



*German Soldiers and the Occupation of France, 1940–1944* by Julia S. Torrie.

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In this fascinating and welcome addition to the literature on the German Occupation, the history of Nazism and World War II, Julia Torrie (St. Thomas Univ.) takes a grassroots approach to the daily preoccupations and leisure activities of ordinary German soldiers sent to France not only to control the country but also to “consume” its delights. She asks specifically how ordinary troops stationed in France approached and experienced the occupation. She demonstrates that German “consumption” of France entailed sightseeing excursions, shopping trips, the enjoyment of French food and drink, and the documentation of the soldiers’ leisure-time experiences through amateur photography and letter writing. Such sources clarify Germans’ self-perceptions as occupiers. We learn that the Nazi regime allowed soldiers reassigned to France to engage in leisure activities as a means to rest and recuperate from the violence and brutality of the Eastern Front; such benefits sustained their support for Hitler and masked the exploitive nature of the occupation.

The book goes on, however, to demonstrate that providing pleasurable leisure experiences in France became more complicated as French resistance to the Nazi regime intensified between 1941 and 1944. Additionally, tensions escalated between long-term occupiers who had “lived like God in France” and new arrivals from the Eastern Front who embodied the German *Kampfgeist* (fighting spirit): “the notion that there was pervasive softness in the West served to spur on violence among soldiers arriving in France from other fronts” (251).

The culture clash between the two groups reflected their different tasks and obligations: on the one hand, day-to-day administrative interactions with locals, on the other military aggression against them. Although not all soldiers in the West became “soft,” Torrie cogently argues that their relations with the French differed sharply from those of men who had undergone the brutalities of war on other fronts. Ordinary German soldiers in France often had daily interactions with the local population and became acquainted with regional cultures, languages, and landscapes. Such familiarity protected both long-term occupiers and French citizens from greater violence in the early months of the occupation, but also incited radical violence against civilians by troops coming from the East in 1944, especially those in the Waffen-SS and other elite fighting units.

The author’s ethnographic approach to period documents is especially valuable. Soldiers’ letters, journals, and photographs provide extraordinary glimpses into the occupiers’ everyday perceptions of the people and culture of occupied lands. One German radio operator, Hans Klumpp, entering France on 16 May 1940, wrote that the destruction of the towns he passed through conveyed a “sad picture” (27). After the battle for France, he was billeted in a local household and relished practicing his French and learning “the value of being able to make myself understood by the local population” (28). As his diary reveals, soldiers’ emotions alternated between excitement and boredom as they remorselessly plundered French goods and property and engaged in “eager consumption” (29).

Torrie's extensive research in both French and German archives and relevant secondary scholarship<sup>1</sup> has enabled her to convey a clearer picture of the occupation in the context of the Second World War, moving the historiography closer to a "history of the Occupation that is predominantly neither French nor German but Franco-German."<sup>2</sup> Torrie's work on German wartime tourism and consuming behaviors complements the vast historiography on Vichy France, which focused primarily on the French.<sup>3</sup>

The book's seven chapters concern, respectively, consuming the tastes and pleasures of France, touring and writing about its occupation, capturing soldiers' experiences through amateur photography and photo books, rising tensions between occupiers and occupied, perceptions of "softness" among German soldiers in France, and the increasing divide between long-term occupiers and new arrivals, with their more ruthless attitudes toward the French.

Torrie concludes that

examining the ways in which leisure and violence interacted reveals more about how the former supported, enabled, and facilitated the latter. Consumption, leisure, and tourism were integral elements of the German occupation of France. These activities smoothed soldiers' transition from combat to occupation, and the regime instrumentalized them to exploit their potential benefits, notably to morale. With time, however, managing these "softer" elements of occupation proved a challenge that contemporaries felt the authorities only partly mastered. "Softer" interactions offered benefits, but they also needed to be managed tightly, for they threatened to get out of hand. Living like gods in France was acceptable only if soldiers did not forget that they were first and foremost Hitler's men. (251)

By stressing ordinary Germans' experiences as tourists, shoppers, and consumers of French culture and cuisine, rather than as combatants, Julia Torrie has enriched our understanding of the nature of wartime foreign occupation. *German Soldiers and the Occupation of France* is a splendid contribution to the historiography of World War II that will interest all historians and students of twentieth-century France and Germany.

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1. Her article, "Our Rear Area Probably Lived Too Well': Tourism and the German Occupation of France, 1940-1944," *Journal of Tourism History* 3.3 (2011) 309-30, built on Bertram Gordon's article "Ist Gott Französisch? Germans, Tourism and Occupied France 1940-1944," *Modern and Contemporary France* 4.3 (1996) 287-98. In an unpublished study of the *Soldatenkaufhaus* (German soldiers' department store), Torrie explored the regime's attempts to encourage and control soldiers' "consumption" of France.

2. Talbot Imlay, "The German Side of Things: Recent Scholarship on the German Occupation of France," *French Historical Studies* 39.1 (2016) 211.

3. *Ibid.*, 209n.