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Olivier Wieviorka. *Normandy: The Landings to the Liberation of Paris.* tr. M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008 (1st edition, as *Histoire du débarquement en Normandie*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007). pp. xviii + 446.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/Knapp-Wieviorka.pdf>

Review by **Andrew Knapp, University of Reading**

Do we need another book about D-Day and after? Olivier Wieviorka thinks we do, not least to demolish the ‘myths’ surrounding the landings and the fighting. These are, firstly, that the Allies’ superior resources guaranteed them success; and, secondly, that the Allied armies consisted of heroes united in a common desire to make Europe safe for democracy.

The first myth takes nearly half the book to dispose of: it is only on page 190 that Wieviorka gets us onto the beaches (the subtitle of the French edition, ‘Des origines à la libération de Paris, 1941-1944’, is sadly lost in a generally excellent translation). Acknowledging the economic might of the Allies (by 1944, the United States was outproducing the combined Axis powers twofold), he nevertheless shows how economic mobilisation was held back by the normal constraints of democratic politics – trade unions in Britain, an aversion to *dirigisme* in the United States. Moreover, translating economic might into a successful operation on the scale of *Overlord* proved extraordinarily difficult. Perhaps the outstanding example of this was the landing-craft crisis, mentioned in passing by other authors but given detailed treatment by Wieviorka. As late as April, barely one-twelfth of the tank landing vessels required for *Overlord* were in place, thanks to competition from other theatres and other shipyard priorities. Nor was the arrival of the equipment – just in time – any guarantee of its successful use. Pre-invasion rehearsals showed serious flaws in inter-service co-ordination; one practice run, disrupted by German torpedo boats, led to hundreds of deaths. These were green soldiers led by inexperienced officers.

The ‘army of heroes’, indeed, is the book’s second major target. His view of Allied troops is far closer to Paul Fussell than to Stephen Ambrose. Symptomatically, the first ordinary

soldier to appear in the book, Corporal ‘Topper’ Brown of Britain’s Fifth Royal Tank Regiment, is cited for going absent without leave from his pre-embarkment camp to visit his family. The infantry, on whom the chief burden of the Normandy campaign lay, were the least motivated of any troops. GIs and Tommies (as well as Germans) could, on occasion, steal, rape, loot and even murder in Normandy. Above all, men took fright, with battle fatigue accounting for as many as 30 per cent of American casualties in the worst of the fighting. Wieviorka’s account of ‘Psychoneuroses’ on the battlefield and their treatment (vastly more humane than in World War 1) by the British, American and Canadian armies is among the most original chapters in the book. The achievement of the Allied soldiers emerges enhanced rather than diminished by his analysis of the enormous psychological strains placed on them.

Readers expecting a ‘French perspective’ on the landings will be, on the whole, disappointed; Wieviorka’s wide archival sources, listed in the French edition, are overwhelmingly British and American. And although he can do battles – his four pages on Omaha are as good as anyone’s – Wieviorka is not primarily a military historian. There are few tales of derring-do; Hastings is better on the superior quality of German weapons, Keegan on the differing *esprits de corps* of the ‘six armies’ in Normandy. Nevertheless, each of Wieviorka’s pages offers a fresh perspective (for example, the point that Leclerc’s 2nd Division was chosen to liberate Paris because, unlike other French units, it was almost entirely white). Above all, perhaps, *Normandy* betters other accounts not just on the breadth of its sweep, but on its sensitivity to the complex interactions between diplomacy and strategy, or between economics and military planning, or between planning and battlefield experience. More than an exercise in myth disposal, therefore, this big, complex book has at least a claim to be a definitive account.

Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994.

John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy: from D-Day to the Liberation of Paris*, London, Pimlico, 2004 (first edn. 1982).

Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*, London, Pan Books, 1998 (first edn. Michael Joseph, 1984).

Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989.

Andrew Knapp is Director of European Studies and Professor at the School of Languages and European Studies at the University of Reading, UK. His most recent publications include *The Uncertain Foundation: France at the Liberation, 1944-47*, ed., (2007); *The Government and Politics of France*, with Vincent Wright, (2006); *Parties and the Party System in France: A Disconnected Democracy* (2004), and “The Destruction and Liberation of Le Havre in Modern Memory”, *War in*

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History, 14.4, November 2007, pp. 476-498. He was made a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques in 2004 and became member of the Franco-British Council in 2005. Since October 2007, he has been working as co-investigator on an AHRC-sponsored joint research project on [*Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940-45*](#), covering the effects of Allied bombing on French civilians and the reactions of the Vichy state and the Free French.

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