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BOOKSHELF

The Birth of Pax Americana

Contra conventional wisdom, occupations can change political cultures. But it may be that it can't be done without deeply coercive measures. Nicholas M. Gallagher reviews "The Good Occupation" by Susan L. Carruthers.

By **NICHOLAS M. GALLAGHER**

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'Peace is hell,' Harry Truman told the Gridiron Club in December 1945, riffing off William Tecumseh Sherman. Only three months after V-J Day, Truman was under fire from all sides. Progressives thought the U.S. was needlessly antagonizing the Soviet Union by keeping vast standing armies in Europe and Asia—perhaps, they suspected, with an eye toward empire. Remnants of the old isolationist right also felt the country had no business maintaining a mighty presence abroad. Liberal internationalists embraced a transformative vision for a post-war order under the aegis of the United Nations, but there weren't enough of them to govern. The president's biggest headache came from average Americans who had fought their way across France and the Pacific but were severely divided over whether to stay and wage peace.

Today the occupations of Germany and Japan are remembered as triumphs. But as Susan L. Carruthers argues in her well-researched new book, "The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace," the reality was much more complicated—and darker—than that legend. Her book vividly illustrates the tumultuous period between 1945 and 1948, when Americans raised as isolationists suddenly found

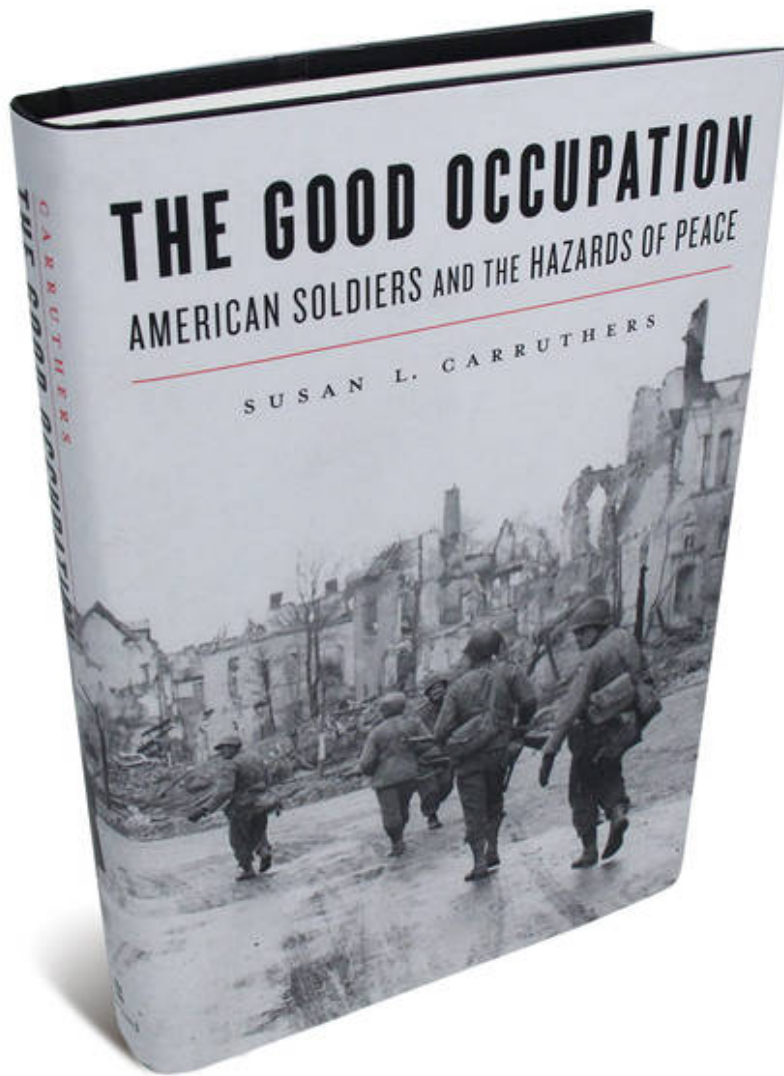
themselves in control of large swathes of the world and were ill-prepared to handle the mission at hand.

Planning for occupation started as early as May 1942 at the Army's School of Military Government at the University of Virginia and at various civilian agencies. But when the rubber met the road, the results were haphazard. Basic supplies were frequently lacking: One naval officer occupying Okinawa kept white sticks topped with stars behind his desk, marked "magic wand for creating trucks," "magic wand for creating supplies," and so on. The more fundamental problem was that soldiers who days or weeks before had been locked in deadly combat were suddenly asked to democratize and rehabilitate, while also punishing—but not brutalizing—their former enemies. Oh, and fix the water supply, rebuild the housing stock and stave off disease.



PHOTO: WSJ

The chaos of postwar Europe and Japan and the boredom of guard duty offered ample opportunities for mischief, chief among them looting and black-marketeering (enlisted men could get \$150 for a carton of cigarettes). Then there was the sex: The military's failed attempts to enforce a no-fraternization



THE GOOD OCCUPATION

By Susan L. Carruthers

Harvard, 386 pages, \$29.95

Paris, and elsewhere, waving signs, “Service yes, but serfdom never.” They were fed up with service that lacked glory or opportunities for advancement in civilian life.

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policy gave way to barracks situations that presaged the 1960s. By April 1946 Uncle Sam started shipping over wives and families; it was bad for discipline and public opinion for letters home to read, “All Germany is just one big Whore House.”

Truman, under pressure from Congress and the public, was bringing troops home as fast as he could: By the end of 1945 over six million soldiers and sailors had been discharged. But that wasn’t quick enough for the military wives who cornered Gen. Eisenhower on Capitol Hill in January 1946, volleying questions about soaring divorce rates and demanding their husbands back. By the spring, thousands of soldiers, sailors and Marines poured into the streets of Manila, Frankfurt,

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Ms. Carruthers is at her strongest when it comes to capturing the viewpoint of the ordinary soldier, who had been told that the quickest way home was through Tokyo, but then found that for a while, Tokyo would be home. Her archival research into the diaries and letters of the occupiers—from Cpl. Clarence Davis, a GI occupying Würzburg, Germany to Gen. Eichelberger, commander of the Eighth Army in Japan—lays bare the rapidly shifting attitudes that members of the Greatest Generation held toward the occupied, the military and America’s new place in the world. “Our aimless piddling in the mud is becoming disgusting to me as well as to many others,” Bob Titus wrote from Okinawa, where he was building hospitals. “Our reason for being here apparently ceased to exist when [Japan] surrendered.”

At times, Ms. Carruthers, who is a professor of history at Rutgers-Newark, uses academic, P.C. language in ways that are jarring. What was “micro-,” exactly, about the aggressions suffered by black troops in a Jim Crow-era military? Likewise, discussions of sexist language seem anachronistic and frivolous given that her subject is the aftermath of the most destructive war in human history.

I also wish she had grasped the nettle more firmly on a central question: Were the unpleasant aspects of the occupation in some way instrumental to its success? The use of food as a weapon at a time when starvation loomed, the mass relocation of populations, and the unsystematic looting that clearly demonstrated who was conqueror and who was conquered—these were all notable parts of our successful efforts to remake foreign political cultures with American military might. And unspoken but ever-present was the threat that American withdrawal would lead to

Russian domination; Stalin's recent conquest of Eastern Germany had been marked by widespread rape and summary execution. It would seem that, contra conventional wisdom on the left, occupation can change political cultures. But it may be that it can't be done without deeply coercive measures that would ordinarily shock the conscience. This is a conclusion that Ms. Carruthers does not make, but on that is very difficult not to draw from her evidence.

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This brings up the elephant in the room: Iraq. The author acknowledges America's recent experience with occupation only once, sensibly letting the comparison speak for itself. In Iraq, the Bush administration wanted an occupation in order to achieve a liberal democracy—but couldn't credibly threaten the coercive measures necessary to achieve it. Meantime, the left argued for walking away, which the Obama administration ultimately did. Suffice it to say, under these circumstances, the results were very different than they were after World War II.

Our politics would benefit greatly from familiarizing ourselves with the real story of the post-World War II occupations—not only the justice of their cause but also the sacrifice they truly required.

Mr. Gallagher is a contributing writer at the American Interest.

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