



The Liberation of Paris: The History of the World War II Campaign that Freed the French Capital from Nazi Germany

Charles River Editors

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“People of Paris [...] the long-awaited day has arrived! French and Allied troops are at the gates of Paris. It is the sacred duty of all Parisians to do battle! The hour of national resurrection has sounded.” – poster displayed in Paris in August 1944

One of the most famous people in the world came to tour the city of Paris for the first time on June 28, 1940. Over the next three hours, he rode through the city’s streets, stopping to tour L’Opéra Paris. He rode down the Champs-Élysées toward the Trocadero and the Eiffel Tower, where he had his picture taken. After passing through the Arc de Triomphe, he toured the Pantheon and old medieval churches, though he did not manage to see the Louvre or the Palace of Justice. Heading back to the airport, he told his staff, “It was the dream of my life to be permitted to see Paris. I cannot say how happy I am to have that dream fulfilled today.”

Four years after his tour, Adolf Hitler would order the city’s garrison commander, General Dietrich von Choltitz, to destroy Paris, warning his subordinate that the city "must not fall into the enemy's hand except lying in complete debris." Of course, Paris was not destroyed before the Allies liberated it, but it would take more than 4 years for them to wrest control of France from Nazi Germany after they took the country by storm in about a month in 1940. By the end of D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Allies had managed to successfully land 170,000 men, with over 75,000 on the British and Canadian beaches, 57,000 on the American beaches, and over 24,000 airborne troops. Thanks to Allied deception, the German army had failed to react to prevent the Allies from making the most of their landings. Just one division, the Hitlerjugend, would arrive the following day. Despite a fearsome and bloody day, the majority of the Allied forces had held their nerve, and most importantly, achieved their objectives. This ensured Operation Overlord was ultimately successful, and victory in Europe would be achieved within less than a year. Given how the rest of the war played out, it’s often forgotten that the British and Americans, after breaking out from their D-Day beachhead on the continent, did not free Paris from its Third Reich garrison. Instead, it was the people of Paris themselves, encouraged by the Allied armies putting the Germans to rout nearby, who retook the city, led by figures from the French Resistance. The revolt that emerged involved many factions, chiefly the followers of Charles de Gaulle, or the “Gaullists,” and the communists of the PCF (Parti Communiste Français, French Communist Party). These factions provided the spearhead and the catalyst sparking the people of Paris into rebellion against their Nazi masters, and the leadership coordinating that uprising and making it a success. Their rivalry and thirst for power spurred them on to outdo each other, but they all sought the same objective: defeat of the foreign occupiers. The Liberation, once it began, required just one week to complete. Parisians fired the first shots on August 19, even as the Allies remained wary of trying to liberate Paris due to its cultural significance, knowing full well that Hitler could order the city destroyed. Nevertheless, on August 24, 1944, the French 2nd Armored Division began liberating parts of Paris, with overjoyed crowds of Parisians welcoming them, while the other Allies entered the eastern part of the city. General von Choltitz decided not to bomb Paris during a retreat, instead surrendering the city intact on August 25. That same day, Charles de Gaulle made a speech at the Hotel de Ville celebrating the freeing of the city and calling for French armies to sweep into Germany and exact “revenge” on the Germans.

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