



## *The Liberation of Paris: How Eisenhower, De Gaulle, and Von Choltitz Saved the City of Light* by Jean Edward Smith.

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The story of Allied forces' liberation of Paris in 1944 has inspired many books, dating back to the classic account by Larry Collins and Dominique Pierre, *Is Paris Burning?*<sup>1</sup> In his final book, historian Jean Edward Smith (d. 2019) (Univ. of Toronto and Marshall Univ.) retells the story with a focus on three individuals, the American commander Dwight Eisenhower, the Free French leader Charles De Gaulle, and the German commander at Paris, Dietrich von Choltitz. He argues that the three were responsible for the rapid and relatively bloodless Allied capture of the city well ahead of the timetable previously set by Allied commanders.

Smith wrote several works on American presidents, including Eisenhower.<sup>2</sup> As such, he tended to write from the perspective of a presidential historian, working as much as possible from the writings of his principal characters and accounts provided by those who worked with them. His goal here is not to supersede those works but to highlight specific aspects of the story to show the importance of the actions taken by his three protagonists.

After a chapter on the fall of Paris in 1940 and one on conditions in the city under German occupation and the gradual evolution of resistance there, Smith shifts his attention to the three leaders. He devotes a chapter to each, covering the different phases of the story from D-Day in June 1944 through the liberation of Paris itself on August 25. He depicts all three men sympathetically, ignoring or downplaying problematic aspects of their actions or characters.

Eisenhower in this period was dealing with illness, injuries, and difficult subordinates. And, too, events were moving rapidly in unexpected directions as the German resistance in Normandy crumbled and rapid advances by Allied mobile forces suddenly became possible. At times he was indecisive or made controversial decisions. Smith deflects much of this by concentrating on a limited set of problems.

As the Allies advanced from Normandy in late July and early August and the Germans went into full retreat, the fragmented and poorly equipped resistance forces in Paris began an uprising, anticipating the Allies would soon arrive. The Allies had intended to bypass Paris rather than get bogged down in urban fighting. But the resistance forces needed help quickly, and De Gaulle and the commander of the French 2nd Armored Division, Jacques LeClerc, were insisting upon immediate intervention. Though many of Eisenhower's staff opposed diverting forces away from the pursuit of the main German forces, he recognized that the politics of the situation required him to act. He sent LeClerc's division, with backup from the American 4th Infantry Division, to take the city. Whatever critics have had to say about Eisenhower's abilities as a military leader, there is no debating his political skills. Smith's strongly positive depiction of him holds up well in this respect.

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1. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965.

2. Viz., *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

The author is similarly positive in dealing with De Gaulle, relying on his and his supporters' writings, while largely ignoring the character flaws noted by his legions of critics. As with Eisenhower, Smith's approach succeeds due to the issues he focuses on. De Gaulle was tremendously stubborn and sure of his own opinions, qualities that often got him into trouble. President Franklin Roosevelt, Smith notes (48-49), had no use for him, and did his best to find other leaders for the Free French movement. But Smith dismisses such concerns and instead presents Eisenhower as justified in being more sympathetic to him. This also attests to Eisenhower's political acumen: he realized that the Free French regarded De Gaulle as their leader, and that he would have to deal with him. In the case of Paris, he recognized that De Gaulle was right, and Smith presents the two of them as acting in concert.

Von Choltitz, far less famous than Eisenhower and De Gaulle, poses less of a problem. He was a successful officer sent to Paris by Hitler because he considered him to be loyal. Von Choltitz had by this time recognized that Germany was doomed and that Hitler had lost touch with reality. While ordered to fight to the last in Paris and to destroy as much of the city as possible if he could not hold it, Choltitz instead negotiated with the resistance and Free French leaders and actually encouraged the Allies to come to Paris as quickly as possible. His story is well known, and here Smith's main achievement is to characterize his inner thoughts for the reader. After describing a meeting with Hitler in which the Führer gave him his assignment to Paris and ordered him to stamp out all opposition there, Smith describes what went on in von Choltitz's mind:

The interview was over. That evening, August 7, von Choltitz boarded the train for his return to Berlin. As he acknowledged later, "a heavy gloom" had settled over him. He had come to Rastenburg looking for encouragement. He was leaving shaken and demoralized. He now recognized that Germany would lose the war, and that Hitler was out of control. "I asked myself the difficult question of whether a general, a leader of men, can in his soul and his conscience take the responsibility of sacrificing his poor soldiers for a cause that has lost all hope." It was clear to von Choltitz as he left East Prussia that both Hitler and his staff had no idea how the war in France was going. (71)

To make matters worse, von Choltitz then learned that Hitler had ordered that the families of officers who surrendered could be imprisoned or killed, which added an even greater cost to following his conscience, yet in the end he did it anyway.

Smith's cleanly written volume is well suited to general audiences. His core argument regarding the importance of the actions of three individuals in shaping history holds up well. At the same time, the book is narrow in scope. Anyone interested in learning more about the Paris uprising itself will be better served by going back to Collins and Lapierre, or David Schoenbrunn's *Soldiers of the Night*.<sup>3</sup> Smith, not being a military historian, handles military matters only superficially. He accepts uncritically the German general Wilhelm Keitel's facetious claim that the French could have won the war in 1939 by attacking while the Germans were in Poland. And while he rejects a similar claim that taking Paris delayed the end of the war by six months, he does not really develop much of an argument from a military standpoint. Instead, he demonstrates that, from both political and humanitarian perspectives, Eisenhower, De Gaulle and Von Choltitz all made the right choices.

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3. Subtitle: *The Story of the French Resistance* (NY: Dutton, 1980).