

***Magna Carta* for Liberation Route Europe**

About Liberation Route Europe

Liberation Route Europe focuses on the liberation of continental Europe from German occupation, including its long-term legacy and sometimes ambivalent consequences.

Liberation Route Europe connects the main regions along the advance of the Western Allied Forces – from southern England to Berlin at the end of the Second World War – with Poland, a country that after German occupation was subjected to decades of communist dictatorship and Soviet domination. This project is the first on a European scale to create a multinational perspective on war, occupation and liberation. Biographical stories of civilians and soldiers connected to the Liberation Route particularly demonstrate the complexity of individual war experiences in 1944-1945. Liberation from German occupation had manifold meanings and utterly different consequences, depending on where and under which circumstances people lived through the turmoil of that time. The project aims to make this core part of European history visible and accessible, not least by creating innovative and sustainable tourism-related products and opportunities. It also aims to link history to the present and to raise awareness of the importance of freedom as a common value of Europeans today.

General historical context

The historical roots of the European Union lie in the destruction wrought during the Second World War. Its immediate point of origin was a pact between two totalitarian states, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, on the basis of which the two countries attacked and divided Poland in September 1939. Europe lay at the epicentre of the ensuing conflict. Destruction, death and atrocities reached their zenith in the struggle waged against Germany and its allies by the Western democracies and the communist Soviet Union after the latter was attacked by the German Wehrmacht in June 1941.

Europe's self-laceration had already begun in 1914. The Second World War would not have been possible without the First – both conflicts are inextricably interconnected. The First

World War resulted in the October Revolution of 1917, which led to the establishment of a radical communist system in Russia, as well as the rise of fascism and National Socialism.

Nevertheless, there was no necessary path from 1918 to 1939. Europe had an opportunity for peace and freedom in the interwar period. There were promising approaches to cooperation, stability and reconciliation that ultimately were unable to prevail over revisionism, autocracy and dictatorship. The weakness of the Western democracies became especially apparent when neither Great Britain nor France halted the aggressive course of German politics. Furthermore, from the beginning of the 1930s, the violence between and within states increased across Europe, until finally Germany plunged the continent into a devastating war in 1939.

Germany and its allies overran nearly all of continental Europe, establishing different occupation regimes in different countries. The practice of occupation was far more radical in Eastern Europe than it was in Western or Southern Europe. In fact, Poland and the western territories of the Soviet Union became the primary scene of the Holocaust during the war of annihilation conducted by the Nazi regime. Jews and others deemed racially inferior were transported from all over the continent to Eastern Europe for extermination. Due to its sheer scope and unimaginable horror, this genocide became the signature event of the Second World War.

The Soviet Union subjected large swathes of Eastern Europe to brutal rule in 1939-1940 and again from 1944 onwards. Oppression, persecution and mass murder were therefore a central component of the war experience for a majority of Europeans, but so too were various forms of engagement with the occupying forces, including collaboration and resistance.

The destructive violence of the Second World War culminated in 1944-1945. In no other 12 month period of the war were more soldiers involved, greater battles fought, more people killed, more cities destroyed and more land laid to waste. At the end, Europe was liberated from National Socialism, but the victory left behind a ruined continent with untold millions uprooted and traumatized. Western Europe soon established a free democratic system, while communist dictatorships ruled in the East. Liberation meant very different things to Europeans in 1945.

The hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War was marked in 2014, as well as the fifty-seventh anniversary of the start of the Second World War and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the peaceful revolution of 1989. It is therefore of particular importance for Liberation Route Europe that the history of the liberation of 1944-1945 be embedded in the wider context of the two World Wars, which began in 1914 and only ended, in terms of their political aftermath, in 1989-1990.

Liberation Route Europe currently focuses on Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Poland to illuminate different military, political and societal perspectives on the liberation of Europe in the key 12 month period spanning 1944-1945. In the future, the project will be expanded to include more partners from other European countries, thereby marking other routes. The following sections describe the different historical settings in the countries at war.

National historical contexts

Great Britain

Britain played a key role in the resistance against Germany and its final defeat. After years of appeasement, the British leadership took a firm stand when the Wehrmacht invaded Poland, declaring war on Germany on 3 September 1939. The decision to fight on in summer 1940 was one of the decisive moments of the Second World War. Germany was unable to force Britain to surrender, even after the first large strategic air offensive in history. Known as the Blitz, the bombing killed an estimated 43,000 British civilians in 1940-1941, but did not diminish the British ability to continue fighting.

From then on Britain continued the war against the Axis powers in the Mediterranean and, from 1942 onwards, waged a massive bombing offensive against the German mainland. Winston Churchill and the British leadership saw the strategic *Schwerpunkt* of the European theatre of war more in the Mediterranean than in France. However, as a result of American pressure it was finally agreed that a Second Front be opened in France. Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious operation in history, was launched from southern England on 6 June 1944. After heavy fighting against German resistance in Normandy, British, Commonwealth

and American troops liberated northern France. However, the subsequent British advance was halted in the southern Netherlands in autumn 1944. In March 1945, British and Canadian forces crossed the Rhine, liberated the northern Netherlands and occupied northern Germany.

While Britain was one of the major victors of the Second World War, its war experience was different from most other European countries. With the exception of the Channel Islands, British soil was not occupied, and apart from the German bombing, saw no fighting. The casualties – both civilians and soldiers – were considerably fewer than those of the other Great Powers. Furthermore, the campaigns of the British Armed Forces against the Wehrmacht were of a different character to the war of annihilation which ravaged Eastern Europe.

Victory over Germany and Japan also entailed an imperial dimension for Great Britain. In 1941-1942, the Japanese had occupied British Malaya. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the British re-established their colonial regime, replacing the Japanese occupation.

The biographies that will be selected for Liberation Route Europe will represent the broad spectrum of the British war experience: for example, the fate of an RAF pilot fighting in different theatres of war and being captured by the Germans; auxiliaries caring for the wounded from the Battle of Normandy; civilians who fell victim to German air raids on London; officers involved in the suppression of the revolt in Athens 1944/45; and officers involved in the reoccupation of Malaya.

France

In 1940, the German Wehrmacht occupied northern and western France after a six-week battle, and in November 1942 they also took control of the southern part of France. An authoritarian French regime was established at Vichy in 1940 under Marshal Pétain, and this government collaborated closely with the German occupation authorities, providing assistance in the deportation of 76,000 French Jews, of whom only 2,500 survived. The French Resistance – a movement that brought together people of highly divergent political persuasions – experienced its most active phase in 1944. In reprisal, German anti-partisan campaigns killed 10,000 to 15,000 people, of whom 7,000 to 10,000 were civilians.

In the summer of 1944, France was the most important theatre of the war in Western Europe. After the Allied landing in Normandy, one of the greatest battles of matériel of the Second World War raged for ten weeks. This battle resulted not only in the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers, but also many French civilians. Almost all of the larger cities in the region were badly damaged. In broad parts of southern and northern France, however, there was very little large-scale fighting due to the speed of the Allied advance, which began in August 1944 and was accelerated by the German retreat after the Allied landing on the French Riviera. By September 1944, large parts of France had been liberated, but in the process, bombardments – predominantly Allied but also German – had killed some 65,000 civilians.

Charles de Gaulle, who had led 'Free France' since 1940, experienced political success in liberated France. He was also able to garner recognition for France as a victorious power at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. These successes did not change the fact that the Vichy regime had collaborated with the German Reich and had fought a defensive war against the Allies in Africa and the Middle East in 1940, 1941 and 1942.

A broad spectrum of French experiences of war and liberation will be represented in biographies selected for Liberation Route Europe. They include soldiers of the 1939-1940 war who bore witness to the defeat; resistance fighters of different political backgrounds, including those who initially worked for the Vichy regime and then for the French Resistance; civilians and their daily life in occupied France and later under German and Allied bombs; people arrested, deported or interned; voluntary and forced labourers in Germany and France, as well as the victims of German atrocities. The massacre of Oradour-sur-Glane represents both extremes of the French occupation and war experience: on the one hand it was the largest massacre of its kind, and on the other hand 19 of the SS troops who participated in the atrocities were Alsatian.

To obtain the sought-after multiple perspectives for Liberation Route Europe, the relief of being liberated from German oppression will be contrasted with examples of revenge upon real and suspected collaborators. In France, around 9,000 men and women fell victim to such acts, and 1,500 more were executed after being tried. Approximately, 350,000 people were, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by the judicial purge ('Epuración judiciaire'). Another massacre will also be highlighted: on 8 May 1945 – the day of German capitulation –

French troops and militias in Algeria killed many thousands of people in Sétif, Guelma and Kherrata. For the French and Algerians, tens of thousands of whom fought against the Wehrmacht in French uniform, the end of the war was a double-edged sword. An awareness of ambivalences and contradictions will guide the selection of biographies.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands was occupied in 1940 after five days of short but heavy ground combat and German bombardment, which severely damaged the city centres of Rotterdam and Middelburg. Although several thousand civilians died in Allied bombings, in comparison to other countries, the Dutch population was less affected by combat operations until the autumn of 1944. Workers held strikes between 1941 and 1944 but there was no guerrilla war comparable to France or Poland. A far higher percentage of Jews than in most Western European countries were deported from the Netherlands to the death camps. While in France two-thirds of Jewish communities were able to escape the clutches of the Germans, three-quarters of the Jews from the Netherlands were murdered. The Dutch population had to face the hardships of German occupation, the deportation of labourers to Germany and acts of revenge such as occurred in Putten, where in October 1944 hundreds of men were deported and parts of the village destroyed by German troops in retaliation for an assault on a German officer's vehicle.

The southern Netherlands was liberated by Allied troops in the weeks between September and November 1944 during Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Scheldt, while the larger northern part of the country followed in April-May 1945 after the Rhineland Assault. The Dutch population in the German-occupied zone suffered through the traumatic experience of the harsh winter of starvation in 1944-1945. A German blockade cut off food and fuel shipments from farming areas to punish the Dutch for the general railway strike during Operation Market Garden and the following months, with approximately 22,000 people dying from the direct or indirect consequences of malnutrition. The German blockade lasted six weeks, but the strike continued until May 1945, which also aggravated the situation in the western part of the country.

According to the Dutch Red Cross, at the end of the Second World War almost one million people in the Netherlands had lost their homes, equivalent to one in ten of the Dutch population.

Liberation also entailed an imperial dimension for the Netherlands. In 1941-1942 the Japanese had occupied the Dutch colonies in South East Asia and more than 8,000 Dutch soldiers and 13,000 civilians of European origin perished in the POW and internment camps. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the liberated Netherlands was in a position to re-establish a colonial regime in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), replacing the Japanese occupation.

These aspects of the Dutch experience will be considered in the selection of biographies. So too will the fate of Jewish people in the Netherlands – the life stories of those who collaborated with the German occupation regime and those who actively fought against Germany, whether in the Allied armed forces or as a resistance fighter in their own country. As was the case in France, we will also present the stories of those who supported the Nazi regime – such as 25,000 Dutch SS men – for whom 1944-1945 was anything but a liberation. After the war, collaborators were at first handled brutally, with German citizens forced to leave the country and a proposal made to annex parts of Germany. However, in the end, most war criminals received only light sentences.

Poland

Poland was without a doubt one of the states that suffered the most during the Second World War. In September-October 1939, the Wehrmacht occupied the western part of the country and the Red Army the eastern part. The Polish government evacuated to London. Both occupying powers established extremely ruthless regimes, murdering tens of thousands of Poland's elite as early as 1939-1940. In the territories incorporated into the Third Reich, Poles were subjected to a brutal process of Germanization, forced to sign what was known as the Deutsche Volksliste and subsequently conscripted into the Wehrmacht. Half the victims of the Holocaust, three million, were Polish citizens. The Christian Poles also suffered, especially under German racial and exploitation policy. The number of people executed and those who died due to the occupation exceeded two million. Thus, the destruction was on a completely different scale from Western Europe.

The Armia Krajowa (Home Army) constituted one of the biggest and most sophisticated resistance movements in Europe and sought in vain, most notably during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, to exercise influence on the political future of post-war Poland. Stalin created a communist government in the form of the Lublin Committee in 1944, which was not recognized by the official Polish government in exile in London. In 1944-1945 there were three Polish armies fighting against the Germans: one on the side of the Western Allies, one on the side of the Red Army, and the Armia Krajowa itself in Poland. In addition to the military formations fighting the Germans, the Poles created a unique phenomenon in occupied Europe: an underground state, with a parliament composed of the most important parties, a civil administration, schools and courts.

Eastern Poland was again occupied by the Soviet armed forces in the summer of 1944, and western Poland in the spring of 1945. The new borders of the Polish state were decided at the Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. Stalin was able to integrate Eastern Poland, which he had already annexed in 1939, into the Soviet Union, with the new Polish state being compensated for this with former German territories in the western and northern part of Poland. The Polish population of eastern Poland was expelled and resettled primarily to the new parts of the country in the west, from which the Germans were in turn expelled. The Polish underground movement continued its armed struggle against the Soviets and the Communists for a number of years, with many resistance fighters from the war years being persecuted, imprisoned, executed or deported to the USSR.

Nominally, Poland ended the war as one of the victors. Polish soldiers even took part in the capture of Berlin alongside the Red Army. In reality, as a result of the war, Poland lost its independence, half of its territory and its internal freedom.

The selection of biographies will provide examples of the different experiences of Jewish and Christian Poles under German and Soviet occupation, as well as soldiers who fought in the three armies. The fate of thousands of Poles who, because they were considered ethnic Germans, fought in German uniform in the Wehrmacht, will also be described.

Germany

Germany was in a fundamentally different position to that of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands or Poland. The German dictator Adolf Hitler was the central figure in the

decision to go to war and in the annihilation of the Jews. However, it must be emphasized that the Nazi regime was supported by a majority of the German people for a variety of reasons, such as ideological conviction, opportunism, economic and social advantages, or belief in national rebirth etc. The support for the regime reached its peak in 1940 after the fall of France, and only diminished from 1943 onwards.

The Germans accepted and gave form to the social practice of National Socialism – whether in Germany itself or in the occupied countries. Hundreds of thousands committed crimes of all kinds. Around 17 million German men served as loyal soldiers in the Wehrmacht and contributed to a war of annihilation in the East and to a certain extent in Southeast Europe. They were also responsible for the harsh and brutal occupation of Western and Southern Europe.

The criminal character of the war was widely known. Although a majority of the people did not approve of the Holocaust, they did not do anything to prevent it. In fact, most Germans were passive bystanders. Only a small group of civilians and soldiers exercised active resistance against the Nazi dictatorship. Their most prominent operation, the 20 July 1944 plot, failed, resulting in even more ruthless party control over society.

Occupation by the Allied troops in 1944-1945 was therefore not regarded as a liberation but rather as a bitter defeat, all the more so as German military and civilian deaths in 1944-1945 amounted to 3 to 4 million. In the West, the occupying powers soon gained broad acceptance, due to their promotion of a liberal, free democracy and their initiation of economic recovery. In East Germany, however, the Soviet Union established a communist dictatorship that was excessively brutal, especially in the early years, claiming tens of thousands of victims.

German wartime experiences differed widely at the individual level. Until 1945 Germany was not occupied, so that life on the home front was much more peaceful than in the occupied countries. The air war, which reached its destructive apex over Germany in 1944-1945, affected urban civilian populations far more than the countryside. In addition, there was also a major contrast between wartime experience in the East and in the West. Large parts of West Germany were overrun by Allied troops. On the western border, severe battles were fought, such as the Huertgenwald, or during the Rhineland Offensive in which cities such as

Emmerich, Wesel or Kleve were almost completely destroyed by Allied bombardment. In the East, however, the fighting was even fiercer. The civilian population, abandoned and left without protection from the advance of the Red Army, fled or was expelled from their homes.

These aspects of the war will be taken into consideration in the biographical case studies, as will the different experiences of those persecuted by the Nazi regime. Concentration camp inmates and forced labourers perceived the liberation of the camps by Allied forces as salvation. Some German Jews who had fled Germany returned as Allied soldiers. Political opponents were drafted into the Wehrmacht after imprisonment in concentration camps. The biographies will also provide examples of men who served as loyal soldiers in the Wehrmacht, as well as others who were perpetrators of the Holocaust, and also the stories of women who experienced the war in Germany. The choice would not be balanced without also considering those who risked and lost their lives conspiring against Hitler and even attempting to kill him, although they had previously been loyal servants of the Nazi regime.

The comparison of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Germany illuminates the variety of wartime experiences in Europe, particularly during the liberation period of 1944-1945. The often contradictory complexity will become significantly clearer with the planned expansion of Liberation Route Europe to include partners in other European countries. Nevertheless, there are still important similarities between the nations' experience, which Liberation Route Europe will also highlight. War and death, occupation and liberation, repression and guilt, affected nearly every European society. The experiences of fighting, killing and death, of sorrow and destruction, are all part of the legacy of the Second World War which connects European nations to one another.

Processes of national commemoration

The Second World War was a global event, but remembrance and commemoration differs widely at the national level.

The collective memory in Great Britain was and still is much more dominated by the fighting on the battlefields than by themes such as occupation, atrocities or the Holocaust. As a

response to a rather self-critical perception of the British war contribution, since the late 1970s, a narrative which focuses on the heroism of British soldiers has been established. Today, this interpretation still dominates public opinion, but it amounts to a reduction of the Second World War to British victories (El Alamein or Normandy) and to the bravery of British soldiers, a public discourse in which there is little place for historical complexity, despite the nuanced approaches of academic historians.

In France, the resistance to the German occupation forms the basic national narrative, occluding other aspects, such as the defeat of 1940, collaboration, those killed in the battles of 1944-1945 or purges after the liberation. Only in the 1970s did the national memory of suffering and heroism begin to accommodate a more differentiated picture. In 1995, President Jacques Chirac apologized for the support provided by French police during the wartime deportation of French Jewry.

The Dutch case has some similarities with the French. In the post-Second World War period, Dutch identity was built on heroic stories of resistance in the Netherlands and of Queen Wilhelmina in exile in London, in defiance of the Nazi regime, the tragedy of Rotterdam and the famine of 1944. Society was fixated on the antagonism of right and wrong and barely on the shades of grey of historical reality. To a greater or lesser extent, the narrative of victimhood also dominated here. Only after 1970 did the Holocaust become a central focus of commemoration, while the collaboration with and accommodation of the occupiers by Dutch citizens under German occupation also gained more attention. Civilian casualties from allied bombing, however, have only obtained a place in collective memory in more recent decades.

In Poland, the politics of memory under the communist regime remained close to the official commemoration policy of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, national-heroic memory was officially promoted while pivotal events, such as the Warsaw Uprising, were excluded, along with the USSR's occupation and criminal activity in eastern Poland. As in the GDR, the Jews were not treated as a special group of victims. Although this line had already begun to soften in the mid-1950s as de-Stalinization began, the Polish national narrative remained subordinate to the communist. Only after 1989 was it possible to speak openly about Soviet crimes. The Katyń massacre and Soviet deportations of Poles became very important topics in a newly shaped historical narrative and collective memory in Poland. A decade later, the

Polish historical narrative encompassed the most sensitive wartime issues, which had been taboo until then: the murder of the Jews in the small town of Jedwabne in July 1941, committed by its Polish inhabitants, and other crimes by Poles against Jews.

While in the GDR a communist narrative which was not dissimilar to that of Poland remained predominant, there was consensus in the early days of the Federal Republic that the German population had been the innocent victims of a criminal Nazi regime. This image only slowly began to change in the 1960s, continuing until the end of the 1970s, when the Holocaust assumed its central place in collective memory. Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker's speech in 1985 was an important event, with the nation's highest ranking politician acknowledging that the surrender of May 1945 was an act of liberation. The actual dimensions of German crimes and the general societal acceptance of National Socialism only became clear to a broader public in the 1990s.

From a scholarly perspective, it is an easy task to unmask individual countries' narratives as abbreviated, distorted or untrue. Collective memory is as much about the creation of meaning as the recreation of events. Nations and societies need myths to be able to develop positive self-images, particularly after a total war.

The history of the World Wars provides a set of building blocks from which people select what is useful to them as a society, a group or as individuals. In the process, they may ignore painful, agonizing and incriminating elements. Memory has evolved differently in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Germany, but the basic principle of repression and selectivity functions in a very similar fashion. All European nations find it difficult to deal with the traumatic heritage of the Second World War.

A European Legacy

Liberation Route Europe views experiences and memories of liberation from National Socialism and German occupation at the national, regional and individual levels. The project will use an international comparative approach to critically reflect on national master narratives and identity formation. This approach will clarify the nature of similarities and differences across Europe. War and suffering, collaboration and resistance, guilt and

repression, affected nearly all parts of Europe. The shared experience of trauma – as different as it may be in its particulars – will allow European states to come together in peace and freedom for a new chapter in the continent’s history. In fact, we are at a turning point in this history – moving from the age of moral condemnation to growing mutual understanding and truly historical analysis. In fact, Liberation Route Europe understands itself as an agent of this process. The European Union, as a community of values, stems directly from the Second World War. Liberation Route Europe’s task, therefore, is to commemorate this heritage, to keep it alive and open to experience, and thereby to strengthen the sense of European identity based on common European values. By telling the personal stories of those involved – whether victims, aggressors or liberators – lessons of peace, liberty, democracy, non-discrimination and international cooperation can be taught and learned.