the massacre. His use of French, German, and English materials has resulted in a richly documented account of the massacre and the formidable mythologies that developed around the “martyred village” from the first days following its tragic destruction. The result is a fascinating analysis of war cultures, the group psychology of the Waffen SS, and the competing political narratives of wartime and postwar France.

Among the most striking of Fouché’s arguments is that the massacre at Oradour was an “eastern” atrocity committed in occupied France. Though German rule in

France was brutal, punctuated by mass deportations, collective punishments, and violent reprisals for resistance activity, the level of violence was generally far lower than in the occupied territories of the east. The destruction of Oradour marked a departure from the rule, and the key to this anomaly lay in the wartime deployment of the *Das Reich* division. Using sources pertaining to the division's wartime service from the Milit r-geschichtliches Forschungsamt and the records of the German military command in France at the Archives Nationales, Fouch  effectively reconstructs *Das Reich's* path to Oradour. Engaged in the invasion of Russia from the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, the division was thoroughly imbued by its officers with the virulent anti-Semitic and anti-communist propaganda of the Nazi regime, and took part in numerous episodes of terror in the occupied Soviet Union. The unit also suffered heavy casualties in the battle for Moscow and the subsequent campaigns of 1942-1943. Transferred to France in early 1944, the remnants of the division were joined by new recruits, including Alsatians. Brutalized by the war in the east, lacking sufficient numbers of officers, and short of equipment, the division was in deplorable shape and facing an upsurge in resistance activity in the Massif Central. It was an unfortunate twist of fate that brought the inhabitants of Oradour into contact with a group of hardened killers, determined to use arbitrary terror to stifle resistance as the allied invasion of France got under way.

Fouch  also dissects the legend of Oradour as martyred village, a kind of idyllic microcosm of France exposed to the horrors of war. Oradour, like countless other French villages and towns, had its share of political divisions, in this case among the Socialists, who controlled the town government, the Communists, and conserva-

tives. While the town was not noted for links to the resistance, there was little evidence of enthusiasm for Vichy either—for example, the local branch of the French Legion of Veterans and Volunteers of the National Revolution was relatively inactive. In addition to the native inhabitants, there were refugees from the Spanish Civil War, as well as from other areas of occupied France, as well as a few Jews of various nationalities. In short, Oradour was neither more nor less representative than other French villages, with their distinctions based on social class, political parties, and private quarrels. And yet, due to the rivalry between Vichy and the Resistance, and the post-war emergence of a French version of *Vergangenheitsbew ltigung*, the rough edges of complex reality were made smooth, just as the ruins of Oradour itself were periodically “restored” to protect them from the effects of the elements.

Fouch 's book is a significant contribution to the literature on Oradour. The translation by David Sices and James B. Atkinson is excellent. As Jay Winter points out in his introduction, it should be read in conjunction with Sarah Farmer's book on history and memory at Oradour.[1] The book is well suited for use in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses on the Second World War, modern France, and history and memory. While there is a useful glossary of abbreviations and foreign terms, some familiarity with the background of Vichy France would help the reader put Fouch 's work in context.

Note

[1]. Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

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