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**Review: “The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace”
by Susan L. Carruthers**

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The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace

By Susan L. Carruthers, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 400, Hardback \$29.95, ISBN: 978-0-674-54570-0

REVIEWED BY SÉBASTIEN TREMBLAY

From the first lines of her well researched study on the U.S. American long post-war occupation in both the European and Pacific theaters, Susan L. Carruthers, professor of history at Rutgers University-Newark sets the tone for a political narrative, connecting the long years of military government to the failed contemporary occupation in the Middle East. Nevertheless, *The Good Occupation* is much more than a pamphlet on the caveats of military imperialism. It is a thorough inquiry and a magnificent example of methodical archival research.

Decentralizing the history of the U.S. presence in not only Japan and Germany but also in the first steps of the liberation of Sicily and Algeria from German occupation, Carruthers manages to dig up enough personal GI correspondence to draw a complete and far reaching tableau of the soldiers' everyday life. Indeed, halfway between cultural history, military history, and *alltagsgeschichte*, her investigation of countless ego documents, written by officers and by simple low-ranked soldiers, offers a new perspective on the less glossy events of the long postwar period in both Europe and Asia. In her own words, Carruthers aims to challenge a more prominent master narrative of the Axis' demise and the Allies' golden Liberation. In so doing, she intends to influence present day tendencies to appeal to the turbulent postwar era as an example of a 'good war' or a 'good occupation'. Only by exposing the thoughts of soldiers, she argues, it is possible to reveal the lesser-known aspects of the U.S. overseas regimes. Nevertheless, one of the core and most impressive aspects of the book is the shift between soldiers' ego documents and Carruthers' interest for both the occupiers and the occupied. Her phenomenal deconstruction of her source material, her reading both with and against the grain, and her brilliant analysis of the power structures at play, offer the reader an almost complete picture of both the dominant and the subaltern voices.

By starting her book on the home front and before the early days of Liberation, Carruthers manages to open her book with a condensed version of her research, namely the dissident voices in both Congress and the civilian population and the ongoing debates on isolationism during the first half of the twentieth century in the United States of America. However, although the first chapter presents the reader an overview of the U.S. efforts of preparation, the real *pièce de résistance* of Carruthers' *tour de force* starts with the second chapter onward, a thematic analysis of the occupations on both continents. More than a comparative study of military decisions and decrees in Germany and Japan, Carruthers offers a global

moment, a contextualized still frame of the United States' imperial expansion beyond the Western hemisphere. By mixing the GIs' reactions in Okinawa and the German (and Austrian) U.S. occupation zones, Carruthers puts forward a decentralized history of race relations, of gender and of the body. Each chapter of her superb exploration of the GIs' thoughts and deeds challenges preconceived ideas of a national grand narrative, without falling in usual traps in which less experienced historians could have fallen.

For instance, her chapter on the relationships between GIs, and German as well as Japanese women, rape, the failed fraternization, and the regulation of sexuality goes beyond the usual 'American soldiers also raped women' political undertone, and exposes not only the fact that officers knew what was going on, but that the intersection of race and gender played an important role. Furthermore, her examination of non-consensual and consensual relationships, based on the aforementioned ego documents, exposes multiple reactions, from women reading the letters of their husbands, to the sexual bragging of young GIs, and finally to campaigns in the press both at home and abroad. Moreover, Carruthers pairs this history of gender (of masculinities and female survival tactics to sexual violence) to a broader history of the body. It is fascinating to see the parallels between the self-proclaimed 'civilizing mission' of the military government and the constant fixation of GIs and what they consider filthy and subhuman. Carruthers analysis of the soldiers' disgust and their portrayal of natives in both Europe and Asia recall the work of Ann Stoler (e.g. *Race and the Education of Desire*)¹, as it clearly identifies the colonial subtext of the Liberation.

Nowhere is this discourse more present than in Carruthers' chapter about displaced persons during the early years of the postwar era. By exposing the soldiers disdain for the 'filth' of Holocaust survivors, their condemnation of 'looting and chaos' and the incendiary and anti-Semitic remarks from generals (Patton is one notable example) to the simplest of GIs, Carruthers once more sheds light on a less prestigious aspect of the "good occupation", of the victory of 'democracy' over the Axis. Nonetheless, Carruthers' endeavor seems at times unpolished. For example, her exhaustive research and inspection of the GIs' race relations, of segregation within the U.S. army and its hypocritical discourse on freedom and liberty might be excellent, but it lacks broader context. By exposing the U.S. American racism in Europe and Asia without paralleling it with the racism in post-fascist societies like Germany and Japan, Carruthers might raise some eyebrows by offering only one side of the picture. The same can be said about her tendency to present Germans and Japanese as suffering under the yoke of occupation. This is not to say that her book is to be classified in the dubious array of revisionist studies. Her research is well documented and necessary in order to broaden the

¹ Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

discussion on the topic, but it could have benefited of a more subtle approach to the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims, a subtlety that might have been lost in her eagerness to dispute a narrative popular amongst certain sections of the Left in countries like Germany and Austria, in which the benevolent Yankee brought freedom and chocolate bars.

The last part of the book, an interesting day-to-day analysis of the *alltagsschichte* of boredom, the black-market and the so-called ‘domestication’ of occupation is where Carruthers is at her brightest. By opposing the official discourse to the reality as the GIs and their families perceived it, she manages to entangle the various aspects of her previous chapters. Bored, frustrated and unsure of their own position in both Asia and Europe, the GIs were implicated in cases of petty theft (excused by their status as occupiers), cases of murder (excused by racial power structures), and cases of violence against their own and against women (excused by a so-called degeneration of their morals). By emphasizing on the desire of soldiers to go home, on the officers’ efforts to cover things up, and on the resistance and revolts of some GIs, Carruthers finishes to paint a grandiose portrait of the situation behind the military walled communities and the relations between GIs, their families and the occupied.

Yet, Carruthers seems to lose her breath in her conclusion. The final pages of her book seem rushed in a mere repetition of her thesis and do not do justice to an overall outstanding and brilliant research. The same can be said about the lack of theoretical analysis of her source material. Throughout her book, she pairs her original findings, the ego documents, with newspaper articles and press clips from well-established magazines. It seems, at times, that she puts these journalistic accounts on the same level as the previously mentioned diaries and letters, and the reader is left to believe that she does not differentiate the two. In spite of that, the genius of her case study is such, that one is forced to forgive these small mishaps for the benefit of a groundbreaking study of the time period.