Oradour-sur-Glane – The "martyred village"

Stéphanie Boutaud

A peaceful and pleasant village

Before and during the Second World War, Oradour-sur-Glane, near Limoges, was a prosperous, animated and dynamic town. The municipality's activity was mainly focused on agriculture, and many businesses and services animated its streets. This peaceful village was a refuge for different populations, including Spanish republicans, Alsatian refugees and people who had been expelled from the Moselle after its annexation in 1940.

Oradour, a victim of the *Das Reich* division

The Waffen SS operated on the Eastern front beginning in June 1941. There they spread terror, with multiple attacks on civilians, mass killings, burnings of villages, etc. On the Western front, beginning in spring 1944 in France, the *Das Reich* division redeployed these same methods of terror, notably in Tulle, Oradour-sur-Glane and Mouleydier.

The unfolding of the massacre

On 10 June 1944, near 2pm, the town of Oradour was encircled and invaded by the 3rd Company of the *Der Führer* regiment of the SS division *Das Reich*.

Under the guise of an identity check and weapons sweep, all the residents – men, women and children of all ages – were gathered on the village marketplace. The women and children were then brought to the church, while the men were spread out to different locations that the soldiers had flagged beforehand.

An explosion was then heard in the village – it was the signal to begin killing the men, who were executed simultaneously on the spot and then set on fire, as was the entirety of the village. Six men were able to escape from the Laudy barn; one of them was shot while on the run, and five managed to leave the burning village in the late afternoon.

During this time, around 450 women and children were locked inside the church. Soldiers placed a crate of phosphorous grenades next to it, which they then detonated. The fire was accompanied by machine gun strafing. Two women escaped from the church through a window. One of them was killed instantly, as well as her baby. Only the second one, while injured, was able to hide and survived.

In the streets, those who attempted escape or who arrived in the village over the course of the afternoon were shot dead. In late afternoon, the town was reduced to smouldering ruins.

In the evening, part of the troops guarded the town. Over the next two days, some SS returned to remove traces of the massacre, ensuring that the victims could not be identified. Around 200 men in total took part in these three days.

On the evening of 10 June, six had survived the execution sites (five men and a woman), thirty others had hidden inside the village or had been able to escape, and fifteen had been spared by arriving on the evening tram. 643 victims have been officially reported.

Ruins and remembrance

On 4 March 1945, during his visit, General de Gaulle made the Oradour massacre a symbol of Nazi barbarism and confirmed that the ruins of the martyred village would be preserved. This date was an important moment in the process of national remembrance. The ruins

were classified as a historic monument with the law of 10 May 1946 and from then on were preserved, protected and maintained by the state.

In Moselle, the municipality of Charly bears the name of Charly-Oradour since 1950, as a tribute to its 39 residents who were victims of the massacre (in addition to 5 victims from Montoy-Flanville). One of the survivors, Roger Godfrin, aged 8 years old at the time, was from Charly.

Oradour-sur-Glane has a unique place in the national memory. Every 10 June, an official commemoration is organised. It begins with a mass, continues with a procession that crosses first the village and then the martyred village, with stops made for moments of remembrance, and then concludes with a ceremony at the tomb of the martyrs, located inside the village cemetery.

In the late 1980s, as many of the eyewitnesses of the tragedy began passing away, others became more vocal, in books, interviews or by meeting with groups of visitors.

The Oradour Memorial Centre: a link between the past and the future

On 12 May 1999, the Memorial Centre opened its doors. With a new and unique access to the ruins of the martyred village, it offers visitors a documented path replacing the Oradour massacre within its historical context, most notably with a film produced amongst the ruins, drawing from the eyewitness testimony of survivors. This helps to inform the visitor and invites them to think about matters of justice and remembrance.

4 September 2013: a historic visit

While many French and foreign dignitaries and political representatives frequently honour Oradour and the Memorial Center with their presence, the visit of president François Hollande hosting his German counterpart Joachim Gauck was of a more exceptional nature. Indeed, it was the very first time that a German leader had come to pay respects to the memory of the victims of the massacre. An act of recognition, a gesture of peace which took the form of a simple and humble visit by the two men, guided by Robert Hébras, a survivor of the tragedy, who was 88 years old at the time.

Further reading

Andrea Erkenbrecher, *Oradour und die Deutschen. Geschichtsrevisionismus, strafrechtliche Verfolgung, Entschädigungszahlungen und Versöhnungsgesten ab 1949*, Munich, 2023.
Sarah Farmer, *Arrêt sur mémoire*, Paris, 2007.
Oradour Objets en héritage. Catalogue de l'exposition, Centre de la Mémoire d'Oradour, 2024.
Robert Pike, *Silent village: Life and Death in Occupied France*, Cheltenham, 2021.
Raconte-moi mon village, Album illustré réalisé par les élèves de CM1/CM2 de l'école d'Oradour, Centre de la Mémoire d'Oradour, 2024.