

# The Dark Side of Liberation

May 20, 2013

The soldiers who landed in Normandy on D-Day were greeted as liberators, but by the time American G.I.'s were headed back home in late 1945, many French citizens viewed them in a very different light.

In the port city of Le Havre, the mayor was bombarded with letters from angry residents complaining about drunkenness, jeep accidents, sexual assault — “a regime of terror,” as one put it, “imposed by bandits in uniform.”

This isn't the “greatest generation” as it has come to be depicted in popular histories. But in “What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American G.I. in World War II France,” the historian Mary Louise Roberts draws on French archives, American military records, wartime propaganda and other sources to advance a provocative argument: The liberation of France was “sold” to soldiers not as a battle for freedom but as an erotic adventure among oversexed Frenchwomen, stirring up a “tsunami of male lust” that a battered and mistrustful population often saw as a second assault on its sovereignty and dignity.

“I could not believe what I was reading,” Ms. Roberts, a professor of French history at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, recalled of the moment she came across the citizen complaints in an obscure archive in Le Havre. “I

took out my little camera and began photographing the pages. I did not go to the bathroom for eight hours."

"What Soldiers Do," to be officially published next month by the University of Chicago Press, arrives just as sexual misbehavior inside the military is high on the national agenda, thanks to a recent Pentagon [report](#) estimating that some 26,000 service members had been sexually assaulted in 2012, more than a one-third increase since 2010.

While Ms. Roberts's arguments may be a hard sell to readers used to more purely heroic narratives, her book is winning praise from some scholarly colleagues."Our culture has embalmed World War II as 'the good war,' and we don't revisit the corpse very often," said David M. Kennedy, a historian at Stanford University and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "[Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945](#)."

"What Soldiers Do," he added, is "a breath of fresh air," providing less of an "aha" than, as he put it, an "of course."

Mary Louise Roberts has written "What Soldiers Do," a book about sexual assaults by Americans fighting in France. Narayan Mahon for The New York Times

Ms. Roberts, whose parents met in 1944 when her father was training as a naval officer, emphasizes that American soldiers' heroism and sacrifice were very real, and inspired genuine gratitude. But French sources, she argues, also reveal deep ambivalence on the part of the liberated.

"Struggles between American and French officials over sex," she writes, "rekindled the unresolved question of who exactly was in charge."

Sex was certainly on the liberators' minds. The book cites military propaganda and press accounts depicting France as "a tremendous brothel inhabited by 40 million hedonists," as Life magazine put it. (Sample sentences

from a French phrase guide in the newspaper Stars and Stripes: "You are very pretty" and "Are your parents at home?")

On the ground, however, the grateful kisses captured by photojournalists gave way to something less picturesque. In the National Archives in College Park, Md., Ms. Roberts found evidence — including one blurry, curling snapshot — supporting long-circulating colorful anecdotes about the Blue and Gray Corral, a brothel set up near the village of St. Renan in September 1944 by Maj. Gen. Charles H. Gerhardt, commander of the infantry division that landed at Omaha Beach, partly to counter a wave of rape accusations against G.I.'s. (It was shut down after a mere five hours.)

In France, Ms. Roberts also found a desperate letter from the mayor of Le Havre in August 1945 urging American commanders to set up brothels outside the city, to halt the "scenes contrary to decency" that overran the streets, day and night. They refused, partly, Ms. Roberts argues, out of concern that condoning prostitution would look bad to "American mothers and sweethearts," as one soldier put it.

Keeping G.I. sex hidden from the home front, she writes, ensured that it would be on full public view in France: a "two-sided attitude," she said, that is reflected in the current military sexual abuse crisis.

Ms. Roberts is not the first scholar to bring the sexual side of World War II into clearer view. The 1990s brought a surge of scholarship on the Soviet Army's mass rapes on the Eastern front, fed partly by the international campaign to have [rape recognized as a war crime](#) after the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, gender historians began taking a closer look at "fraternization" by American soldiers, with particular attention to what women thought they were getting out of the bargain.

"The standard story had been that the Soviets were the rapists, the Americans were the fraternizers, and the British were the gentlemen," said Atina Grossmann, the author of ["Jews, Germans and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany."](#)

An American soldier and a Frenchwoman kissing in a picture that raised eyebrows after appearing in Life magazine in 1944. Ralph Morse/Time Life Pictures-Getty Images

Work that looked at sexual assaults by American soldiers, even on a small scale, remained controversial. J. Robert Lilly's ["Taken by Force,"](#) a groundbreaking study of rapes of French, German and British civilian women by G.I.'s, based on courts-martial records Mr. Lilly [uncovered,](#) drew a strong response when it was published in France in 2003. But the book, which emphasized the grossly disproportionate prosecution of black soldiers, struggled to find an American publisher amid tensions between the United States and Europe over Iraq.

"American presses wouldn't touch the subject with a 10-

foot barge pole," said Mr. Lilly, a sociology professor at Northern Kentucky University. (Palgrave Macmillan published his book in the United States in 2007.)

Today the seamier side of liberation is not entirely absent from popular accounts. ["The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945,"](#) the final volume of Rick Atkinson's [best-selling trilogy](#) about the war, published this month, includes a brief discussion of the Army's campaign against venereal disease ("Don't forget the Krauts were fooling around France a long time before we got here," an Army publication warned soldiers in December 1944), as well as a reference to Mr. Lilly's work.

The few scholars who have [looked more closely](#) at rape by G.I.'s have attributed its racially skewed prosecution to "the Jim Crow army," which was happy to depict rape as a problem only among the noncombat support units to which black soldiers were mostly limited.

"White soldiers got a pass because of their combat status," said William I. Hitchcock, author of ["The Bitter Road to Freedom"](#) (2008), a history of the liberation of Western Europe from the perspective of often traumatized local civilians. "The Army wasn't interested in prosecuting a battle-scarred sergeant."

Ms. Roberts, who closely studied transcripts of 15 courts-martial in Northern France, certainly sees American racism at work. ["Let's Look at Rape!"](#) a 1944 Army

pamphlet credited to “a Negro Chaplain,” contained a prominent illustration of a noose — a clear suggestion that the Army was going to “protect the color line,” she writes. (Among the soldiers hanged for rape and murder was [Louis Till](#), the father of Emmett Till.)

But her analysis is hardly more flattering to the French, whose often shaky accusations, as she sees them, reflected their own need to project the humiliations of occupation onto a racial “other.” (“We have no more soldiers here, just a few Negroes who terrorize the neighborhood,” one civilian remarked in April 1945.)

Ms. Roberts said the book has attracted strong interest from French publishers, where willingness to explore the darker side of liberation jostles with a lingering fear of seeming ungrateful. At home, she insisted, her goal is not “to sour the story of Normandy.”

“I truly believe what we did there was amazing,” she said. “But I’m interested in providing a richer and more realistic picture.”