

---

H-France Review Vol. 9 (December 2009), No. 143

Eric Touya de Mayenne, *French-American Relations: Remembering D-Day after September 11*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008. vi + 201 pp. \$36.78. ISBN: 0-7618-3968-2.

Review by Vera Mark, Pennsylvania State University-University Park.

This book opens with the premise that the United States and France share a common view of the principles of democracy and the defense of liberty, and that this political value and shared cultural worldview continue to link the two nations in a unique relationship, despite currents of anti-French public opinion diffused through American mass media.

Tocqueville's nineteenth century writings on the relationship between democracy and religion form the explicit and implicit frame of reference for this work. Religion is broadly conceived here as a moral viewpoint and a potential basis for civic engagement. Touya de Mayenne asks what role religion might continue to play in the exercise of civic engagement in both nations. Are the two modern democracies similar in their approach to the defense of political and civic liberty? He argues that the concept of liberty encompasses both the political (choice of regime of governance) and civil (guarantee of freedom from oppression). The sub-title of the book: Remembering D-Day after September 11 juxtaposes two historical events and raises the question of whether June 6, 1944 and September 11, 2001 have the same epistemological status.[1]

The volume consists of primary source material culled from interviews conducted with the attendees of several prominent American World War II veterans' conventions between August 2005 and May 2007. They include the annual convention of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Association and the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 29<sup>th</sup> Division; interviewees represent soldiers of varied ethnic backgrounds, mostly from the East Coast. The four chapters address the motivations that led the interviewees to engage in armed service in France during World War II, their physical memory of participating in the Allied Landing of June 6, 1944, and the extent to which they commemorate their involvement in the space (in Normandy, especially) and the time period of their engagement (1944-1945). Chapter One ("Landing on D-Day and Beyond") profiles American soldiers at a meeting in Roanoke and at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne convention in Milwaukee. Chapter Two ("The Free-French and America") profiles French soldiers, including three women Resisters, previously contacted through the Fondation Charles de Gaulle, the Fondation de la France Libre and the Fondation du Maréchal Leclerc who were interviewed in France. Chapter Three ("The French-American Dialogue: On Reconcilable Differences") continues the profile of the initial chapter, and presents interviews with veterans conducted in Virginia, Wisconsin, and New York, while Chapter Four ("The Legacy of D-Day: A Global Perspective") profiles American veterans who were not born in the United States and who were interviewed at their homes, outside of the convention space, in Chicago, Marble Falls, Texas, New York and Fréville, Normandy. The volume tacks between "American" and "French" as defined by place of birth, with some limited sampling according to ethnic and social class diversity. Race and gender do not figure significantly in the sample: twenty-eight of the thirty-one interviewees are white men, three are French women. The volume does not include testimony from African-American veterans of World War II, nor does it include American women from the Army Nurse Corps, both of whom served in France.

The first part of the introductory chapter expresses a political anxiety as to how to remember the military conflict of World War II, in which the United States was an ally of France, and whether this (consensual) memory can function concerning a different historical event, that of September 11, 2001. This question is addressed directly in the interviews of the remaining four chapters, in which the more educated veterans differentiate the historical and political contexts for the two events, whereas less-educated veterans gloss the two as equivalent, subsumed as conditions for the “defense of democracy.” Touya de Mayenne cites several reasons for anti-American sentiment on the part of the French, including France’s declining power on the geo-political stage and Cold War French intellectuals’ rejection of American foreign policy, tempered however in more recent times by positive references from Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy. The author cites the effect of American media in representing anti-French sentiment, in sharp relief at the beginning of the Iraq war, due to the differing policy positions held by the two nations. Oral history, Touya de Mayenne argues, is a powerful means by which to contest the prevailing power of media, including commercial film, to shape images of nation-states and to channel political public opinion on “friends” and “enemies.” He paints a broadly chronological picture of Franco-American ties dating back to the American Revolution, from sources that include historians, travel writers, and politicians. This academic overview contrasts with on-the-ground event history, represented by several American veterans’ narratives concerning D-Day. The vivid narratives of jumps, landing, and witnessing of death by Porcella, Slaughter, and Branham (pp.13-14) are iconic in setting up the remainder of the book. Significantly, Touya de Mayenne does not explore the ideological basis of the structuring of American/French political public opinion. This may be due to his intended audience of a general reading public, including American veterans. His vision of history is cyclical, one that parallels and transcends the constancy of a French-American tie across the past three centuries.

A range of issues of interest to historians emerge from the interviews. Most prominent are the parameters of memory, and the extent to which memory is consensual, repressed, and/or engendered; the nature and degree of involvement with commemorative practices (visiting graves and cemeteries, attending veterans’ banquets),<sup>[2]</sup> and the meanings of these practices for the individual soldier and for his family; the structure of narration of one’s life story: the role of social class, education and religious affiliation in the soldiers’ initial military engagement; going to battle as a significant locus of young male adult identity formation; and the principle of sacrifice as a key element in generational memory.

Organized in question/answer format, the volume presents the rich expression that characterizes oral history and makes it readily accessible to the reader. At the same time, the minutiae of everyday life make it difficult to situate the book’s broader themes, which would have been reinforced by the presence of a separate concluding chapter and by a thematic index. Methodological questions arise: how was the interview sample put together?<sup>[3]</sup> What was the nature of the interviewees’ attendance at the veterans’ convention? To what extent was their attendance a memory practice? In dedicating his work to his two grandparents, one wounded at Verdun, the other in 1940, author Touya de Mayenne acknowledges his own historicity. This becomes problematic in the course of the interviews, however, as he positions himself repeatedly within the questions and answers (p.124, Oxendine interview; author: “I think that is a great answer, a very good answer.”). This practice makes it difficult for Touya de Mayenne to take distance from his interviewees. The volume presents edited excerpts from the interviews but gives little indication of what portion of the interviews the transcripts reflect, or of the contexts for the interviews undertaken in the United States and in France. The dramatic impact of the book’s content is marred by inconsistencies and typographical errors: in the date of Charles de Gaulle’s June 18, 1940 speech (printed as 1944 in the notes, p.26); in the spelling of Klaus Barbie’s name (“Klauss” Barbie, p.16); by the term “Fee French” (pp. 74-75, Chaline narrative; p.79, Hourçourigay narrative); “retuned,” rather than “returned” (p.166, Demboski narrative); and “emotionally distress,” rather than “distressed” (p.181, Zenie narrative).

The interviews nonetheless highlight the memory of history as event, shared in differing degrees with the self and with one’s intimates. Thus some veterans do not talk about their experiences at all with

their families and only reveal their role in World War II late in life. Particularly rich narratives include those of Bill Tucker (Chapter 1); Emile Chaline, Rosette Peschaud (Chapter 2); Jesse Oxendine (Chapter 3); and Walter Reed, Peter Demboski, Henry Stein, and Jean-Baptiste Feuillye (Chapter 4). As this book was published after the urban French riots of November 2005, several French interviewees pose questions about a cohesive national identity and France's relationship with its Muslim citizens (Peschaud and Lecordier interviews, Chapter 2). While this issue appears as a *leitmotif* and is implied by the sub-title of the book, unfortunately it does not figure directly in the interview questions for the French nationals profiled in Chapter 2. Indeed, the introductory chapter sets up a Manichean contrast: "To what extent are we civilized and what makes us so? What is the barbarity that we must confront today?" (p.24), as it equates Nazism with contemporary terrorism. The author sidesteps a valuable occasion to address the contemporary identity issues that confront France through a more sustained reflection on similarities and differences between these two "-isms".

Throughout this work, the author and the interviewees distinguish national policy, as fashioned by power elites, and public opinion, a product of media representations and lived human experience. The interviews appear as a corrective to broader categories such as "public opinion" or "historical memory." The volume implicitly raises the question of how to mesh individual lived experience with the larger movements of history. Echoing the concerns of oral historians in a range of cultural and historical settings, it mourns the consequences of the loss of direct witnesses, since the upcoming years will see the passing of the last veterans who participated in the Allied landing. One solution to the loss of direct witness memory lies with the historical museum (detailed in the interview with Jean Nallit, a guide at the Museum of Resistance in Lyon, pp.87-88). Touya de Mayenne asks whether historical memory inevitably fades into family memory and the private domain. If Touya de Mayenne's volume underscores the duty to remember as an integral element of civic participation, recent debates in the French press regarding the role of the state in defining and consecrating national memory of World War II remind us of the complexity of commemoration.[4] Of whom? By whom? For what ends?

## NOTES

[1] Sustained reflection on the nature of the "event" of September 11 is present in Giovanna Borradori's interview with Jacques Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Derrida shows the event of September 11 to have been "conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine" (p.86) and thus was not as spontaneous as media representations suggest. Derrida applies his deconstructionist stance to the categories of "Arabs", "Islam" and "the Arab Islamic Middle East," each of which is heterogeneous, filled with tensions, conflicts and essential contradictions, as is the "West" (p.115).

[2] John Gillis, ed., *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) provides a key source for reflection on this function of memory. Gillis observes that the cult of the fallen soldier, which reached its limits in the interwar period, was replaced by a new emphasis on veterans, after World War II, whose place in the present reduced considerably the pressure to memorialize them (p.13). In assessing the transformations of national memory over the course of the twentieth century, Gillis observes that "taking memory out of the hands of specialists, diffusing its practices over time and space, runs the risk of merely privatizing rather than really democratizing it" (p.19).

[3] Two models of oral history with respect to narrative voice and explicitness of methodological approach include Studs Terkel, *The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Random House, 1984) and Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[4] These debates center around the role of the state versus the school with the Guy Mocquet controversy (October 2007), and the issue of inclusiveness regarding the D-Day commemorative ceremony of June 2009. The newly created Ministère de l'immigration, de l'intégration et de l'identité nationale represents an institution through which to assess cultural issues raised in this review.

Vera Mark  
Pennsylvania State University-University Park  
vxm3@psu.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172