

**Kenneth D. Alford.** *American Crimes and the Liberation of Paris: Robbery, Rape and Murder by Renegade GIs, 1944-1947.* Jeffersonville: McFarland, 2015. 240 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-1943-9.

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Kenneth D. Alford's *American Crimes and the Liberation of Paris* is an engagingly written but scattered and sloppy look at the disciplinary problems created by American deserters in US-occupied France during the Second World War. While told with verve and a storyteller's eye for detail, *American Crimes* fails as a work of scholarship, as Alford advances no clear argument about the significance of the material he presents and ignores virtually all of the existing literature on his topic.

The work is organized into a loose chronological narrative, beginning with the German capture of Paris in 1940, moving quickly on to the D-Day landings and the liberation of Paris in 1944, and proceeding from there to detail the activities of a number of criminal enterprises engaged in by American soldiers. These ranged from individual rapes and murders to groups of men engaged in large-scale organized crime behind the lines. It is in depicting the workings of these complex criminal enterprises and how the army eventually dealt with them that Alford is at his best, deftly explaining the ins-and-outs of the French black market and how a uniform could give a man the opportunity to make a staggering amount of money stealing gasoline and cigarettes. Other notable sections include a chapter discussing the squalid conditions and brutal treatment that overseas war time prisons offered, and another touching

on the use of beatings and torture by American military police to extract confessions from US soldiers in their charge.

Unfortunately, these highlights are obscured by some frankly baffling decisions about how to structure and organize the work. For instance, after giving a lengthy account of the rise and fall of a ring of cigarette thieves at the end of the war that led to what Alford claims was the "largest general court-martial in all of military history"—a natural stopping point for the narrative—he continues for another forty pages recounting the postwar criminal career of Manuel Martinez, whom the army would hang for murder and armed robbery in 1947 (p. 150). While an interesting enough tale on its own, it is unclear how the Martinez case (or indeed any of the rape and murder cases that Alford gives brief coverage to throughout) fits into a larger narrative, or why his crimes should be more worthy of examination than any of the hundreds of other murders and rapes committed by American servicemen during the war. Other peculiarities include a brief, rudderless chapter on Eddie Slovik, and another on plane crash in the English Channel which resulted in the deaths of several men mentioned briefly in the chapter on D-Day. All of this combines to give *American Crimes* the feel of a scattershot collection of vignettes rather than a cohesive narrative,

to say nothing of a cogent analysis. Indeed, Alford does not seem to have much to say about the crimes beyond the fact that they happened—he advances no broader argument about the significance the events he details or why they might matter to a modern reader beyond a desire to “present history as it really occurred during this tragic war” (p. 2).

If some of these problems might be forgiven as stylistic decisions that didn’t quite come together or a preference for narrative briskness over analytical rigor, other issues are less easily overlooked. Citations are sparse and inconsistent, and in many cases it is unclear where particular facts or figures come from. For example, Alford claims that of the 11 million packs of cigarettes the US Army sent to Europe each month, at least one thirty-day period saw soldiers steal and resell 9.46 million of them. Alford gives no indication of when, precisely, this remarkable theft of government property occurred, nor does he provide any direct sourcing for the claim (p. 137).

Where his sources are more easily tracked, his handling of evidence does little to inspire confidence. Early on, he claims that the army’s decision to hang James Whitfield, an African-American soldier convicted of rape, substantially reduced the incidence of rape among black troops. To support this contention he cites the fact that 214 black soldiers were convicted of rapes committed in June of 1944 alone, while only 46 would be convicted “for the remainder of the entire war in Europe” (p. 35). These figures are not correct, however. The Judge Advocate General in fact recorded that it tried only seventeen soldiers for rapes committed in June of 1944.[1] The error stems from Alford’s choice of source—an army report on disciplinary problems that occurred *after the end of the war*. Alford’s figure of 214 convictions is more correct for the period of May-June of 1945, almost a full year after Whitfield was hung, and even then the same document recorded an-

other 132 black soldiers convicted of rape after June of 1945.[2]

Perhaps more revealing is the fact that this error would have been readily apparent had Alford conducted even a cursory review of the scholarly literature. For instance, both Mary Louise Roberts’s *What Soldiers Do* (2013) and J. Robert Lilly’s *Taken by Force* (2007) are prominent works that include relevant information about the incidence of rape committed by American soldiers in France, and neither appear in Alford’s bibliography. In fact, Alford’s bibliography includes only twenty-five books, six of them his own, and only one by another author published in this century. His use of primary sources is similarly anemic, omitting key sources on matters of discipline and military justice like the Reports of the General Board and the *History, Branch Office of the Judge Advocate General with the United States Forces European Theater of Operations* (1945)—the latter being the most comprehensive set of statistical materials available on crimes committed by members of the US Army during the war.[3]

What makes this all so vexing is that so much of the material that Alford has assembled is new and interesting. There are the bones of an excellent work of scholarship in *American Crimes*, one that could offer a unique contribution to the emerging literature on disciplinary problems in the US Army during the Second World War. And indeed, scholars interested in the army’s military justice system and its efforts to impose discipline on a large number of heavily armed young men, the origins and workings of black markets, or simply the perils and difficulties of occupation would be remiss in avoiding the book entirely. But unless one is willing to come to *American Crimes* with a due skepticism, understanding that it serves as a promising but uneven first step rather than an authoritative statement on its subject, it would be better to stay clear. While specialists will rifle through Alford’s work for some time to come, the broader historical community would be wise to

await a more thorough, carefully handled treatment.

#### Notes

[1]. *History, Branch Office of the Judge Advocate General with the United States Forces European Theater 18 July 1942-1 November 1945* (St. Cloud, France: The Branch, 1946), vol. 1, chart 16.

[2]. Office of the Chief of Military History, *Morale and Discipline in the European Command 1945-1949* (Karlsruhe, Germany: Headquarters, European Command, 1950), 6.

[3]. "Reports of the General Board, U.S. Forces, European Theater," US Army Combined Arms Center, n.d., <http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/cace/carl/eto>.

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