“Paris Liberated” by Colin Colahan, c. 1945

Collin Schnakenberg

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Paris, France is a city teeming with beautiful art and architecture and, in 1944, German soldiers and discontented Parisians. The five-year Nazi occupation of the city left many longing for better days. Finally, in August 1944, the moment came: Charles de Gaulle and the Americans are coming! The liberation of Paris had begun, and ended a mere week later. In their well-known book, *Is Paris Burning?*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre recount the weeks prior to the liberation, the tense week itself, and the aftermath that followed.

Collins and Lapierre were not technically historians by trade but investigative journalists (at the time this book was published in 1965, Collins was chief of *Newsweek*’s Paris bureau, and Lapierre, a senior reporter for the French magazine *Paris Match*), and they worked hard to ensure that their first book was as accurate and informative (not to mention entertaining) as possible. The result bridged a gap many academic historians have yet to bridge: the appeal of history to the general populace. *Is Paris Burning?* was translated into thirty different languages and sold ten million copies worldwide. The year after the publication of the book, a movie based on the book was released, starring famous celebrities.
such as Charles Boyer, Kirk Douglas, and Orson Welles. Collins and Lapierre wrote other books after their early success, including a book about the formation of Israel (O Jerusalem! 1972) and a book about the Indian independence movement (Freedom at Midnight 1975). Unfortunately, by the 1980s, Collins and Lapierre moved away from nonfiction books and into the world of fiction. Nevertheless, for their first book, they were able to use their skills as investigative journalists to find and use sources that an academic historian may not have had access to or the ability to use in order to write *Is Paris Burning*?

As mentioned before, *Is Paris Burning*? was written for the public and not experts in the field. As such, it was written for both information and enjoyment. Collins and Lapierre have no definite point or thesis they are trying to prove. However, Collins and Lapierre seem to (perhaps subconsciously or subliminally) present a few arguments in their narrative. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is that Dietrich von Choltitz (the German commander of Paris) defied Hitler’s orders and wanted to give Paris to the Americans to prevent the destruction of the city; which most likely comes from the authors’ interview with von Choltitz himself. This is a unique view for Lapierre, as he was a native Parisian and a child in Paris during the liberation. To this day, Parisians, especially those alive during the Nazi occupation, look upon von Choltitz with disdain. Collins and Lapierre also attempt to show how the Communists tried to start a rebellion in Paris before the Americans appeared, and how the de Gaullists debated with them over this action. As Collins was an American and Lapierre French, they do tend to have a slight bias against the higher ranked Germans,
with the exception of von Choltitz and his staff. Despite these opinions, the authors try to remain objective and simply present the story.

Collins and Lapierre present the liberation of Paris from perspectives of Germans, Americans, French (both de Gaullists and Communists), and even those who were neutral. In addition, they provide perspectives from both those in command and those following orders. By following many different stories, Collins and Lapierre immerse the reader into 1944 Paris. Such a technique allows the reader to relate to the characters involved, which is especially depressing if the characters happen to die, such as Sergeant Larry Kelly, who wanted desperately to be the first American in Paris but was killed by friendly fire 50 yards before he accomplished his goal (277). The authors show internal struggles as well as the external war. General Lieutenant Dietrich von Choltitz struggles when ordered by none other than Adolf Hitler to turn Paris into the new Stalingrad by destroying it, from the Eiffel Tower, to the Louvre, to Notre Dame. Every bridge and landmark in Paris was already mined and ready for demolition; all that was needed was von Choltitz’s order. But, to the relief of the world, von Choltitz decided secretly to turn Paris over to the Allies. Von Choltitz constantly feared that the German High Command would discover his intentions (at one point, an Oberstrumbannführer, the SS equivalent of a Lieutenant Colonel, marched into his office and von Choltitz was sure he was under arrest until the Oberstrumbannführer simply demanded a tapestry from the Louvre). General Dwight Eisenhower also struggled internally, as he wanted to avoid street fighting in Paris. Von Choltitz offered Eisenhower little resistance, but he didn’t
know if he could trust the Nazi officer. Collins and Lapierre presented the little known struggle between the Communists, led by the mysterious “Colonel Rol”, and the de Gaullists, led by Jacques Chaban-Delmas and Alexandre Parodi, over control of the FFI, or French resistance, in Paris. The Communists, seeing that once de Gaulle entered the city, he would control it after the war, wanted to start a rebellion in Paris and root out the Germans before the Americans arrived while the de Gaullists wanted to wait for the American’s liberation. Both the Communists and the de Gaullists agreed with Hitler that “he who holds Paris holds France” (29).

Collins and Lapierre wrote from numerous perspectives and recounted hundreds of stories: Marie-Hélène Lefaucheux’s trek on bicycle following her imprisoned husband as he was taken to Germany, Swedish consul Raoul Nordling’s heroic attempts to save the lives of hundreds of Parisians, Charles de Gaulle’s deception of his American counterparts in his haste to get to Paris, Willi Wagenknect’s bitterness as he remained one of the few prisoners in Paris instead of being transferred to Germany, the race to put the French flag on the Eiffel Tower, and a French collaborator, Antoinette Charbonnier, as she watches her doom pass by in the form of the American liberators.

The authors back their book with an incredible amount of sources. In the acknowledgements, they reveal that they interviewed over 800 different people to get their personal experiences (including the major players of the liberation: von Choltitz, Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, George Patton, Parodi, Col. Rol. etc.), in addition to consulting French, German, British and American primary and
Review: Is Paris Burning?

secondary sources. While the information is undoubtedly accurate, the book may possibly be rejected by some academic historians as too scattered and confusing due to the lack of chronology in the book. Collins and Lapierre stop recounting a story, only to pick it back up in another chapter. However, there seems to be no alternative way to tell the story chronologically without making it confusing. Overall, Collins and Lapierre do a masterful job of reporting the liberation of Paris with an energetic and informative flair.