Dietrich von Choltitz, born 1894
Is Paris Burning? How the City of Lights Almost Went Dark

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Paris has seen much bloodshed over its long and illustrious history, yet in spite of all this blood a city of beauty arose, a “City of Love and Lights,” filled with marvelous art and architecture. However, this picturesque city faced one of the biggest challenges to its existence during the Second World War. When the Germans, led by the power hungry dictator Adolf Hitler, invaded France in 1940 and replaced the government with the puppet government, Vichy France, life seemed over for many Parisians. While a few collaborators loved the Nazis with their sleek uniforms and aristocratic tastes, the majority of Paris residents detested their captors. Finally, in June of 1944, hope appeared on the horizon. The Allied forces had landed in Normandy and liberated the nation as quickly as they could march. Every day hundreds of Frenchmen found freedom from their oppressive government. Both Hitler and the German High Command at the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) wanted to do everything in their power to stop the Allies in their tracks. Hitler decided that the best course of action would be to destroy Paris and force the troops to engage in the grisly practice of street fighting, thus turning this beautiful city into the next Stalingrad. The Nazis thought that they had found the perfect man to accomplish this in a Wehrmacht general named Dietrich von Choltitz.

1 Jean-Pierre Azéma, From Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 64.
Known as the ruthless destroyer of cities such as Rotterdam, Netherlands and Sevastopol, USSR, von Choltitz seemed like a man without mercy to Hitler, who ordered the general to turn Paris into “a frontline city”. Von Choltitz, however, realized that destroying Paris would forever associate him with death and destruction, so he brokered a deal with the Americans in the August of 1944: if they reached Paris within a few days, he would release the city to them with as little bloodshed as possible. This was an unusual move for the quintessentially Prussian Wehrmacht general, but he felt that his duty was not to his Nazi superiors for once, but to the good of all. He faced a series of difficulties along the way. The most pressing concern for von Choltitz was that the OKW would find him out and execute him. The Allies also posed a challenge, as they were nowhere near Paris and had already made plans to bypass the city. Finally, the French internal struggle between the followers of Charles de Gaulle and the Communists and the subsequent insurrection of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI) almost pushed von Choltitz to abandon his plans and give in to his OKW superiors. Thus the city was being pushed to destruction on three separate fronts. None of these difficulties proved insurmountable due to a fortunate combination of von Choltitz’s persistent defiance, the bravery of two Swedish diplomat brothers, and the audacity of de Gaulle, aided by General Omar Bradley.

The political situation of the Third Reich in late summer of 1944 was chaotic and fearful for all. With the failed assassination attempt of Hitler on 20 July, the Wehrmacht generals that were considered disloyal to Hitler were being methodically executed.

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allowing for more radical Nazis to retain power. As Hitler himself told von Choltitz:
“Since the 20th of July, Herr General...dozens of generals—yes, dozens—have bounced at
the end of a rope because they wanted to prevent me, Adolf Hitler, from continuing my
work, from fulfilling my destiny of leading the German people.”

This meeting helped
von Choltitz shake the last remnants of blind loyalty to the Nazi command, but it also
instilled a fear in von Choltitz of the consequences that would come of his disloyalty. The
struggle for France after D-Day forced the German commanders to face the possibility of
defeat. Instead of willingly surrendering towns to the Allies, the Nazi generals employed
a “scorched-earth” policy by systematically destroying towns before the Allies could
liberate them. Paris was no exception. Since D-Day, the Germans had systematically
mined notable sites of Paris: twenty-seven bridges, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de
Triomphe, the Louvre, the Opera House, the Grand Palais, the Palais de Luxembourg, the
Pantheon and Notre-Dame, just to name a few.

In addition, Hitler had ordered the 600-mm mortar that had been used in the destruction of Sevastopol, nicknamed “Karl”, to
Paris. Fortunately for the citizens of Paris, Karl was delayed on the railroad tracks and
never made it close to the city.

All von Choltitz had to do was issue a short command and Paris would burn to
the ground. The severity of the situation cannot be overstated. But von Choltitz did not
want to destroy Paris. “I like these pretty Parisiennes” he is quoted as saying; “It would


5 Collins and Lapierre, 35.
6 Liam Dunne, “Festung Paris” [map]. Scale not given. In: Collins and Lapierre, inside
cover.
7 Collins and Lapierre, 53, 221.
be a tragedy to have to kill them and destroy their city.” He was thus given a terrible problem: How could he dupe the German High Command long enough to surrender the city? For once, the chaos and fear aided von Choltitz. His immediate superior, Generalleutnant Hans Speidel, faced problems of his own. His loyalty to the Third Reich had been questioned and he astutely realized that his days at OKW’s French branch, Army Group B, were numbered. In his haste to make plans to leave the country, Speidel decided to disregard an order to V-bomb Paris. The Gestapo arrested Speidel not long after this “oversight”. While Speidel was a good friend of von Choltitz, even promising to take care of his family should something happen to the general, he was also a Nazi officer who was to be feared. Speidel’s arrest was fortunate for von Choltitz, who had lied to Speidel about the number of explosives that he had and that were needed in order to demolish the city. Von Choltitz had even told Speidel: “The Grand Palais, you’ll be happy to know, is in flames…[I am planning] to blow up the Madeleine and the Opéra in one stroke…[and] blow up the Eiffel Tower so its ruins will block the access to the bridges which we will have already blown up.”

After sending the neutral Swedish Consul Raoul Nordling to deliver the terms of the salvation of Paris to the Allies, von Choltitz became even more unnerved. On one occasion, an Oberstrumbannführer of the feared Adolf Hitler Leibstandarte Panzer

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9 Collins and Lapierre, 137-139, 332-333.
10 Neiberg, 220.
12 Ibid., 209.
Division of the SS and his three men marched into von Choltitz’s office in the Nazi headquarters of Paris, the Hotel Maurice. Von Choltitz thought that the men had come there to take him into custody; he seemed justified when they announced that they had come there on direct orders of Heinrich Himmler. Much to von Choltitz’s relief, the Oberstrumbannführer instead requested that a medieval tapestry, the Bayeux tapestry, be taken immediately from the Louvre and sent to Berlin.\(^{13}\)

The Nazis did not quit fighting even after von Choltitz had released the city to the Allies. Hitler, furious that Paris was still standing, ordered the city to be bombed by both the V-2s and the Luftwaffe. All but six V-2s never flew, due in large part to Speidel and his refusal to carry out the order, but Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle, head of the Luftwaffe in France, had no such qualms. He ordered a raid on the city on August 26, killing 213 people and injuring an additional 914.\(^{14}\) The results of this are minimal, however, compared to the potential death toll that would have occurred had Hitler’s orders been fully followed. Hitler famously demanded an answer of the chief of his general staff, Alfred Jodl, to the question: “Is Paris burning?”\(^{15}\) Despite the Germans’ best tries, they could not accomplish their ultimate plan: to raze Paris to the ground and ensure no one would ever again marvel at its beauty.

The liberation of Paris also faced serious problems from the Allied forces, though they, unlike the Nazis, did not want the city destroyed. Many of the Allied leaders felt that the liberation would be too costly in gas and men, and wanted to delay the liberation

\(^{13}\) Collins and Lapierre, 198-199.
\(^{14}\) Zaloga, 85.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 84.
as long as possible. Dwight Eisenhower, head of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), thought that Paris posed such a quandary that he planned to encircle and besiege the city and deal with it after the Allied troops crossed the Rhine River in September. Paris was just too costly of a risk for the Allied troops, the strategy-minded Eisenhower feared. He knew the Germans would put up a resistance, and he did not want to be fighting a French version of Stalingrad, which would take away the two tactical advantages of the Allies: planes and tanks. Eisenhower felt that his priority should be General George Patton’s Third Army, who, though trudging steadily across France, desperately needed gasoline. Patton needed as much fuel as SHAEF could spare in order to cross the Rhine in September, but he rightly calculated that the liberation of Paris would cut his supply down to nothing. The feelings of the American High Command perhaps could be seen in an exchange between General Patton and General Wade Haislip, who had official control of the only French army in the war: the 2nd Armored Division. Haislip tried to convince Patton to allow him to send the French to liberate Paris: “George, you are wrong, you know. It will mean more to the French than anything else to think the only division they have in Europe is the first one to get into Paris and it will really jolly them up. It will thrill the whole country.” Patton replied in his characteristically gruff manner: “Oh, to hell with that. We are fighting a war now.” If Eisenhower had stuck to his original plan, von Choltitz would have no hope and would

17 Neiberg, 66.
19 Blumenson, 128.
most likely have blown up Paris, due to pressures from Hitler and the OKW. While the Americans in SHAEF were hesitant about the liberation, one man, one force, was doing all he could to advance on Paris. Charles de Gaulle, leader of the French forces, eagerly needed to get to Paris in order to set up a government in his name. The American and British governments had still not decided whether to recognize de Gaulle as the official leader of France; instead, they wanted to hold elections in a liberated France.\footnote{Stanley F. Clark, \textit{The Man Who Is France: The Story of General Charles De Gaulle} (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1960), 195.} The Allied governments decided that Eisenhower’s plan was a prudent one and tried to convince de Gaulle of this as well. However, de Gaulle would have none of it, ironically agreeing with Hitler, who claimed “he who holds Paris holds France”.\footnote{Collins and Lapierre, 29.} Much to the aversion of the Allies, de Gaulle had decided to fly to France and personally lead the French army.\footnote{Harry C. Butcher, \textit{My Three Years With Eisenhower: The Personal Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, Naval Aide to General Eisenhower, 1942 to 1945} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 648.} De Gaulle was nothing but a headache to SHAEF; he hid from his American liaison officers and illegally separated the 2\textsuperscript{nd} French Armored Division from the rest of the Allied army.\footnote{Collins and Lapierre, 183; Charles de Gaulle, \textit{The War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle: Unity, 1942-1944} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 333.}

De Gaulle was not the only Frenchman who wanted to rule France. Since the Russian Revolution in 1917, communism had been slowly closing its grip around France.\footnote{Huddleston, 266.} When the Germans captured France in 1940, the Nationalists like de Gaulle went to fight in Northern Africa, while the Communists tended to stay behind and

\textsuperscript{21} Collins and Lapierre, 29.
\textsuperscript{24} Huddleston, 266.
integrate themselves into the French Resistance. The FFI was divided into three separate groups: the Communists had gained control of the Comité Parisien de Libération (the Paris Liberation Committee, CPL) and the Comité d’Action Militaire (Military Action Committee, COMAC) and turned the third group, the Comité National de la Résistance (National Resistance Committee, CNR), into an “ineffectual debating society”. The leader of the Communists, and thus the French Resistance, was a man named Henri Tanguy, better known by his nom de guerre: Colonel Rol. Rol and the Communists saw nothing worse than the liberation of Paris by the Americans and de Gaulle. To them, de Gaulle would undermine the authority over France that they had worked four years to achieve. The Communists wanted liberation, but they wanted to “welcome” de Gaulle to an already liberated Paris, much to his agitation: “On my arrival, I would find this ‘popular’ government installed; it would bind my brows with laurel, invite me to assume the place it would show me to, and henceforth pull all the strings itself.” The Communists wanted to liberate the city before de Gaulle so much that they were willing to have the Germans destroy the city before the Allies could come: “That the Germans might shoot hundreds of hostages, direct their artillery against the principle buildings, blow up the sixty-odd bridges of the Seine did not trouble them. Only on the smoking ruins of the capital could Communism hope to triumph. So Paris was doomed, both by Hitler, whose orders were peremptory, and by the insurrectionists, to complete

25 Collins and Lapierre, 26-27.
26 Neiberg, 44.
27 De Gaulle, 327.
To Rol and the Communists, Paris was “worth 200,000 dead”. On 19 August 1944, the Communists started the insurrection, much to the horror of the Gaullists. One of the primary Gaullists, Jacques Chaban-Delmas knew where this rebellion would lead: “Rol and the men around him are leading Paris to a massacre!”

The insurrectionists gained initial success, taking over the Prefecture of Police and various ministries. The Communist-designated Minister of Justice liberated the Hotel Ritz by simply walking in after all the Germans left to put down the rebellion in another part of the city. Von Choltitz, furious that such a massive uprising would occur in a city he held, decided to put down the resistance ruthlessly. He sent panzers and Nazi troops to the Prefecture of Police, which had become the headquarters of the rebellion. Rol, seeing that the Germans would outgun his civilians, requested an arms drop from the Allies. De Gaulle, of course, did not want any support for the Communists, and SHAEF was afraid that the arms would end up in the hands of the German soldiers, so they decided to cancel the arms drop. For now, the rebels would have to fight on their own.

Throughout the whole of Paris, the cry of “Aux Barricades!” rang out romantically in memory of the days of old, although barricades would have had little effect against the modern German panzer. In the firefight, the façades of the rebel-held buildings, such as the Prefecture, were being destroyed. Finally, a cease-fire was called between Alexandre Parodi, one of the moderate leaders of the insurrection and Charles de Gaulle’s personal

28 Huddleston, 277.
29 Blumenson, 130.
30 Ibid., 133.
31 Schoenbrun, 451.
representative to the FFI, and von Choltitz. Von Choltitz had taken the unusual step of releasing Parodi in order for peace to resume. This was not well received by some of the men under von Choltitz, who decided to take matters in their own hands. They decided to machine-gun Parodi and Raoul Nordling (who had negotiated the release of Parodi) right outside of the Nazi headquarters. Fortunately, one of Parodi’s friends had heard about this plot and took measures to stop this.\(^{33}\) Parodi’s release shows the hesitation of von Choltitz to continue the fight. This cease-fire, though effective at first, was not well received by the Communists as well. Many of them directly refused to follow this truce, and tried to restart the insurrection.\(^{34}\) Rol ordered his men to continue to fight: “The order is insurrection. As long as there is a single German left in the streets of Paris, we shall fight.”\(^{35}\) Many of the German occupiers refused participate in the cease-fire as well.\(^{36}\) Von Choltitz, upset at this failure, planned to blow up Paris with them in it and be done with it. The city seemed doomed yet again until the fateful cry rang out that would change the course of the insurrection: “The Allies are coming!”

Although the Allies were still hesitant to march on Paris, ultimately, the presentation of von Choltitz’s offer to the Allies by a Swedish diplomat changed the American plan. Von Choltitz had decided to send Raoul Nordling to deliver his terms to SHAEF. However, as he left the consulate to meet the Americans, Nordling had a heart attack and was turned into an invalid. Someone had to go in his place, but the pass that

\(^{33}\) Collins and Lapierre, 150.
\(^{34}\) Zaloga, 60.
\(^{35}\) Collins and Lapierre, 144.
\(^{36}\) Azéma, 204.
von Choltitz had given Nordling to leave the German lines read “R. Nordling”. Raoul
sent the only other person in France who could have gotten past the frontlines and deliver
the message: his brother Rolf, who, in his long twelve hour trip to reach the Americans,
was checked and double-checked by Gestapo agents, who did not willingly follow
Wehrmacht generals such as von Choltitz. Immediately upon receiving the offer from
Nordling, General Omar Bradley ordered the French 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armored Division and the
American 4\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division to march on Paris saying “We can’t take any chances on
that general changing his mind and knocking hell out of the city.” The French 2\textsuperscript{nd}
Armored justly reached Paris about an hour before the Americans. With the arrival of de
Gaulle, the government of France was grouped under his de facto leadership and Paris
became safe once again. With the Allies, however, came the downfall of the
Communists. The Communists had failed to liberate the city before de Gaulle, who
became known as the savior of Paris. Von Choltitz decided that the time to surrender had
come, but he did not want to sacrifice his honor in the process. He insisted that instead of
simply handing over the city to the Allies, he would continue to fight, and thus restore his
honor. The battle inside the Nazi headquarters, the Hotel Meurice, became an almost
effortless victory for the Allied troops due to the German’s view of their hopeless
situation.

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38 Collins and Lapierre, 215.
40 Miller, 763.
With the advancement of the Allied troops, thousands of Parisians in the suburbs came out to welcome these liberators. The famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle recalled the reaction of the French to the incoming Americans: “From two in the afternoon until darkness around ten, we few Americans in Paris on that first day were kissed and hailed and mauled by friendly mobs until we hardly knew where we were. Everybody kissed us...they jumped and squealed and pushed in literal frenzy.”\textsuperscript{41} Pyle was not the only correspondent to enter Paris on those first fateful days: both Andrew Rooney and Ernest Hemingway helped in the liberation.\textsuperscript{42} Not everyone was as excited to see the Allies roll in. To the people that had collaborated with the Nazis during their reign, those very tanks signified the end of an era. They were pulled from their homes, had their heads shaved and a tattoo of a swastika placed on their foreheads.\textsuperscript{43} Fortunately and ironically for the former occupiers, the American forces ensured that that the very people they fought, the Germans, would be saved from the onslaught of hatred that was directed at them. For the leader of Nazi Paris, von Choltitz, one last embarrassment awaited. As the Americans drove him away from the Hotel Meurice on 20 August, he happened to look behind him, where an irate French woman had claimed her prize of Nazi occupation and angrily waved it at the crowd: his trousers.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Ernie Pyle, \textit{Brave Men} (New York: H. Holt, 1944), 458.
\textsuperscript{44} Collins and Lapiere, 299.
The Americans who enjoyed their brief respite would have to wait another nine months to see the end of the war, but for the Parisians, their city was free. By 21 August 1944, the French tricolor had replaced the symbol of Nazi oppression atop the Eiffel Tower, the very icon of France that the Germans had wanted to demolish. Had but one misstep happened along the way, it seems probable that Paris, the City of Lights, would have faced its planned grisly destruction. In a bunker in northern Germany, a little dictator in a fit of rage demanded an answer from his Chief of Staff to the question: “Is Paris burning?” Had any one of many problems proved too overpowering to solve, Hitler’s question might have been answered with an affirmative, and one of the most beautiful cities would have been erased from the map.