

10 June 1944

# The Oradour-sur-Glane massacre

Photograph © Helen Watts



All that is left of Oradour's main street, with the wine store (right) and hotel (left).

## FACT SHEET

**IN THE DAYS** preceding Saturday 14th June 1944, German troops had been rapidly moving north through occupied France to defend against the D-Day landings in Normandy by the Allied troops. In an attempt to disrupt their progress, French Resistance activity was at its peak; with frequent ambushes on German battalions, attacks on German garrisons and the sabotaging of rail links. The Germans were outraged, especially when a high-ranking SS officer, commander Major Helmut Kämpfe, was kidnapped and subsequently murdered. So, on 10th June, General Heinz Lammerding issued an Order outlining the punitive measures to be taken. There was, he said, to be a *'brutal crackdown'*.

### Peaceful village

The village of Oradour-sur-Glane, located about 20 miles from the city of Limoges, had stayed relatively peaceful during the Occupation. The Germans had left it alone, and as a result it had become a safe haven for refugees, including Jews and exiles from the Lorraine region.

Saturdays were always busy in Oradour because of its shops, its market and the chance of good fishing in the nearby river Glane. But the population in the village on 10th June was especially large because it was the day on which tobacco rations were given out. It was also the day before the festival of Corpus Christi and, in the schools, medical vaccinations were being administered, so children from outlying areas had come into the village, swelling its numbers.

Just before 2pm, 20 Waffen-SS officers and 187 Waffen-SS soldiers under the command of Sturmbannführer Adolf Diekmann (a well-respected SS major with an excellent military record) marched into Oradour, sealing off all the roads. The people in the village were surprised, but not unduly concerned. So, when they were summoned to assemble in the market square (known as the fairground or *Champ de Foire*) for an identity check, the majority of them saw no reason not to cooperate.

Addressing the people, Commander Diekmann said that the SS suspected there was a secret store of arms in the village so a search was to be carried out. He then asked the Mayor, Dr Paul Desourteaux, to nominate 30 hostages. However, the mayor refused, offering himself and his four sons instead.

### The Godfrin family

Only about 20 people decided to make themselves scarce when the Germans arrived – mostly people who had more reason than most to be suspicious, including some Jewish and French refugees. One such family – the Godfrins – had come to Oradour four years earlier after being evicted by German troops from their home in Lorraine. Of the five Godfrin children, three (Jeanne, age 13, Pierette, 11, and Roger, 7) were in school that Saturday. All had been warned by their parents to flee to the woods behind the cemetery if the Germans ever came to Oradour, but only Roger heeded that warning. Rather than going to the fairground with his sisters, he escaped out of a back

window of the school. After hiding for a while, Roger headed for the cemetery but was spotted and fired at by a German soldier. Roger fell to the ground and played dead, not moving even when the soldier came right up to him and kicked him in the kidneys. After the soldier had gone, Roger lay there for more than two hours before fleeing over the river Glane to safety. Roger was the only child among a mere 29 survivors that day.

## The massacre begins

After they had assembled the villagers in the fairground, the Germans separated the men from the women and children. They took the women and children to the church, and the men to six key sites – three barns, a wine store, a forge and a garage. Around 4pm, an explosion was heard from the church. It signalled the start of a massacre. More than 400 women and children were crammed inside the church as an incendiary device was set off. The nave filled with smoke and anyone who tried to escape was shot. Then the soldiers (some as young as 18) threw hand grenades into the terrified crowd. Firewood, straw and wooden chairs were piled onto the dead and wounded then set alight. The fire was so hot it melted the bronze bells in the church tower.



Roger Godfrin, photographed in Oradour-sur-Glane in 1945.

Only one woman survived – Marguerite Rouffanche. She was shot five times, but climbed out of a high window and crawled into a nearby garden where she was found alive the next day.

Meanwhile, machine guns have been posted at the entrances to the six sites where the men had been taken. The SS soldiers opened fire, aiming low so as to injure more than kill. The bodies were then covered in hay and firewood, before being set alight. Only five men got out alive.

In total, 644 people lost their lives that day: 191 men; 247 women and 206 children. Almost 170 were from surrounding villages. Only 23 people, including Roger, escaped death by hiding around the village or by fleeing, and six escaped from the execution sites, including Mme Rouffanche.

## Laying blame

At Oradour's Visitor Centre, blame for the massacre is laid at the door of General Heinz Lammerding. However, there has been much debate over who specifically ordered it.

In 1953, some of the SS officers involved were brought to trial in Bordeaux. They claimed that their superiors were keen to take reprisals for the murder of Major Kämpfe and *'wanted to terrify the French people'*.

Some said that troops were sent to the village to find evidence of Oradour's involvement in the kidnap.

Others have suggested that Oradour was simply an easy target for a reprisal against the Resistance because of its small size and because it was defenceless and easy to encircle. But there is no solid evidence linking Oradour to any Resistance activity, and no proof that Lammerding specifically ordered the massacre.

Even if Major Adolf Diekmann was ordered to search the village and take hostages, it's possible that he wasn't ordered to do any more than that. Certainly, he was court-martialled afterwards which suggests that he acted independently. However, Diekmann didn't live long enough to



Commander Adolf Diekmann, who led the troops in Oradour.

Photograph source unknown

face his court martial as he was killed just 19 days after the massacre, on the battlefield in Normandy.

The original village of Oradour-sur-Glane was never rebuilt: the ruins were left as a memorial to those who had died. But in 1946, two years after the country was liberated from German occupation, the National Assembly authorised the construction of a new town, adjacent to the old. It was completed in 1953.

## Oradour today

In 2013, German investigators opened a new inquiry into the Oradour massacre following the arrest of six former SS soldiers believed to have been involved. One 89-year-old man, known to the public only as Werner C and who had been a member of an SS mechanised infantry regiment, was charged. However, in December 2014, a German court threw out the case, stating that there was insufficient evidence to prove little more than the fact that the accused was present at Oradour during the massacre.

So even 70 years on, the events at Oradour on 10 June 1944 remain at the forefront of people's minds and a joint visit from German and French Presidents, Joachim Gauck and Francois Hollande, is just one of the many tributes still being paid to those who lost their lives that day.