

Liberating and Being Liberated in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Europe

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ABSTRACT

By bringing an end to foreign domination—whether in the form of *de facto* or *de jure* annexation, or military occupation—and the oppression that goes with it, liberation has been an exceptional moment in the history of European nations. It is also a fragile one, in which violence can either subside or resume, and state structures can be reestablished or collapse: in short, a moment of uncertainty in which socio-political relations are reconfigured. In particular, use of the term often contributes to a discourse legitimizing action. For instance, can the forces that “liberate” present themselves as being “liberating,” or be perceived (or not) as such by a part of “liberated” populations. While the experiences of foreign domination are diverse, those of liberation do not correspond to any scripted storyline.



British soldiers giving chocolate to Dutch civilians during the liberation of the Netherlands, 1944. Photograph: Sergeant Laing from no. 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit. Photograph B10245, Imperial War Museums. Source : Photographie B10245, [Imperial War Museums](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/object/b10245).

Process and Actors

The liberation of a territory under foreign domination is sometimes planned and negotiated, with the military occupation being seen as temporary, in advance of a final resolution to the conflict. This was the case for the Prussia's occupation of France between 1871 and 1873, initially to establish peace, and later to ensure security. Those who oppose this foreign presence evoke the need of "deliverance."

During the twentieth century, liberation was increasingly the result of an armed intervention. It was consequently anticipated or deferred by military and political actors, who were not always pursuing the same goals. While the liberation of Paris in August 1944 was highly symbolic for the Provisional Government of the French Republic, it was secondary for the American leadership, which saw the European front in its entirety. Some occupied territories were liberated by endogenous forces growing out of internal resistance, doing so with or without the help of civilians, who sometimes sparked uprisings varying in their scope and spontaneity, such as the Four days of Naples in September 1943 or the Warsaw Uprising between August and October 1944.

These insurrections were rarely victorious without the direct or indirect support of regular armies. This was the case for the liberation of Marseille in August 1944, after multiple days of revolt supported by French regular troops that had landed in Provence. In other cases, the territories under domination were liberated by foreign armies, which could pave the way for a new occupation. For instance, Latvia was incorporated into the USSR in 1940, occupied by the Wehrmacht in 1941, and then again by the Red Army in 1944. While certain Latvians were pro-Soviet, others considered the Red Army, which presented itself as a liberating entity, to be a new occupying force. The term "liberation" has often been manipulated by the actors involved. The Nazi party thus spoke of the "liberation of the Rhineland" (*Rheinlandbefreiung* in German) to describe the re-militarization of this area in 1936.

Violence and Emotions

The liberation of a territory can take various forms: some take place with no shots or very few shots being fired, for example when the occupying army decides to retreat. When the first British troops entered Lille on October 17, 1918, the German army had already left the city a few days earlier. However, fighting can last, reaching great intensity and causing great human loss and material destruction, such as that suffered by the cities of Normandy in 1944. Finally, some liberations are only temporary, as often-bloody repression is unleashed on civilians. The latter are subsequently plunged into a cycle of occupations/liberations/re-occupations, such as Madrid during the Spanish War of Independence against Napoleonic domination between 1808 and 1814.

When it puts an end to painful experiences of occupation, liberation is always a hoped-for event on the part of the population, with the exception of auxiliaries of the foreign domination, who fear both loss of power and reprisals. While in certain cases liberated but distressed civilians act with more reserve, the initial hours of liberation are often accompanied by collective jubilation. "An entire ecstatic city just threw itself at us," Albert Londres bore witness in 1918, during the previously mentioned liberation of Lille. It is later, during the hours or days that follow, that political and military authorities organize a program of cathartic rites intended to exalt the union between the population and their liberators, in which we often find military parades, public speaking, and public dances, along with ceremonies of remembrance for the dead.

Liberation, however, does not end violence, and can sometimes even exacerbate it. It can be accompanied by extra-judicial purge trials to punish traitors, which are initiated against those accused of collaboration. It can also sometimes agitate nationalism that was long buried under the yoke of occupation, reconfigure the socio-political power relations within divided communities, and impose racial conceptions of nationality, as in Bohemia after the Second World War.

In addition, this violence is sometimes gendered. Violence contributed to the revirilization process of men

humiliated by the occupation of their country, for instance through the practice of shearing, which targeted women and became a Europe-wide phenomenon after its beginnings in The Great War. Gendered violence could also be the act of foreign armies, as with the rapes, murders, and pillaging committed by the French army in Italy in the spring of 1944. The boundary between liberation and invasion can therefore be a fine line for civilians, especially when the army's representations of the latter include a range of evaluations between the categories of "friend" and "foe." In Alsatia in 1918, and then again in 1945, the French army was suspicious of Alsatians, for fear of the presence of spies at the front.

Transitions and Political Power Relations

Liberations are moments of transition between the occupation and its repressive order, and the re-establishment—or creation—of another political order. During this moment of uncertainty, which can range from a few hours to a number of weeks, who holds power, and at what scale? In Brussels, after the abdication of Emperor Wilhelm II, German soldiers created a revolutionary council on November 9, 1918, and restored some of their rights to municipal authorities. The situation nevertheless remained chaotic until the departure of the last occupiers on November 17. While military forces can sometimes temporarily maintain order, the latter is more or less quickly taken charge of by local communities or agents of the central authority, who implement temporary administrative organizations or use pre-existing structures and personnel. It is during this waiting period that rival powers capable of triggering a civil war can be exacerbated. While in France the rapid reestablishment of republican legality in 1944 limited centrifugal forces, the same was not true for Greece, which descended into civil war.

Finally, the expectations of populations can quickly be disappointed, as soon as they sense that there has hardly been any improvement in their condition. In France, Paris was liberated on August 25, 1944, but Saint-Nazaire only on May 11, 1945, after the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. In Europe, liberation did not necessarily mean an end to war and its suffering.

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