France During World War II: From Defeat to Liberation — and the Legacy of Oradour-sur-Glane

The Outbreak of War and the Fall of France (1939–1940)

On September 3, 1939, France declared war on Germany, following the Nazi invasion of Poland two days earlier. The French army, still marked by the defensive mindset of World War I, fortified itself behind the Maginot Line. But in May 1940, Hitler's forces bypassed the line through the Ardennes, and France collapsed in a matter of weeks.

As the German army advanced, millions of civilians fled south in l'Exode—a desperate mass flight of refugees blocking the roads with carts, bicycles, and livestock. Paris was declared an "open city" on June 10 to avoid destruction, and Italy invaded from the south.

On June 16, Marshal Philippe Pétain, the hero of Verdun, became head of government and asked the French people to stop fighting. An armistice was signed with Germany on June 22, dividing the country: the north and west were occupied, while the south became the so-called "Free Zone," administered from Vichy.

That same week, a little-known general named Charles de Gaulle fled to London. On June 18, he broadcast an appeal on the BBC, urging the French to continue resistance. This Appel du 18 Juin became the founding act of the Free French Forces.

Life Under Occupation and the Vichy Regime (1940–1942)

Life under occupation was marked by fear, scarcity, and moral ambiguity. Food, clothing, and fuel were rationed; propaganda filled the press and radio; and curfews darkened the cities.

Pétain's Vichy regime collaborated with Nazi Germany, justifying it as a way to protect France and restore "moral order." On October 30, 1940, he publicly declared the policy of collaboration after meeting Hitler in Montoire. The regime enacted antisemitic laws, excluding Jews from public service and seizing their property—without even being ordered by the Germans.

Roundups began in 1941, and by 1942, the situation had worsened dramatically. Jews were forced to wear the yellow star; French police organized mass arrests such as the Rafle du Vél' d'Hiv' in July 1942, where over 13,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz, including 4,000 children.

Meanwhile, the south remained a fragile refuge. Artists, writers, and refugees—among them the young Marcel Mangel, later known as Marcel Marceau—hid in Limoges and other towns. In 1942, Marceau joined the Resistance under the codename "Marceau," helping to smuggle Jewish children to safety in Switzerland.

Resistance and Repression (1942–1944)

Resistance networks multiplied across the country. The maquis sabotaged railway lines, distributed clandestine newspapers, and gathered intelligence for the Allies.

Jean Moulin, sent by de Gaulle to unify the movements, founded the Conseil National de la Résistance in 1943. He was later captured and tortured by the Gestapo in Lyon, dying that July without betraying a single name.

In November 1942, after the Allied landings in North Africa, German forces invaded the “Free Zone.” From then on, all of France was under occupation, and repression intensified.

The Road to Liberation and the Tragedy of Oradour-sur-Glane (1944)

D-Day came on June 6, 1944. As the Allies landed in Normandy, Resistance groups across France launched uprisings to support them. In response, Hitler ordered brutal reprisals against the maquis and the civilian population.

In southwest France, the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich was moving north toward Normandy. Having already committed atrocities on the Eastern Front, they were now instructed to “create terror.” On June 9, they executed 99 men in the town of Tulle. The next day, June 10, they reached the peaceful village of Oradour-sur-Glane, near Limoges.

Oradour was not a center of Resistance activity. Yet, the soldiers surrounded the village, gathered everyone in the square for an “identity check,” then divided them: men were taken to barns, women and children to the church. The men were machine-gunned and burned; the church was set on fire, and those who tried to escape were shot.

In just a few hours, 643 people were killed—247 women, 205 children, and 191 men. Only a handful survived. Among them was Marguerite Rouffanche, who escaped through a church window and hid in a garden until the soldiers left.

Aftermath and Trials: Justice Denied (1945–1997)

After the war, France vowed never to forget. Charles de Gaulle ordered that the ruins of Oradour be preserved exactly as they were found—a permanent memorial to the victims. But justice proved far less enduring.

Of the 200 SS soldiers involved in the massacre, 65 were still alive by 1953. Only 21 were ever brought to trial, since the others lived in East Germany, which refused extradition.

The trial took place in Bordeaux in 1953.

Among the 21 defendants, 14 were Alsatians—men from eastern France whose region had been annexed by Germany in 1940. Technically, they were French citizens forced into the Waffen-SS. All but one claimed to have joined under coercion. The court found all of them guilty.

However, soon after, the French parliament voted to grant amnesty to all Alsatian conscripts. The 14 Alsatians, though convicted for participating in the massacre, were released shortly after the verdict. This caused enormous controversy in France—especially among survivors and the families of the victims in Oradour. By 1958, all of the German defendants had also been released.

The main perpetrators escaped justice entirely.

- General Heinz Lammerding, who had ordered the division to “crush the Resistance,” was never extradited from West Germany. He lived freely, ran a successful construction business, and died in

1971.

- Adolf Diekmann, the battalion commander who led the attack, was killed in Normandy in June 1944. His son, unaware of his father's role, learned the truth decades later—an emotional burden he described publicly as "a lifetime of inherited shame."

- Heinz Barth, one of the officers who gave the order to shoot and burn the men in one of the barns, was the only one later prosecuted. He was found living in East Germany and tried in Berlin in 1983. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he served only 14 years before being released in 1997 for old age and ill health—after expressing limited remorse.

In the end, the crimes of Oradour-sur-Glane remained largely unpunished.

Unearthed Memory: The Corrèze Mass-Grave of German Soldiers (1944–2023)

Nearly eighty years later, the soil of France is still revealing its wartime secrets. In the summer of 2023, near the town of Meymac in Corrèze—just 80 kilometers from Oradour—researchers and archaeologists investigated the possible site of a mass grave containing between 30 and 47 German soldiers and one French collaborator executed by the Resistance in June 1944.

According to a 98-year-old eyewitness, these men were captured by local Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP) after D-Day and summarily executed in retaliation for earlier German atrocities. The grave had been hidden for decades, its existence whispered but never confirmed. Modern geophysical surveys now suggest its location, stirring debate about whether to excavate it.

This discovery reminds us that the final months of the war in France were marked not only by liberation and heroism but also by vengeance, moral ambiguity, and unresolved trauma. The Resistance fought for freedom, yet it too could commit acts of violence that haunt the landscape today.

The Corrèze grave is therefore part of the same geography of memory as Oradour-sur-Glane—a reminder that the aftermath of war is never simple. In both cases, the land itself has become a silent witness, holding within it the complexities of justice, retribution, and remembrance.

Memory and Meaning

Today, the ruins of Oradour stand as one of France's most powerful memorials. Burned-out cars, melted clocks, and sewing machines lie frozen in time—mute witnesses to the massacre. The Centre de la Mémoire, opened in 1999, continues to tell the story to new generations.

The site is not just about tragedy; it is a lesson in remembrance. It reminds us how fragile civilization can be, how ordinary people can become victims—or perpetrators—under the weight of ideology and war.

As French poet Claude Roy wrote: