Reader on Fuller, 'After D-Day: The U.S. Army Encounters the French'

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Robert Lynn Fuller has written a fascinating book about D-Day and the Allies' fight to remove the Nazis from France. However, rather than discussing battles, tactics, strategy, or operations, he looks at the French populace itself and their interaction with Allied soldiers, primarily American GIs. The book is, in part, a history of the US Army's Civil Affairs unit but also a broader study of the army's interaction with the French during and immediately after the war. Fuller does an excellent job presenting the successes and difficulties that the army contended with when taking control of French towns and civilian life from the Germans. It is a fresh way of viewing the experiences of those involved in a war beyond from just the perspective of combat. He demonstrates how the residents of the areas that were targets of aerial bombardment, artillery, and infantry fighting not only survived the experience but also began to rebuild their lives and towns. While most people, whether historians or casual readers, have read military histories of D-Day and the end of the Second World War, many have not examined this side of the conflict. As Fuller writes, his book "inserts the French population back into the history of the liberation" (p. 7).

After D-Day is a cultural and social history of French and American interaction. The plans for how to successfully assume normal civilian governmental affairs (such as providing power, water, currency, food, and open and secure markets) was surely a daunting task. Fuller documents not only how these goals were accomplished but also how French authorities viewed, supported, and obstructed these efforts for a multitude of personal and political reasons that were, at times, confounding for those involved. Yet Fuller's work is broader than simply a review of the Civil Affairs' interactions with the civilian populace. He also discusses the interactions at the political level between Charles de Gaulle and Dwight D. Eisenhower as well as between those lower down the chain of command. Fuller does not limit himself strictly to official, government, or military bodies; he also examines the interactions and dealings with the Resistance, the French Forces of the Interior (FFI). Furthermore, he includes both urban and rural people's experiences, from someone in a small Norman village to someone from metropolitan Paris. In all of these circumstances, cultural differences, goals, and strategies were viewed differently by the participants, sometimes causing problems among them that lasted through the conclusion of the war.

Geographically, Fuller primarily focuses on northern France, from Normandy to Alsace-Lorraine. However, in his discussion of the FFI he does include activities in the South of France. He did not
limit his research strictly to the bigger national archives of France, Britain, or the United States or their armies, although he obviously used them. He supplemented these sources with research in a number of smaller regional French archives. Specifically, he conducted research in the French towns of Troyes, Marseille, Nancy, Auxerre, and Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. He notes that he would have also accessed the records in Saint-Lô, which contained numerous American records, had they not been lost in fire. Fuller's efforts allow him to provide a view of events from a leadership level as well as an intriguing view from the farmer or merchant on the ground. It is this latter view that was personally enlightening and refreshing to see.

While I find Fuller's work extremely interesting, I encountered a few issues while reading. They are not monumental nor do they dilute the overall scholarship of the book but occasionally made reading somewhat difficult. First there are some factual mistakes, such as the date of death of Admiral François Darlan (p. 28). He died on Christmas Eve 1942, not 1944. Also, the paragraphs were inordinately long at times, some reaching a page and a half (for example, pp. 214-16). The inclusion of multiple points in a paragraph of such length sometimes makes it difficult to follow the argument. Finally, for those like me who are not overly familiar with the subtleties of French geography, a few more maps would have been beneficial.

Nevertheless, Fuller has written an outstanding book that helps to expand on a lesser examined aspect of the war in France during 1944-45. After D-Day is certainly a welcome addition to the scholarship.


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