ROUGH GUIDES

TRAVEL THE LIBERATION ROUTE EUROPE

SITES AND EXPERIENCES ALONG THE PATH OF THE WORLD WAR II ALLIED ADVANCE

Liberation ROUTE EUROPE

Written by
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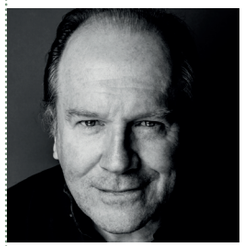
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Preface by **William Boyd**

Novelist and screenwriter

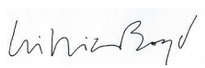


The D-Day landings of 6 June 1944 still astound. The slightest acquaintance with the scale and risk involved, the monstrous complications of the logistics and the strategy, not to mention the mind-boggling bravery of tens of thousands of young soldiers, is a humbling experience to contemplate and examine. The whole enterprise seems, in military terms, almost hubristic. How could anyone have dreamed up such a plan – the largest seaborne invasion in the whole history of warfare, never to be surpassed? How could such a start to the liberation of western Europe have been contemplated given the enormous, cataclysmic consequences of failure?

Time has passed and hindsight's 20/20 vision does not lessen the admiration – on the contrary: if anything our respect and wonderment have increased. Were the stakes higher then? Undoubtedly. Were we braver people then? Probably. D-Day and its aftermath cast a light on our own times – and sometimes that candid illumination is not flattering.

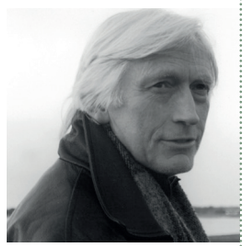
Nothing better, then, than to retrace the events of that day and the weeks and months that followed and vicariously relive a small fragment of twentieth-century history.

D-Day on the beaches of Normandy leads on to the slow but steady liberation of western Europe – other invasions, other battles fought, most won, some lost, but the progress towards victory seemed unwavering. And let's not forget that Nazi Germany was caught in an inexorable pincer attack of its own making. Hammer blows from the East as well as the West. Throughout Europe, the many sites and memorials still speak to us with clarion voices. It is remarkable, three-quarters of a century on from 1944, that Europe remains united and at peace, albeit under new pressures. Remembering D-Day, the liberation of Europe and the cause it represented, is a potent spur to that remaining the case, forever.



Preface by **Richard Overy**

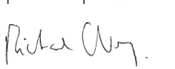
Professor of History at the University of Exeter



The Liberation of Europe in 1943–45 from the menace of German occupation and oppression was a defining moment of the last century. That liberation required a colossal military effort, almost unimaginable today. Allied armies from the west, east and south slowly drove back the Axis forces until by 1945 they decisively destroyed German military power in Germany itself. The German armed forces surrendered on 7 May.

Liberation Route Europe is a unique organization dedicated to keeping alive the memory of that momentous victory and the terrible cost in lives and treasure that it demanded, not only from those powers engaged in the fighting, but from the people and cities in the path of the advancing armies who were bombed or shelled or starved by the circumstances of the war. Tracing the path made by the Western Allies from the prelude to D-Day in 1944 to the final invasion of Germany in March 1945 is to follow a route of campaigns and battles that hung in the balance on many occasions – the defence of the narrow Normandy beachhead in June, the crisis at Arnhem in September, the Battle of the Bulge in December when Hitler ordered one last surprise assault against the Allied line. The Liberation Route recaptures those key moments and shows just what an exceptional effort was involved in crossing northern Europe against a determined foe.

Liberation was also the language used by the Soviet Union as the Red Army stormed across Eastern Europe. Here at least the genocidal German regime was defeated, but liberation meant something different for the peoples brought suddenly under the rule of Soviet-sponsored dictatorships. Here liberation in the same sense as the West was postponed until the 1990s. The liberation that mattered in shaping the development of the continent after the war was the liberation of northern and western Europe. This laid the foundation for today's European Union and the reconciliation of the peoples of Europe. Liberation Route Europe is not only about reconstructing the key historical moment when freedom returned, but a way of reinforcing the ideal of a united and peaceful Europe in the present.



Foreword by the Liberation Route Europe

A continuously growing, international remembrance trail, the Liberation Route Europe (LRE) connects important milestones from modern European history. It forms a link between the main regions impacted by the Liberation of Europe in 1944–1945 and is managed by the Liberation Route Europe Foundation.

Origins of the Liberation Route Europe

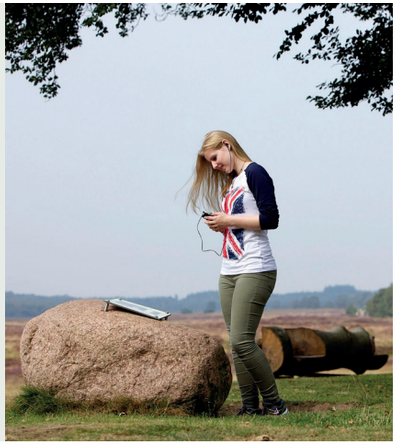
The LRE's roots lie in a small regional project that began in the Arnhem–Nijmegen area of the Netherlands, where Operation Market Garden and Operation Veritable took place in 1944–1945. In 2008, three of the area's museums – the National Liberation Museum 1944-1945 in Groesbeek, the Airborne Museum "Hartenstein" in Oosterbeek and the War Museum in Overloon – joined forces with the Regional Tourist Board Arnhem Nijmegen (RBTKAN) to raise awareness of local World War II history by telling its stories and promoting its remembrance sites.

In Arnhem and Nijmegen, plenty of recognized sites remembered the war and the Liberation – museums, cemeteries and so on – but other important locations were almost completely unknown. Commemorative years witnessed veterans returning to the region with their families, eager to show them where they fought; some were airdropped during the war and keen to identify their landing areas. Unfortunately, many of their stories were unmarked, lost in the fields and forests that blanketed the land. "It was difficult to find all the relevant information, the stories, the bigger picture; we had to do something to keep this history alive," explains Jurriaan de Mol, one of the project founders.

In response, a network of listening locations called "audiospots" were developed, where visitors could listen to – and read about – the forgotten and hidden stories of World War II. Accessed using a smartphone or by calling a specific phone number, in time these audiospots became local monuments, maintained by local communities. Tour companies and their guides began incorporating the spots on their routes, connecting story and place to give meaningful insight into the Liberation of Europe.

LRE audiospots

The LRE currently has around two hundred audiospots disseminated in six provinces of the Netherlands, as well as in Kreis Kleve in Germany. Audiospots are planned in several other Dutch provinces, and the network is constantly expanding. At each audiospot, poignant stories of wartime experiences are offered in three languages using a mobile application or a local phone number. Throughout this book, audiospots are marked with the headphones symbol. You can listen to the thought-provoking stories at www.liberationroute.com/audiospots.



The LRE trail today

The initial project met with enthusiasm, and quickly spread to provinces all over the Netherlands. Its immediate popularity prompted the founders to investigate the possibility of expanding into other European nations. When they had successfully joined together with partners from five other countries, the idea of creating a transnational remembrance trail was born, linking the regions, sites and stories of the Liberation across Europe. LRE's chairwoman, Victoria van Krieken, has compared the route to a pilgrimage – dedicated to the memory of those who fought and lost their lives during World War II.

The LRE, in its international form, was officially inaugurated in Arromanches on the shores of Normandy on 6 June 2014 to mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day. Today, as presented in this book, the trail connects sites – museums, cemeteries, memorials, fortifications, monuments and audiospots – in nine European countries: Italy, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. But the route is still far from complete. The LRE Foundation is committed to extending the trail, especially into parts of eastern and southern Europe, in order to add yet more perspectives to the story of the Liberation.

A legacy project

The LRE is all about "remembrance and reflection," says project founder Jurriaan de Mol. "Without the sacrifice of all those men and women in the Second World War, we would live in a totally different world." The LRE uses a multi-perspective approach, bringing together many different points of view to explore the sensitive history of World War II and the Liberation, presenting our shared European past in all its complexity.

The message of the LRE is to encourage people, and especially the younger generations, to visit local remembrance sites and to experience history first-hand. Victoria van Krieken's hope is that "young people will consider this history as a reminder that this should never happen again and to be aware that freedom is not to be taken for granted." The route inspires reflection, awareness, sensitivity and a meditation on the importance of freedom.

Route companions

Touring the Liberation Route Europe is even easier with the book in your hands. This helpful companion brings together two parties in a one-of-a-kind partnership: the expertise of Rough Guides as a long-standing travel publisher and the LRE Foundation, promoting remembrance tourism and international cooperation.

You can read more personal stories on the LRE website (liberationroute.com), as well as finding descriptions of over four hundred sites, suggested places to visit and offers from relevant tour operators. A mobile

» The Europe Remembers campaign raises awareness of the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Europe

application also allows you to create your own itineraries (available for download from the Apple Store or Google Play).

It is also possible to travel the route with a professional tour guide specializing in the history of World War II. The LRE Guide Network is a collection of tour operators, from Normandy in France to Berlin in Germany, Arnhem in the Netherlands to Bastogne in Belgium. The guides work to bring visitors the most interesting on-site experiences, as well as placing each in its historical context. Find out more about LRE Guides at www.liberationroute.com/guides.



The vfonds

The Dutch National Fund for Peace, Freedom and Veterans Support (vfonds) was created in the 1970s, its mission being to care for war veterans – especially members of the Netherlands Association of Military War Victims. It focuses on the following social areas: promoting the recognition of veterans and other uniformed persons; keeping the memory of war and peace missions alive; remembering and commemorating victims of conflicts; and celebrating freedom. The vfonds supports war and resistance museums and a number of commemorative projects, as well as providing information on military operations and their consequences for civilians and soldiers. Their work is carried out with the wider aim of preserving peace, democracy and the rule of (both national and international) law. For more information, visit www.vfonds.nl.

vfonds invests in PEACE

The Liberation Route Europe Foundation

The Liberation Route Europe Foundation was established in the Netherlands in January 2011, with a special team dedicated to implementing the initiative. The foundation is a membership organization, gathering relevant parties – museums, local government teams, tourism boards and veteran associations – into a multidisciplinary network of stakeholders with the shared mission of preserving the history and heritage of World War II.

The LRE Foundation has been generously supported by the vfonds (Dutch National Fund for Peace, Freedom and Veterans Support) since 2012. Vfonds works across three main areas: historical content development; remembrance tourism tools; and memory transmission activities, with young people as their main audience.

2019–2020: the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II

The years 2019 and 2020 mark the 75th anniversary of the Liberation and the end of World War II; the LRE Foundation has launched two major projects for these jubilee years.

The first initiative, the Europe Remembers awareness campaign, collates a wealth of information about the commemoration – all in one place and available in six languages. The website europeremembers.com provides an inventory of events organized over the course of those two years, including memorial services, special exhibitions, conferences, festivals and concerts. It also presents suggested itineraries and places to visit – with more than six hundred recommended remembrance sites across nine European countries – as well as tours from LRE guides and offers from partnered tour operators. Illuminating historical background and context completes the picture.

The second initiative is a signed hiking trail, due to launch in May 2020 to commemorate VE Day in 1945. The route will allow walkers to follow in the footsteps of many of the soldiers who liberated Europe at the end of World War II. Developed in partnership with several reputable hiking organizations, the main trail will connect London and Berlin, with branches leading off to reach a wider network of remembrance sites. Beyond 2020, the aim is to extend the route and make it bike-accessible.

The trail will be distinctively signed: the LRE Foundation has partnered with Studio Libeskind to develop a family of markers of different sizes and shapes, inscribed with explanatory text and graphics. Creator Daniel Libeskind explains that the collection of markers, or "vectors", "gives you the sense of direction, but also the sense of unity. It is pointing up to something positive and optimistic. Something that gives you the sense that you are united in this territory with many other people from different walks of life."

Daniel Libeskind

Daniel Libeskind is a Polish-American architect who founded Studio Libeskind in 1989 with his wife, Nina. His buildings include the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, the Military History Museum in Dresden and the Holocaust Memorials in Ottawa and Amsterdam. He is also the master architect for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site in New York City.

For Libeskind, whose architecture company has designed the signage for the 2020 LRE hiking trail, the markers or "vectors" represent, "the footsteps of the future, of something that we all badly need across the divisions, across the forgetting, the oblivion of forgetting, which gives rise to all sorts of ghosts of history. To remember is to create a better future."



Introduction



Introduction to the Liberation of Europe

The Liberation of Europe that marked the closing stages of World War II saw the defeat of Nazi Germany in one of the largest and most daring operations ever witnessed.

Why is the Liberation important today?

For anyone reared on the internet in the democratic nations of western Europe, World War II can feel like a long time ago, and peace is easily taken for granted. Only a dwindling number of elderly men and women remember the conflict first-hand; most people alive today interact with a war that happened before their parents – or even their grandparents – were born. Far removed from the present, World War II is no more than a history lesson at school or the subject of dreary daytime documentaries.

World War II was the last great global war and has long functioned as the conflict by which all other wars are judged. It is a conflict often represented as an archetypal struggle between good and evil, and while wicked and heroic acts were committed by men and women on both sides, the Liberation of western Europe was essentially a triumph of morality and justice. The campaign was driven by a desire to restore liberty to the nations of occupied Europe that had been stripped of their rights.

Between 1940 and 1943 Nazi Germany controlled much of western Europe. The Liberation was contrived by individuals who, for all their faults, agreed that the Nazi regime could not be permitted to continue. They viewed Germany's racial policies, suppression of opposition and militarized occupation of its neighbouring states with contempt. Nazism's expansionist aims, in particular, prompted an international crisis of titanic proportions. Unable to ignore Germany's ruthless invasions across Europe – and despite many politicians favouring a policy of appeasement towards Hitler – an international coalition of nation-states banded together to stand up to discrimination and destruction. The Liberation is an enduring lesson in collaboration and cooperation.

Nevertheless, World War II witnessed acute hardship and suffering. Its victims were seldom comforted by an arching morality tale, and men, women and children existed in exceptional circumstances, and were pushed to the extreme. The realities of war threw everything into question and tested everyone. Some people faced difficult choices; for others, the choices were impossible. It is important to approach the stories of those who lived through World War II with compassion and empathy – to try to understand the responsibility of an army commander who had to ask thousands of young men to give their lives so that the next generation could be born free or the dilemma faced by a resistance fighter whose actions might bring reprisals on her entire village.

All of this belongs to history, but this book is as much about the present as about times lost. The purpose of the Liberation Route Europe – and the sites along it that provide living memorials to World War II and the Liberation – is to keep memory alive so that the stories, experiences and lessons of the war do not fade.

What exactly was the Liberation?

World War II began in 1939 and ended six years later in 1945. The Liberation was the last phase of the war, when occupied Europe was freed from Nazi rule. The Liberation consisted of three campaigns, one from the west, one from the south and one from the east, which converged on and defeated Nazi Germany.

The army from the west was principally an alliance between the USA, Great Britain, Canada and France. The army coming from the east was that of Soviet Russia, officially the Red Army. Together, all the armies of the Liberation are known as the Allies. En route to Germany, these two armies freed the countries that Germany had occupied in 1939–40: France, the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The Liberation only became a feasible enterprise after three-and-a-half years of war – the conditions for success came together in the spring of 1945. After much preparation, the Liberation began on 10 July 1943, with the invasion of the island of Sicily. It ended on 8 May 1945 with the capitulation of Nazi Germany to the Allies.

Complexities of the Liberation

All history is a simplification. There is too much detail in any given day of the past to relate it all; facts have to be selected and compressed into a coherent narrative – otherwise history would be unreadable.

Throughout the Liberation there were a great number of variables that affected the Allied advance: the weather; the availability of basic supplies; the health and morale of troops; the quality of communications; and luck. Not all of these factors can be addressed when describing every battle, so it is important to be aware of what's omitted.

It is easier for historians to ignore complexity and instead relate grand events involving famous personalities – these are the



« A British recruit reads the *Soldier's Guide to Sicily*

stories most of us want to read about, after all – but the banal actions of average soldiers and civilians were important, too. The events of the Liberation were at once dictated by large-scale strategic decisions and their implementation "on the ground", altered by the reactions of ordinary men. The difference between the success and failure of an offensive frequently hinged, not on the orders from above, but how the men on the frontline interpreted them in the reality of battle. Did they risk their lives to hold some shell-battered village, for instance, or follow their instincts and retreat? To a platoon of scared young men who didn't want to die, the village was just a coordinate on a map – to a general it could mean the success or failure of a meticulously planned campaign.

War is infinitely complex. Every battle is confusing, and rarely went according to plan, precisely because there were so many variables. With hindsight, it is possible to make sense of the intense and complicated interaction between two opposing forces by comparing the military objectives with the outcomes. It is easy to impose cause and effect on any given phenomenon – that one side prevailed because it was stronger and had better tactics – but that is often to be seduced by a false conclusion. Likewise, it is easy to ignore factors that don't fit the coherent narrative. Sometimes success depended on constantly shifting weather and luck, neither of which is readily quantifiable.

On a practical level, relating history relies on using an accepted system of abbreviations. It is not possible to mention every nationality that fought in any particular episode of the Liberation, and we must make do with terms like "Allies" and "Germans" to describe the armies made up of men and women from a diverse patchwork of backgrounds – of different ethnicities, political persuasions and character. These terms are simultaneously true and imprecise.

Another problem is that we know how things turned out. With hindsight, we know how the war ended, and this can be misleading. Hindsight gives a satisfying shape to a jumble of facts; it joins the dots of cause and effect. It can be hard to understand the decisions made by men and women on the ground who didn't know the end game. In the extreme, hindsight can make an outcome seem inevitable. This is deceptive; the Liberation was not a smooth progression and its conclusion always hung in the balance.

Knowledge on the subject of World War II is also limited – evidence, by definition, is that which is left behind. Any view of the war is dependent on what can be gleaned from original documents, objects, recorded interviews and contemporaneous films and photographs. The archive is incomplete and always will be. Additionally, the history of any war is largely written by the victor, who is keen to present a favourable version of events. Myths are easily invented but are hard to dispel. The truth – of course – is that the winner's version is only one interpretation. To see the war from the "other side" demands a leap of comprehension and empathy.

How a person sees the Liberation may well depend on their nationality, ancestry and other allegiances. Its events were felt differently by each country, and by each individual involved – divergent experiences that continue to colour present-day interpretations of World War II.

» East Londoners left homeless by German bombing raids in the first month of the Blitz



Writing about the Liberation

Several challenges arise when writing about the Liberation. Its events took place in a number of different places across Europe at the same time, meaning any narrative must move either geographically or chronologically. The liberation of each country (and region) is best considered as a whole, in the order they were freed, but battles were being fought concurrently throughout Europe; it is important to keep both time and place in mind.

Writing about the liberation also involves juggling political and military history. The generals and their troops conducted the war on the ground, but their objectives were set by senior politicians in Washington, London and Moscow. There was not always a clear line of accountability for wartime decisions – which helped many Nazis escape justice after the war (see p.336). The Liberation is a military examination of the troops' various attacks and retreats, as well as the story of the civilians who got caught up in the fighting. The activities of soldiers are generally easy to analyse and reconstruct – armies work in hierarchies and keep meticulous records – whereas civilians frequently slipped beneath the radar;



« Burned bodies of the victims of the Gardelegen massacre, perpetrated by the Nazis in April 1945

most of them are mentioned in the history books only as statistics.

When considering the Liberation, there are few stable points of reference. Even the political geography has shifted since the end of World War II. The countries of the time broadly correspond to the nations of today, with some important exceptions. Czechoslovakia has since been divided into two; this book covers only the territory of the Czech Republic. The borders of Poland during the war and the Poland of today are also different. Poland's borders were gerrymandered by the Nazis in 1939; after the war, its borders were altered again to the benefit of the Soviets.

A writer's choice of words matters, too. The very notion of a "liberation" is a value judgement, implying that the Allies were virtuous. We must be wary of depicting one side as wholly right and the other wrong. This is especially important when discussing the actions of the Soviet Union. At the time, the Red Army was often considered an army of liberation in the same way as the USA, but for too many the Soviet "liberation" brought a new kind of subjugation. Wherever possible, it is best to suspend moral prejudgement when reading accounts of the Liberation or visiting its monuments. The accumulation of facts may lead in the same direction, but it is worth leaving a mental space for readjustment. Some actions of the Soviet Union were virtuous; some Nazis defied their stereotype; and some British and American soldiers committed atrocities that must not be whitewashed.

A historical tapestry

For these reasons, it is useful to see the Liberation not as a single coherent event but as a patchwork of accounts – a complex web of overlapping interactions – that is often complicated and contradictory. It is a fascinating period of history with many different stories to tell. It exists in the past, but has a reality today too, kept alive in the memories of those who served in World War II and in the many local and national museums dedicated to the subject.

How this book works

The main section of this book is organized into eight chapters, covering the nine principal countries affected by the Liberation. First, we look at the countries of western Europe: Italy, where the liberation of continental Europe began; the United Kingdom, the launchpad for D-Day; France, liberated through the D-Day landings in Normandy; then Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – vital territories that had to be controlled by the Allied armies before the invasion of Germany could be launched. Action then shifts east to explain the events that affected Poland (the first country to be invaded by Nazi Germany in collusion with the Soviet Union) and the Czech Republic – countries where Nazi rule was ended by the Soviet Red Army. Last is Germany – straddling western and eastern Europe – where World War II started and where the European war ended in the spring of 1945.

Each chapter recounts the events of the liberation that happened within that country, divided into regions and following a general chronological order as far as possible. The regions contain a range of excellent visitable sites connected with the Liberation; every listing has a helpful description, so you know exactly what to expect. Accompanying country maps – marked with modern borders – pinpoint the location of today's sites, while arrows show the broad sweep of troop movements to help illustrate each country's history.

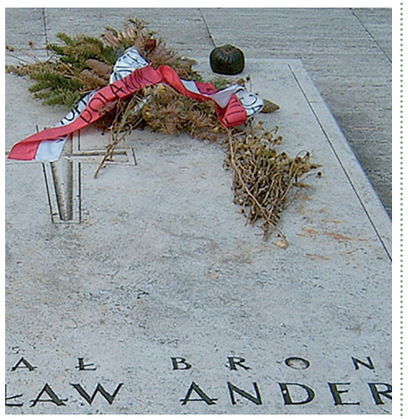
Dividing the country chapters are eight "in focus" features examining important themes that affected populations across borders: life under occupation; resistance movements; strategic bombing; casualties; atrocities; the Holocaust; the Soviet Union; and displaced persons and refugees.

Before the main countries section, a series of introductory chapters set the Liberation in context. A map provides an overview of the sweep of the Liberation; a timeline chronicles the major events of 1943–45; and an editor's choice suggests the best sites to visit. Directly preceding the country chapters is a discussion of the run-up to the Liberation – the events that shaped Europe between 1934 and 1943 – and an account of the countries that remained neutral in World War II.

Towards the end of the book, the conclusion section explores the legacy of the Liberation, including chapters on reconstruction, justice and retribution, and the world at war – a way of remembering and paying homage to the many non-European countries involved in World War II. We also include a number of personal reflections on the Liberation, offered by people from varied walks of life.

Finally, we have a reference section that supplies some Liberation-themed tailor-made tours around Europe; a selection of films and books for further study; and an explanation of exactly how World War II armies were organized.

Dispersed throughout the book are a number of useful boxes and features offering insights into a range of important themes, from friendly fire to concentration camps, breaking the Enigma code and the Atlantic Wall. All the major personalities are covered too – Eisenhower, Mussolini, Rommel and so forth – as well as some of the people inadvertently caught up in the tragedy of war, such as Anne Frank and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.



« Stone tablet at Monte Cassino Polish Military Cemetery

Liberation Route Europe

History is just one aspect of this book. It is also a travel companion, as the fascinating story of the Liberation is brought alive by exploring the landscapes of today. All the sites associated with the Liberation that we have chosen to include in this guide – fortifications, cemeteries, museums, memorials, battlefields, towns, ruined villages – are portals into the past.

It hasn't been easy to decide what to include and what to omit (for want of space), and there are plenty of other interesting places to discover. Some of them don't receive many visitors; some are overgrown with vegetation; some have little or no documentation to explain their significance, but they all have something to say about the people who passed through between 1943 and 1945.

Touring the lands and sites of the Liberation Route Europe, whether through the pages of this book, on the internet, on an independent adventure or as part of an organized trip, is a deeply rewarding experience. History and place intersect to offer a moving, living and connected exploration of World War II and the final Liberation.