



**William I. Hitchcock.** *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe.* New York: Free Press, 2008. vii + 427 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7432-7381-7.

**Reviewed by** Laura J. Hilton (Department of History, Muskingum College)

**Published on** H-German (May, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Liberation Is Also Hell

In the context of World War II, popular perception of “liberation” is that of a triumph, the freeing of peoples and places from the clutches of the Nazis. Within traditional historiography, discussion of liberation has focused mainly on the D-Day invasion, key battles in the Allied advances eastward and westward into Germany, and the exposure of concentration, prisoner-of-war, and extermination camps across Europe. However, a new conception of liberation is emerging in literature on the Second World War, one that seeks to move beyond liberation as a moment in time to a complex process, involving political, military, and social restructuring. William Hitchcock accommodates his latest work—which heavily foregrounds eyewitness and contemporary accounts—to this emerging literature, as he focuses on the individual and regional impact of military liberation, the grueling impact of the fighting on civilian populations, the relief efforts mounted immediately following conflict, and the impact of liberation on those the military freed from confinement in camps, particularly Jews. While this work adds depth to the historical understanding of liberation

by deluging the reader with contemporary accounts of the process, its main argument is muted, beyond a general presentation of the violence and destructiveness of the process itself.

The book is divided into four sections. The first part focuses on the process of liberation of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands by the western Allies. The second segment examines the Soviet advance westward into Germany, the planning for Germany’s occupation, and the first months of the process of occupation. The next two chapters center on relief efforts, most notably those conducted by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Rather than focusing solely on Germany, Hitchcock begins with the organization’s work in Egypt, Greece, and Italy before shifting focus to central Europe. The survivors of concentration and extermination camps—particularly the Jewish population—are the focus of the final section.

In flipping liberation on its head, as it were, Hitchcock painstakingly demonstrates several important themes

that have been neglected in much of the historical literature, particularly the scholarship that focuses on the military aspects of liberation. First, the military conflict of liberation was aimed at winning the war, and often civilians were caught up in its violence and suffered terribly. Second, the relationship between liberators and the liberated was not all flowers and adoration, as is often suggested. Rather, on all fronts, armed forces used their power to inflict damage upon civilian property and bodies. Third, military victory over the Third Reich did not bring freedom and peace to many within Europe. Soviet troops controlled eastern Europeans and the demands of Joseph Stalin at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam took aim in particular at Polish sovereignty and territory. Millions of Germans were expelled from their homes in Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, and Czechoslovakia and were caught in the advances of the Soviet military. Fourth, as Hitchcock demonstrates, the population to be occupied rather than liberated, the Germans themselves, was quickly rehabilitated, and the focus of the United States and Great Britain within their zones was on rebuilding rather than punishing. Finally, the survivors of Nazi persecution, particularly Jews, were still not free at war's end. They remained in camps for years following the war, as displaced persons.

The book's greatest strength is to substantiate the author's argument about the violence and suffering endemic to the process of liberation with specific and graphic examples. Following a brief explanation of the D-Day invasions, Hitchcock explains the toll that the battles southward toward Paris took on the regions of Normandy and Calvados. Pounded by aerial assaults, cities such as Caen and many smaller villages were destroyed and their civilian populations were devastated by the loss of life, lodging, food, and safety. These regions were not liberated overnight, and often Allied and German troops fought over the same territory repeatedly, further displacing an already ravaged population. In addition, the Germans continued to exact harsh reprisals against civilians. When liberation came, said one Benedictine sister, "there ha[d] been too much suffering" to experience joy (p. 36). The liberation of Belgium took months, during which its civilian population suffered death and deprivation. In addition, as Hitchcock elucidates, the occupation forces, both Allied and German, took food, shelter, and goods from—and had sexual relations with—civilians, exploitative acts that caused a strained relationship. In the Netherlands, one of the last regions to surrender, the combination of the Allied military's decision to focus all resources on winning the war and the Germans' stub-

born refusal to yield the territory resulted in death from starvation for at least sixteen thousand Dutch citizens. Reduced to eating tulip bulbs and sugar beets, the survivors were confronted with food rations that dropped to four hundred calories a day. By April 1945, no food could be had. Dealing similarly with the Red Army's liberation activities, Hitchcock documents the mass rapes and violence in the East with bleak realism. Each account is more horrific than the last. In the chapter about Allied liberation of concentration camps, Hitchcock paints a more complex picture of the interaction between liberated and liberators than usual. Soldiers, journalists, and other observers often had strong, visceral reactions, many of them negative, to the "walking skeletons" in striped uniforms. He weaves their story into a larger discussion about how the captives sought to rebuild their identities and lives and grappled with the effects of the inhumanity that surrounded them for so long.

If any interpretive weakness emerges from the book, it relates to this flood of primary-source reports. The work draws upon a very strong base of individual accounts and memories. In addition to the accounts of soldiers and statesmen, Hitchcock includes stories of civilians from all walks of life to illustrate his larger themes. He draws materials from nineteen archives, in Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States, to paint a multifaceted, complex picture of reconstruction. He adds contemporary newspaper accounts, mindful of both self-censoring and official censorship during wartime, from twenty-five different publications and a myriad of official histories and published memoirs and autobiographies. Frequently, this huge amount of material overwhelms the reader with awareness of violence and suffering and masks the author's larger points. This result stems, in part, from the methodological approach to the topic. As Hitchcock explains in his preface, the aim of the work is to examine liberation from the ground up, to give a historical voice to the liberated, rather than to focus on the process from the viewpoint of the liberators. He reminds readers that the liberating armies did not exist in a vacuum, acting upon a passive land and its inhabitants. Rather, civilians were an active part of the larger process.

All of this material is buttressed by secondary sources, although by sweeping from west to east and back to the center through one of the most studied periods of the twentieth century, Hitchcock makes his secondary-source base broader than it is deep. For instance, in his chapter on the Soviet advance across Poland and into Germany, he neglects the works of Keith Sword

and Jan Gross in his examination of the Soviet conquest of Poland and the writings of Philipp Ther and others in his description of German expellees.[1] His source base for the chapters dealing with Jewish DPs lacks important German scholarship on the subject, most notably the works of Angelika K nigseder, Julianne Wetzel, and Michael Brenner.[2] The several chapters that focus on the reconstruction of Germany and the experiences of DPs there do so without examination of any scholarly works in German. Admittedly, only the rare Europeanist reads all of the languages of the areas that his/her work examines.

Written in the early 2000s, this work stands as a testament to the fact that war is dirty, brutal, and violent for all whose lives it touches. It goes a long way toward dispelling myths about war as heroic, starting with a very difficult challenge: changing the public and historical conception of the Second World War as the “good war,” fought, in the American mindset, by the “greatest generation.” Hitchcock is not arguing against war in and of itself; rather, he wants people to be mindful of its short- and long-term impacts, upon the minds and on the

bodies of those who do the fighting as well as upon the civilians whose lives are irrevocably changed by it. The book makes clear that when war is seen or depicted in an illusory, overly heroic fashion, the lack of the complete picture does a disservice to all concerned.

#### Notes

[1]. Keith Sword, *Deportation and Exile, Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939-1948* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Jan Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak, eds., *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

[2]. Angelika K nigseder, *Flucht nach Berlin: J dische Displaced Persons, 1945-1948* (Berlin: Metropol, 1998); Angelika K nigseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Lebensmut im Wartesaal: Die J dischen DPs im Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995); Michael Brenner, *Nach dem Holocaust: Juden in Deutschland, 1945-1950* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Laura J. Hilton. Review of Hitchcock, William I., *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24687>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.