

**Claire Miot, La première armée française.
De la Provence à l'Allemagne, 1944-1945,
Paris (Perrin) 2021, 456 p., nombr. ill. et tabl.,
ISBN 978-2-262-07192-9, EUR 26,00.**

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Christopher Knowles, London

On 4 June 1940, after the defeat in France, Winston Churchill, in one of his most famous speeches, told the British House of Commons:

»We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and if ... this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas ... would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old«.

Britain, of course, was not invaded and never surrendered. France was invaded, defeated and surrendered in 1940, but it was not only the Americans and the British, but also the Première Armée Française from the French »Empire beyond the seas« in north and sub-Saharan Africa which fought on the beaches, the landing grounds, the fields, the streets and the hills, to liberate metropolitan France in 1944 and 1945. This French army, reinforced by elements of the Vichy army and former resistance fighters, has received little credit for its remarkable achievements, which included liberating much of the south of France, including the cities of Toulon, Marseille and Lyon, overcoming German resistance in fierce fighting in the Vosges and Alsace, and finally crossing the Rhine to capture territory in the south-west of Germany which later formed the French zone of occupation.

Claire Miot has provided a superb account of the military campaign, from the preparations for the landings in Provence by the French »Army B« in August 1944 and the renaming of French forces as the Première Armée Française after they linked up in September with the other Allied armies to form a continuous Western front, to the German unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945 and the formal dissolution of the Première Armée on 24 July 1945. More importantly, she analyses the deep divisions between the various elements of the army, which were rooted in underlying social, political and racial tensions. The fragile unity of a new French army that incorporated colonial, free French and Vichy units overcame the humiliation of the catastrophic defeat of 1940, but did not survive the victory:

»L'unification de l'armée de la Libération, si fragile pendant la campagne, n'est plus qu'un souvenir au lendemain de la capitulation allemande. C'est cette armée divisée et faiblement



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

renouvelée qui s'engage dans les guerres de décolonisation. Car dans l'empire, la guerre continue» (p. 299).

Perhaps the most difficult and controversial issue to be addressed in any history of the presence of French troops in Germany at the end of the Second World War is the widespread occurrence of gendered violence, theft and rape. Miot addresses the issue directly in a carefully argued chapter (p. 253–267), showing that while it is difficult to judge the extent of violent and sexual crime, the conduct of French troops was significantly worse than the Americans or British. While indigenous Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian soldiers were more likely to be accused and found guilty than their white metropolitan French colleagues, violent crime was very widespread at the time, and many other groups had reason to seek revenge against the Germans, including forced labourers, released prisoners of war, and former partisans now enlisted in the French army. Contemporaries, including French officers, the German civilian population, and US observers, however, all tended to blame the colonial troops when such crimes were reported.

The level of violence was much higher in occupied Germany than, for example, in Alsace, or in the French zone of occupation in Austria. Miot argues that violence and rape by French troops was not due to hatred of the enemy, although a feeling of disgust of everything German was deliberately encouraged by the military commanders. An equally, if not more important factor, in her view, was the humiliation of the defeat of 1940, together with a failure by French officers to enforce discipline. European officers of colonial troops considered the relaxation of discipline after a long campaign inevitable and therefore to some extent acceptable. A US observer commented on the weak enforcement of discipline by French junior officers and the absence of military police patrolling the streets. Middle and junior officers, unable or reluctant to prevent violence, restricted their efforts to limiting its impact. Concluding the chapter, she writes that »ces crimes entachent durablement la relation entre occupants et occupés« (p. 281).

At the end of the war French soldiers celebrated with mixed feelings. The Première Armée had achieved its military and diplomatic aims brilliantly, defeating enemy forces, helping to liberate the country and securing a zone of occupation under full French control. But many soldiers felt marginalised and excluded from the festivities and victory celebrations organised by de Gaulle in Paris. They did not recognise the events celebrated and felt unappreciated, especially compared to the recognition given to the Free French, the army of the interior. Both colonial and European French troops keenly awaited demobilisation and their return home, but the complexity of the rules and favourable treatment for some categories, such as agricultural workers, led to a sense of injustice felt by many. Soldiers from North Africa were especially badly treated, as they had fought in Tunisia, Italy, France and Germany, and received little or no leave home during the campaign. Lack of shipping made their repatriation more difficult and led to further delays, with complaints of poor food and living

19.–21. Jahrhundert – Histoire contemporaine

DOI:
[10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89236](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89236)

Seite | page 2



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris | publiée par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

conditions. Their experiences after the end of the war exacerbated the divisions between regular troops and Free French, between European and colonial troops, and between the army and civilians.

»La confiance entre la nation et son armée, loin d'être restaurée, reste fragilisée par les conditions de démobilisation. La crise entre l'empire et sa métropole est plus aiguë encore. Alors que les soldats colonisés, engagés en première ligne pour sauver la métropole des griffes de l'occupant, éprouvent un sentiment accru d'injustice, les Européens installés dans les territoires colonisés attendent, en retour de leur engagement, que la métropole défende leurs prérogatives dans l'empire« (p. 299).

Miot concludes by suggesting that instead of finding a place within a Gaullist vision of a Thirty Years War from 1914 to 1944, from which (metropolitan) France finally emerged triumphant and united after defeating two attempts to destroy the country, the Première Armée Française, a French imperial army which went a tortuous way, via Vichy, London and Algiers, from the disaster of 1940 to the victory of 8 May 1945, is better placed historically within a more global perspective that runs from the outbreak of war in 1939, to Algerian independence in 1962, decolonisation and the end of the Empire (p. 305).

Overall, this is a remarkable book that deserves to be widely read, as a definitive account of the contribution of the Première Armée Française to the liberation of France, and also for the many insights that it provides on the unresolved divisions within French society, reflected in the army, partially overcome by a fragile unity during the campaign, and re-emerging later in various ways to influence the future course of French history.

19.-21. Jahrhundert – Histoire contemporaine

DOI:

[10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89236](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89236)

Seite | page 3



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)