Oradour, June 10th, 1944: A Nazi Massacre in Occupied France

Oradour-sur-Glane is a commune (district) in the French region of Limousin (15 kilometers west of Limoges, in the département of Haute-Vienne), where a Waffen-SS unit massacred 642 people, most of which were women and children, in one afternoon.

The characteristics of the Oradour tragedy are the following: an arbitrary massacre of a civilian population by a regular military unit, under the responsibility of a legal authority, or by a paramilitary body acting within a territory, beyond the authorities’ control.

A. Context

On June 6th, 1944, the final phase of World War II began in France. On the Western Front, German forces were concentrated on the North Sea, Channel, Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, practically vacating a substantial part of French territory. This was the case for the Massif Central region and its western side, Limousin.

Only the main towns were permanently occupied. Specialized troops were combing the area, moving into villages and the countryside, using violence there to create a state of terror. Arrests, cases of deportation, summary executions and fires alternated with quieter periods. Two armored divisions, transferred back from the Eastern front in poor condition, were stationed in the region (in the départements of Dordogne and Lot-et-Garonne), where they were being reconstituted with new equipment and personnel. Local military staff used them for operations against the maquis. These operations contributed to the military training of very young recruits, by placing them in “combat situations”.

The local population was waiting to be delivered by the Allies. It was morally and materially weary after years of occupation and deprivation, the absence of prisoners of war, and the requirements of forced labor in Germany, or for the Atlantic Wall, and feared repression following maquis activities.

The announcement of D-Day led to an increase in resistance activities: sabotage of communication infrastructure (railways, roads, telephone lines) and the liberation of certain towns, especially Guéret and Tulle, respectively the préfectures (administrative headquarters) of the Creuse and Corrèze départements. German reinforcements quickly put a stop to these premature liberations, which were followed by violent repression, intended to establish a durable state of terror, as in the case of Tulle.

The commune of Oradour-sur-Glane had 1,574 inhabitants according to the 1937 census, and 1,640 food ration card holders in the first semester of 1944. They were spread out among roughly twenty farming villages. About 300 of them, including the craftsmen and shopkeepers, lived in the town, where the schools, the town hall and church, as well as the marketplace, fairground, train station and post office were situated. From 1939 onward, Oradour-sur-Glane and the neighboring villages housed refugees. First came Spanish republicans driven away by Franco’s forces; next, Alsatians evacuated from combat zones, then people expelled from Moselle – one of the three départements annexed by the Nazis in 1940 – and finally, Jews from France and beyond, fleeing racial persecution.

In April 1941, the Vichy administration replaced the elected town council, which had been directed by a Socialist mayor since 1919, with a “Special Delegation” led by a doctor who was a notable, as well as a former mayor and First World War veteran. At the same time, a Groupement de travailleurs étrangers (GTE number 643), a group intended to integrate foreigners into local production structures and keep them under control, was set up within the commune boundaries. The police kept a close watch on foreign refugees and on the local unit of the Communist party – which had been dissolved in 1939 – though it was not active in the area. In August 1942, the Jews that had been
As of October 1943, several maquis were positioned in forests, more or less close to the town. But “in Oradour, there were no maquis and sometimes we used to boast of it,” stated a witness whose family had disappeared. Oradour-sur-Glane was an ordinary village at the time of the German occupation of France, a “quiet place”, a refuge where one could find food – which city-dwellers lacked – including from the black market. A considerable number of its inhabitants believed, or tried to believe, that they lived apart from the war; they complained but put up with the situation, hoping it was temporary.

B. Instigators and Perpetrators

The Das Reich Waffen-SS armored division was described as an elite unit, consistent with the Nazi criteria for “political soldiers”, a self-proclaimed elite. (Wegner, 1987) It was formed in 1939, from armed SS units that had participated in the annexation of Austria and Sudetenland, under the name of SS Division Verfügungs-Truppe (S.S. VT); after several changes, in February 1944, this name became the Das Reich 2nd armored Waffen-SS division. It was reconstituted several times thereafter, and remained active until May 8th, 1945.

It was first used during the attack on Poland, in September 1939. Nazi troops committed various acts of violent abuse there, including massacres of Jewish populations. The division participated in the campaign against Belgium and France in May 1940. In Pas-de-Calais, France, massacres took place alongside military operations. There were 92 victims on May 22nd-23rd at Aubigny, 45 on May 22nd at Berles-Monchel, and around one hundred British prisoners were shot on May 27th. In June, the SS division reached the Spanish border. In 1941, it was sent to the region of Banat in Yugoslavia; the troops entered Belgrade through the suburb of Pancevo, where mass hangings and shootings were carried out.

The division took part in the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. It reached the outskirts of the Moscow suburbs in December 1941. But starting in February 1942, it had to defend itself and counter-attack. The division was decimated and was taken off the front in March, then transferred to France to be “rebuilt”. The soldiers’ military training involved combat and violence. The brutalization of Nazi troops and of their behavior toward civilian populations was characteristic of the “war culture” of the period. The military hierarchy organized collective violence against Communists and Jews, who were invariably stigmatized as “Judeo-Bolsheviks” (Bartov, 1985).

In early 1943, the division was sent back to the region of Kharkov, on the Eastern Front. The Nazi army’s spring attack was bogged down in the mud. Then they retook the city of Kharkov, which had previously been liberated by Soviet forces, massacring the population and carrying out mass hangings in the streets, from the balconies. On August 22nd, 1943, Soviet troops recaptured Kharkov for good. This was the beginning of a months-long retreat for the Waffen-SS of Das Reich, until the remainder of it was regrouped in France, in April 1944. SS General Lammerding was in command of the division. He was a member of the Nazi party before it came to power, and was “specialized” in the struggle against guerrilla fighters. He had been posted to the “Eastern Territories” in 1943. At the end of the war, he served as chief of staff of the reserve army under Himmler’s command.

The division was stationed in France, near Montauban (northwest of Toulouse) in May 1944, and being reformed. It was still missing two-thirds of its officers and half its non-commissioned officers, and received a large contingent of young recruits, mainly Frenchmen from Alsace (annexed by Germany in July 1940). In disregard of international law, which the Nazi regime systematically contravened, these Frenchmen were recruited against their will – which made them victims of a war crime – and drafted under duress. They later called themselves “malgré-nous” (literally, “despite ourselves”).

The SS soldiers were instructed through “training” and search-and-sweep operations in combat situations. Several villages in Haute-Garonne, Lot and Lot-et-Garonne saw the SS troops come...
searching for “bandits” (Communists, Gaullists, Jews), looting, starting fires, and carrying out shootings, hangings, arrests and deportations.

On June 5th, Lammerding suggested a “gang” repression plan to his superiors, who approved it. This document replicated the May and June 1941 orders issued by the Commander-in-chief of the German army for the Eastern Front (OKW). These directives had been reiterated in February 1944 by the Western Command-in-chief: members of the French resistance were considered “francs-tireurs” (guerrilla fighters, snipers) and should be immediately executed; there would be no punishment for any excessive behavior of the troops involved.

On June 8th, the Das Reich division was sent to “the region of Tulle and Limoges” to help the besieged German garrisons and fight the “gangs”. Due to an insufficient number of vehicles, less than half the troops departed. Barricades on the road and clashes with Resistance fighters were met with violence, and the SS division left a bloody trail. The reconnaissance battalion arrived in Tulle that night. The next day, they hung 99 hostages; several hundred men were taken to Limoges, of which 150 were deported, leading to the death of 101 of them.

At dawn on June 9th, the Der Führer armored infantry division arrived in Limoges, Saint-Junien (Haute-Vienne) and Guéret. That evening, in Limoges, a militia leader assembled his men and notified them of a “big operation planned by the SS for the next day”; they were to accompany the Waffen-SS until their departure to the Normandy front. Lammerding issued an Order of the day justifying the need for “brutal action” to counter the establishment of a “Communist government” in the region.

On Saturday, June 10th, after lunch at the Saint-Junien camp, a unit from Der Führer Battalion I set off. It comprised the 3rd company, under Captain Otto Kahn’s command, a few of the company officers, and the commander, Adolf Diekmann. Around twenty French Alsatians were part of the company, which also included Russians, Poles and Croatians, along with Germans – young recruits and Eastern Front veterans.

The operation was carried out in precise and organized phases: troops arrived in the town by surprise and surrounded it; they assembled the population and demanded hostages; they spotted execution locations and separated the men from the women and children. The executions were spaced out; after the looting, burning and feasting in the midst of the fires, a squad got rid of the bodies to prevent their identification, which inevitably prolongs the subsequent grief of the survivors. Cases of sexual assault, which are the most difficult for witnesses to express, appeared in several of the accounts collected by investigators.

These phases are identifiable in different accounts of the massacres (Sofsky, 1996). In the case of Oradour, they reveal the manner in which the use of violence was sanctioned and the ways it was taught. The training of the troops included a “blood pact” and a baptism of fire of the recruits incorporated in March 1944. Some very young soldiers, some of them under 18, participated in the crime. They were compromised in the transgression represented by the murder of women and children. In court, they said they had obeyed under duress. The malgré-nous remembered how their officers threatened them, more than the cries of women and children. Was compromising them, so as make them obedient, not one of the operation’s goals? Ritualized sentences, as well as the circumstances, the composition of the group of victims and the specificity of the criminals, all contribute to the construction of a model for the analysis and the description of similar events.

C. Victims

“They arrived at two o’clock.” It was a complete surprise. The witnesses saw trucks full of soldiers pointing their guns at the houses. The main town in the commune was surrounded. Only a few persons hid or tried to escape. Thus, a few managed to leave the town or conceal themselves inside it. Most of the population was confident, convinced they were in order straight had committed no offense against the “Germans”, and could not imagine they were in danger. They did not understand why, for what reason such a mass of soldiers was bursting into “their homes”.

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Everyone had to join the assembly, “with no exceptions”: the soldiers were ordered to shoot anyone refusing or running away, and the sick and disabled. They broke windows and doors to search the houses. From the town outskirts, guarded by a ring of sentries, they pushed the inhabitants toward the center, to a fairground, of which all exits were guarded with machine guns.

In front of the crowd, SS officers alternated between threats and moments of respite. They asked the mayor to select hostages, and whether there were any arms caches. They were trying to get the population to participate, or at least not to resist. They counted the women and children under fourteen, and sent them into the church. The men were counted too and sent into barns, garages, a wine store: closed buildings with a exit onto the street. They placed machine guns (MG42s, which can shoot over 700 rounds per minute) in front of the exits, pointed at the men, as well as a row of soldiers with rifles. Everyone waited.

An explosion gave the signal: the order “Feuer!” was heard. The machine guns all started simultaneously. As the dust settled, some SS walked on the bodies to finish off the wounded. Then they brought fuel and piled it on the bodies. The soldiers lit the fire. Five survivors were able to extract themselves from the pile of bodies. They huddled until nightfall in precarious hiding places, and escaped the fire under cover of the smoke.

More than four hundred women and children were waiting, shut up in the church. Two soldiers brought a box into the middle of the crowd. They lit some “cords” and went out. When it exploded, the box gave out “black smoke” and released suffocating gas (a weapon against tank crews). From the outside, several soldiers said they heard “cries”. Some Waffen-SS entered the church, shooting with machine guns and throwing bunches of hand grenades tied together. Then they brought firewood and set it alight with incendiary bullets. A single woman managed to escape through a window; another was killed along with her baby, while trying to follow the first.

After placing explosives between the vault of the nave and the church roof, a pyrotechnical officer was wounded to the head by a stone. He was taken to hospital in Limoges by a medical officer, who also brought the second-in-command to report to regimental headquarters. The operation was closely overseen by the military hierarchy.

The Waffen SS looted and burned the town, sparing one house for the night. That evening, when the local train arrived, the passengers resident in the area panicked. They were threatened and driven away by an officer. At nightfall, the troops returned to their quarters, carrying their plunder with them. They left a guard for the night. The men feasted late into the night on the food they had found, particularly the stores of wine and spirits; empty bottles were found later. In the surrounding villages, officers demanded meals “as large as possible”!

Several Waffen-SS returned on the mornings of Sunday, June 11th and Monday the 12th. They hastily buried some bodies, to prevent their identification. They took farm animals and poultry with them, and the troops ate meat for several days. They fed off the country. This was standard practice, since the invasion of the Soviet Union.

On Sunday the 11th, the village inhabitants, and the town residents that were absent the day before, looked for their children. They had to avoid the threatening presence of the soldiers. They discovered the extent of the disaster, beginning with the dead: all the children that were in school, over two hundred women, including mothers with babies... The town was destroyed. Counting the dead was long and difficult: only 10% of the corpses were identified. By December 1944, the authorities could not specify the exact number. It took several rulings from the Rochechouart court, in 1945 and 1946, to establish the list of 642 victims.

D. Witnesses

-* Victims

Marguerite Rouffanche, the only woman to survivor the massacre in the church, and Borie, Broussaudier, Darthout, Hébras and Roby, five men who escaped the barn shootings alive, were
surviving witnesses of the executions. They recounted the assembly, the waiting on the fairground, the executions, the death of their relatives, and their escape from the fires.

Around fifteen witnesses that had refused to go to the assembly, and hid inside the town, were later able to escape the soldiers searching the town, and the massacre. About ten of the inhabitants, including Roger Godfrain, a pupil at the Mosellans school, fled directly upon the soldiers’ arrival. Around twenty passengers from the evening streetcar, and a solitary traveler, railroad engineer Pallier, arrived unexpectedly and saw the town in flames. They feared for their lives, and the women were subjected to lewd propositions from soldiers.

Some residents of the surrounding area saw the SS soldiers surround the town and move into several of their villages. That night and the next day, they searched for their children and discovered the mass graves, the charred and dismembered bodies, the heaps of human ashes and the ruins. These witnesses, the survivors and those that fled the massacre, described what they saw and experienced, their fears, their despair and anger.

- * The Authorities, Journalists, Photographers...

Several journalists said that they came to the site covertly on Sunday or Monday, alerted by the fire, which was visible from a long way off at night, and by rumors. As of June 10th, traveling in the entire area was strictly forbidden, since it was declared a war zone, so rescue teams were unable to intervene for several days. Two social workers arrived on Tuesday. On Wednesday the 14th, the doctors in charge of health services started recording what had happened, along with policemen from the Renseignements Généraux (the French internal security forces) and the police records service.

That day, the German authorities allowed the regional préfet (the civil servant responsible for administering the region) to visit the site, along with the bishop. They returned on June 21st, and the préfet delivered a speech of “farewell to the victims of Oradour,” which was the first call to commemorate the massacre.

The bodies were buried in mass graves by first aid workers – mainly men from the hamlets and villages nearby – along with road workmen and Défense passive volunteers, including seminarians from Limoges. They described the dismembered bodies, the smell of the mass graves, their prayers, the flowers tossed onto the graves... A journalist, a seminarian and anonymous photographers took the first pictures of the site. They had to photograph the bodies so their reports would be credible.

While the official information channels remained silent about the event, flyers and clandestine newspapers – the Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien and Les Lettres françaises – published the first witness statements in July. Along with the photographs, these served as the basis of several brochures and books published between October 1944 and June 1945. These publications called for justice, in the name of the victims.

- * The “Criminal Protagonists”

The judicial inquiry opened after the liberation of France allowed the collection of the witnesses’ testimony, but also that of the protagonists of the massacre. The first stage, in December 1944, involved the Frenchmen that had been drafted by force. They were initially deserters (and called themselves “évadés”, or escapees) or prisoners, and had then signed an enlistment form, for the duration of the war, in the French forces. Soldiers and non-commissioned officers, who were prisoners of war, were heard later and gradually included in the judicial proceedings. Their accounts complete and confirm the victims’ statements. (The inquiry files are kept at the Dépôt central des archives de la justice militaire, the central depot of military justice archives, on the defense ministry premises at Le Blanc, in the département of Indre).

The SS officers who were responsible for the massacre had disappeared; the battalion commander died in combat, in Normandy. Others were beyond the reach of the French courts as soon as they returned to Germany, due to the protection offered them by the British and American occupying authorities. The Cold War made it impossible to obtain justice.
E. Memories

The massacre was immediately interpreted as the expression of “German barbarity” and of “gratuitous violence” meted out to an “innocent population”. In June 1944, the Vichy administration préfet spoke of a “peaceful population”, meaning it had no particular political commitments, and did not noticeably support the maquis.

He considered a reconstruction procedure “at a distance from the destroyed village,” which he entrusted to Pierre Paquet, an architecte des Bâtiments de France (State architect) and Inspector-General of the Monuments of France. (In an exemplary case of administrative continuity, Paquet was later put in charge of all conservation and reconstruction projects, in January 1945.) Afterward, a 1946 law confirmed the priority given by the authorities to the site, as a “symbol of all the suffering endured by the French, including in the camps (...).”

The descriptions made as of June 1944 were amplified after the region was liberated: “Oradour” became “the most monstrous of war crimes,” at a time when the mass killings of Eastern Europe and the genocide of European Jews were still relatively unknown. An Official Remembrance Committee was created in Limoges in October 1944. The new préfectoral (regional administrative) authorities appointed a curator for the ruins on September 20th. Then on November 28th, 1944, the Provisional Government of the Republic decided the ruins of the town would be conserved.

The conservation of the ruins “in the state the inhabitants discovered them the day after the tragedy” was determined by political choice. But since then, the necessary consolidation, restoration and museography projects have repeatedly modified their appearance. However, though the ruins are constantly being altered by erosion, they are still particularly evocative and suggestive.

As early as 1944, many “remembrance pilgrims” visited the ruins. The narrative of the tragedy, as it was articulated by the surviving witnesses, reinforced the ruins’ capacity to move visitors, who continued to come in large numbers (about 300,000 a year).

The conflicts between the political movements active in French society over three decades (1944-1974) structured the dominant memories of the massacre. The first was initially expressed by the regional préfet (from the Vichy regime) in June 1944, then taken over by the Socialists (after the liberation of France). They acted through the Official Remembrance Committee (which was active from October 1944 to the end of 1945), then through the National Association of Martyrs’ Families (created in January 1945), which has acted continuously until today.

This memory is characterized by the assertion that the victims were politically inactive, and innocent. It is expressed though silent ceremonies, and the avoidance of speeches and taking stands. The message is structured by pacifism among Limousin Socialists. The authorities and the State administration supported local requests, and created the historical monument of the ruins of the martyred village, and the memorial known as “Monument de l’Etat,” or State monument. The local community determined the protocol of remembrance ceremonies and the pilgrimage conditions, with support from the local authorities.

In February 1953, the association broke with the State when the amnesty law was voted. The regional elected representatives supported the local community’s refusal to transfer the victims’ remains inside the State monument. The martyrs’ families association built its own community monument: the Martyrs’ Tomb. This private monument represented their identity, and remained the focus of public commemorations.

The memory system as a whole – the site, narrative, monument and ritual – was under control of the local community representatives, whose influence was considerable, even with respect to the creation of the Centre de la mémoire (Memory Center). The Conseil Général de la Haute-Vienne (the elected assembly governing département affairs, in which the Socialists had a majority), which ordered it, presented this structure as “cultural”. The municipal authorities and the Association participated vigilantly in its design, and they imposed the protocol for its inauguration, in presence of
The Catholic memory of the massacre originated in the activity of Louis Rastouil, a charismatic individual who was Bishop of Limoges in 1944. A former army officer from World War I, and initially a supporter of Pétain [1], he evolved toward opposition to the Vichy regime, when it became exceedingly militaristic. (He protected the rabbi of Schiltigheim when he was a refugee, and was betrayed by the préfet of Vichy; he left the Légion des Volontaires Français, a unit of French volunteers serving the Nazi regime, and asked the priests of his diocese to resign as well. He also refused to participate in the Te Deum demanded by the Milice, or “French Gestapo”, following the execution of Henriot, the Vichy minister of Information and Propaganda, by Resistance fighters.)

In a de-Christianized Limousin, the bishop supported the martyred town of Oradour, and the need for a pilgrimage, which required conservation of the ruins. He protested to the commander of the local German garrison, demanding that the ciboria, containing the consecrated hosts, be returned: the soldiers had desecrated the body of Christ. They had debased the sanctity of a church by killing women and children inside it, then setting it on fire. They had also killed three priests. Bishop Rastouil preached divine mercy all the more strongly since some believed it had disappeared during the crime. He had to fight the idea that God could have kept silent. The bishop strove to reestablish the sanctity of the desecrated church.

Since 1945, mass has been part of the protocol of commemorative ceremonies. It is the beginning of a silent ceremony that always ends with the bishop saying the Lord’s Prayer in front of the Martyrs’ Tomb.

The Communist memory is one of opposition and resolute action. During the liberation of France, the martyrs of the Oradour massacre were assimilated to Resistance martyrs. Subsequently, after the Communists left the government in 1947, Communist memory exclusively promoted remembrance of the innocent population, victimized by the barbaric and fascist killers. From 1945 to 1953, when the Communist party controlled the municipal authorities, they used the town ruins as a stage to produce a discourse critical of the Atlanticism of different governments, accused of wanting to “rearm the vengeful Germans.”

The Communist party took advantage of the name and the site of Oradour. Since judicial authorities were unable to judge those the press called the “Oradour killers”, the Communist discourse, which vehemently demanded their punishment, aroused much interest and approval within public opinion in the region at the time.

F. Interpretations

The Official Remembrance Committee published a book in June 1945: Oradour-sur-Glane – Visions of Horror. The authors were the two persons in charge of the Committee: Guy Pauchou, sous-préfet of Rochechouart and Pierre Masfrand, curator of the ruins. Visions of Horror became the “official book” of the Association of Martyrs’ Families, which ensures its distribution.

The massacre is presented as a perfect example of the perverse barbarity of the “German soul”. The authors used the Vichy préfet’s expression of the peaceful character of the innocent population. This interpretation satisfied General de Gaulle when he visited the ruins and met the survivors on March 3rd, 1945. Showing that no Frenchmen were immune to repression confirmed the necessary unity of the country, and the myth of its unanimous opposition to the German occupation. The Nazi massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane concluded the era of the Vichy regime, which had proved unable to protect the population. The Resistance martyrs and those from Oradour could share in the same compassion and martyrdom, with everyone’s approval.

After over eight years of inquiry and legal procedures, the judicial account was formulated by the public prosecution, during the trial before the military court of Bordeaux, in 1953. It could not modify the convictions put forward by the so-called official account, several years earlier.

Neither the 1944-45 publications, nor the courts were able to answer the victims’ question, “Why
Oradour, why us?” As early as 1944, rumors satisfied this need. Some were built around the possibility of confusion of two places with similar names. The commune of Oradour-sur-Vayres (20 kilometers southwest of Oradour-sur-Glane) was known for its support of the maquis: “Had the Germans got mixed up between the two Oradours?” Other rumors portray the revenge of a young Alsatian who had not been made welcome in the village where he took refuge, and once he had become a Waffen-SS, guided his unit to the town.

Rumors were linked to the development of revisionism, expressed through publications, edited videos, web sites and the discourse of far-right political leaders. The distribution of certain leaflets and videos was regularly prohibited by the authorities. But trials and convictions, based on witness testimony, did not hinder the diffusion of a revisionist account, linked to anti-Semitism, and the anticommunism typical of far-right political movements.

The revisionists tried to blame the massacre on members of the maquis, alleging they were “all Communists and Jews.” These maquis men, allegedly settled in the town, were said to have stored munitions in all the houses, and explosive material in the church, and to have hidden there when the Waffen-SS arrived. They were said to have panicked, and triggered gunfights and explosions. Then, through a huge conspiracy, they allegedly kept these activities quiet, told the witnesses what to say, bribed the defendants on trial, and fabricated the whole story! According to these defenders of the Nazis and some supporters of the Vichy regime, Communist resistant fighters were responsible for the massacre.

However, a historical account can be reconstituted through access to German and French archives. It is not necessarily welcome when it puts the event of the “Oradour massacre” in the context of Nazi war practices, and those which were common in occupied France.

The SS general in command of the Das Reich division called for the organization of “a brutal gang discrimination operation”; a formal order was not necessary in such circumstances. In Nazi vocabulary, “gangs” invariably meant Communists and Jews. The “discrimination” mechanism combined psychological action and arbitrary violence. Its goal was to convince a population that the persons being “discriminated” against were responsible for its misfortune, and these persons were ultimately to be blamed for the repression itself.

For such an operation to be as efficient as possible, it had to appear exclusively arbitrary: the victims were not supposed to be able to understand why a tragedy had befallen them. The “Why us?” question had to remain unanswered.

“Brutal action” was overtly prepared during military staff meetings. It was carried out by a unit on the move between two camps. On their path there was a small town, known to the local SS police (the KdS of Limoges), and the French Milice, for sheltering or having sheltered Communists and Jewish refugees – French or foreign – including some that had been incorporated into a Groupement de travailleurs étrangers (GTE number 643) by the authorities.

The Oradour massacre and war crimes were a “brutal operation” to “discriminate” the French Resistance, intended to “exclude them from the national community” (according to Lammerding), and to have them blamed for the tragedy. In this case, “discrimination” was aggravated by the murder of women and children in a church: this transgression made killers and victims incapable of reconciliation in the future. This incapacity became a long-term burden for the descendants of both groups, for whom it is infinitely difficult to imagine cohabiting. A crime such as that of Oradour-sur-Glane, committed in the name of a Nazi conception of Europe, remains an obstacle in the context of the European Community.

G. Legal Action

The trial before the Bordeaux military court, in January and February 1953, only involved 21 defendants (out of 200 or so that could have been charged!). Fourteen were French (one volunteer non-commissioned officer, and 13 that had been drafted under duress). The victims’ demand of “punishment for the Oradour killers” was supported by the elected representatives of Limousin and
the Communist party. Alsatian elected representatives (except the Communists) argued that the situation of this frontier region annexed by the Nazi regime, was specific, and requested that the French defendants not appear before the court, because before they participated in the crime, they themselves were victims of the crimes of the Nazi regime.

The court found all these defendants guilty, and the verdict triggered considerable political unrest. The RPF (Rassemblement du peuple français, a party founded by General de Gaulle at Strasbourg in 1947, to oppose the IVth Republic governments) was in control of the Alsatian associations of persons drafted by force. He organized demonstrations for the rehabilitation of the Malgré-Nous (according to the Alsatian spelling). All the Alsatian elected representatives, except for the Communists, supported this demand and the demonstrations.

About ten days after the verdict, an amnesty law obliterated part of the judgment. The Frenchmen drafted by force benefited from the law, without any impact on the other sentences. The court had convicted them of having obeyed criminal orders. The amnesty relieved them of all responsibility. The other sentences were later modified through clemency measures.

According to the victims, the trial led to a denial of justice. They considered that the State had abandoned them in favor of the Alsatians. The amnesty law caused a long-lasting conflict between the regions of Alsace and Limousin, whose inhabitants seemed to be engaged in a conflict involving competition between victims, vying for the nation’s recognition of the exceptional situations they had experienced.

Due to international agreements, judicial inquiries continued in the Federal Republic of Germany, under the authority of the public prosecutors of the Länder. There was not much of a chance that these procedures would lead to public hearings. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic did not allow for its citizens to be extradited and to appear before a judicial body outside of Germany. In 1995, a public prosecutor from Stuttgart closed the judicial inquiry, since no one was accused any more. Since the Waffen-SS officers responsible for the crime were deceased, this put an end to all legal action on behalf of the public.

Only the former Waffen-SS Lieutenant Heinz Barth, a platoon leader during the massacre, was found and tried in 1984, in East-Berlin, by a court of the Democratic Republic of Germany (Meyer, 2000). In the 1950s, the East German authorities had guaranteed that there were no SS war criminals residing in their territory. Barth confirmed the witnesses’ testimony, commenting that he had never imagined there were any survivors. He specified that the operation had been prepared, and was not an irrational, personal initiative on the part of his battalion commander. Indeed, Barth considered this officer was outstanding, and capable of reaching the rank of general in the SS. In the evening of June 10th, at their camp, the troops were instructed to say that they had been attacked by the maquis, and had reacted according to orders.

Barth was also on trial for his participation in the Lidice massacre (June 10th, 1942, in Czechoslovakia), and was given a life sentence. After the reunification of Germany, his sentence was reduced, and he was later released.

H. Bibliography

A complete bibliography would include dozens of entries, which cannot be listed without any analysis. A complete study of these publications (their origin, content, text and illustrations, and how they were received), compared to the literature on similar events (the massacres of Vercors, Ascq, Maillé, Châteaubriant...) would suffice for a separate project.

However, it is worth mentioning Oradour-sur-Glane Vision d’épouvante - Ouvrage Officiel du Comité du Souvenir et de l’Association Nationale des Familles de Martyrs d’Oradour-sur-Glane, by “Guy Pauchou, Sous-préfet de Rochechouart” (the president of the Official Remembrance Committee) and “Dr. Pierre Masfrand, Curator of the ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane.” The book was dated December 17th, 1944, and first published by Charles-Lavauzelle et Cie in June 1945. This book is part of the heritage of the Families’ Association, which regularly has it reprinted, without modifying the text.
Sources with references to archives, and bibliographies:


Selection of general studies on the subject:


Filmography:

Folin, M., and Wilmart, M., 1988, Oradour, Les Voix de la douleur, produced and distributed by France 3 Télévisions ; the film is in two 52-minute parts, and includes many witness statements, as well as a contribution from Sarah Farmer. Available on videotape from INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel).

Weber, C., 2004, Retour sur Oradour, produced by Sunset Presse and distributed by France 3 Télévisions ; the film includes witness interviews and many archive documents ; Jean-Jacques Fouché acted as historical counselor for the film. Available on DVD.

Museography:

The Centre de la mémoire d’Oradour (“Oradour Center for Remembrance,” B.P.12, 87520 Oradour-sur-Glane; www.oradour.org) has a permanent exhibition on the massacre, researched and written by Jean-Jacques Fouché, with scenography by Yves Devraine. Catalog: Comprendre Oradour (anonymous), published in 2000 by the Centre de la mémoire, Limoges.

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