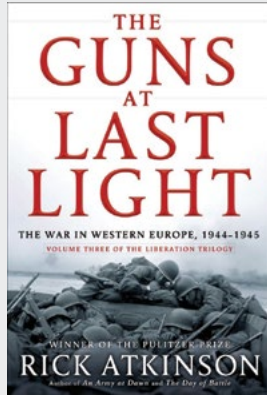


THE GUNS AT LAST LIGHT

The War in Western Europe 1944-1945



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NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, Rick Atkinson embarked on a Herculean venture to retell the narrative of the Allied forces in Europe and North Africa during World War II. The project, consisting of three linked but stand-alone volumes, was named “The Liberation Trilogy.” The first book in the set, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943*, was published in 2002. Lauded by reviewers and historians alike, it won a Pulitzer Prize for history. The second volume, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, appeared in 2007. It was likewise extolled and quickly became a *New York Times* best seller. In a review of the second book, *New York Times* book critic William Grimes referred to the then-unfinished trilogy as “A triumph of narrative history, elegantly written, thick with unforgettable description and rooted in the sights and sounds of battle.” The long-awaited final tome, *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945*, was released in 2013. The third volume describes the struggle for Western Europe, the end of the Third Reich, and the defeat of Nazi forces. From Normandy to Berlin, the book uncovers the hardships, exhaustion, and sheer horror of warfare in the European theater of operations. It also describes in uncompromising detail the contentious Anglo-American relationship, the Blitz in England, the liberation of Paris, the horror of the labor camps, and the coming of age of the American warfighting machine. By 1944, the American military was no longer the untrained apprentice.

Atkinson’s first two books described how Allied forces fought through the challenging conditions of North Africa and Italy to the threshold of victory. *The Guns at Last Light* takes forward the narrative from D-Day through the eventual liberation of Europe and the restoration of freedom to the continent.

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Atkinson is right to dwell on Operation Overlord, the ambitious air and sea assault of Normandy, in the early pages of his final volume. It was here that Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, earned his spurs—planning and executing a complex operation fraught with difficulties. Six thousand ships and landing craft—including 700 warships—and 150,000 men, undertook the greatest amphibious invasion ever mounted. American casualties were predicted to reach 12 percent of the assault force alone, with the 1st Infantry Division estimating that under “maximum” conditions, casualties could reach 25 percent. Eisenhower needed to mitigate factors such as surprise, weather, and tidal conditions. Because of bad weather, he made the key decision to push back the operation 24 hours to 6 June 1944. Any delay thereafter would risk delaying the operation until the next full moon in July.

An essential ingredient of the operation was a comprehensive deception plan—embellished by a network of British double agents—that persuaded German intelligence the main invasion would occur across the Pas de Calais. The clever deception worked, as Atkinson observes, diverting the German 15th Army—which could have acted decisively in Normandy against Allied forces. Although Operation Overlord helped set the foundations for Allied victory in Europe and was the major turning point in World War II, it came at an enormous cost to men and material. German shells and machinegun fire took their toll on the invading forces, and battles raged. Even so, the all-important conditions were set for the subsequent breakout.

Following his narrative of the Allied landings on the Normandy beaches, Atkinson expertly chronicles the major battles and activities as the Allies advanced east through Europe. He looks critically at the fighting to consolidate the beachhead before the attempted breakout by rapid armored assault, known as Operation Cobra. A description of the Falaise Pocket, the decisive engagement of the Battle of Normandy, is followed by an account of the liberation of Paris in August 1944. Operation Dragoon, the invasion of southern France in August 1944, is next to receive Atkinson’s critical gaze. Operation Market Garden, the disastrous attempt to outflank German defenses in September 1944 through Holland, is then chronicled sympathetically (Bernard Montgomery, commander of

the 21st Army Group, was held responsible for the failure). Then comes an account of the complex and exhausting fight for the Hürtgen Forest on the Belgium-Germany border in November 1944. The Siegfried Line campaign follows, before Atkinson tackles the horrific Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Forest—an epic of American heroism. Here, Adolf Hitler, in an all-out gamble, launched a largely fruitless counteroffensive. Hitler skillfully massed significant combat power for what Atkinson calls the “last great grapple of the Western Front.” His objective was to regain the initiative by splitting the Allied armies with a devastating armored thrust. American units were caught flat-footed, and the ensuing battle, which lasted from 16 December 1944 to 25 January 1945, was the costliest engagement ever fought by the U.S. Army. The Colmar Pocket is next to be considered, before Operations Veritable and Grenade—the crossing of the Roer in February-March 1945—are scrutinized. The last battle described is the crossing of the Rhine

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in March 1945. The German surrender and VE Day—Victory in Europe—conclude the historical narrative.

In many ways, the brilliance of *The Guns at Last Light* is that it goes well beyond simply recording renowned battles and events. Atkinson introduces a cast of well-known characters—and some not-so-well-known—throughout the book, ranging from celebrated military commanders to unnamed soldiers, sailors, and aviators. The reader relives the courage, fear, and determination of those who prosecuted the battle for Europe. Through these characters, the author presents interesting anecdotes and thought-provoking analyses that cause the reader to pause and reflect. Moreover, topics such as leadership, technological sophistication, and logistics catch the reader’s imagination and add real depth and quality to the explication of the major battles.

To cite an example, the narrative describes the complicated and often fractious relationship between three of the greatest World War II commanders, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Bernard Montgomery, and George S. Patton. As Atkinson uncovers, grumbling, backbiting, and spitefulness were a routine part of the Anglo-American relationship and everyday coalition life. However, it is the tension between Montgomery—one of the most controversial leaders of World War II—and Eisenhower—the Supreme Allied Commander and Montgomery’s overall boss—that is most evident throughout the manuscript. The two did not start their relationship well. Montgomery thought Eisenhower did not fit the mold of a battlefield general. At their very first meeting, Montgomery chastised Eisenhower, a chain smoker, for lighting a cigarette in a conference room. Eisenhower never forgave Montgomery for the outburst, and the fallings-out between the two only grew worse. Montgomery dismissed Eisenhower’s initial plan for the invasion of Normandy with brutal candor, and the relationship continued to deteriorate beyond D-Day as the Allies advanced through Europe.

Although a great coalition leader (Allied unity remained the central principle of his command), Eisenhower was no strategist. Furthermore, he had proved himself to be an indifferent commander in Tunisia and Sicily. He was also cautious and prone to remaining in the rear. He often ignored logistical needs. All told, his generalship was vulnerable to external criticism. Although a good staff officer of great intelligence, Eisenhower was viewed as a “lightweight” by the unreasonably critical and conceited Montgomery.

Montgomery, as Atkinson illustrates, would often besiege Eisenhower with tactical schemes and proposals, articulated in long correspondence. Montgomery firmly believed that Eisenhower knew little about strategy and that he was an indifferent supreme commander. He particularly detested Eisenhower’s broad-front operational concept in Europe; Montgomery believed in concentrating effort in a “single thrust.” Montgomery’s arrogant intractability, numerous tactical shortcomings—and there were a good number—and smug claims finally undermined the Anglo-American relationship. It is little surprise that he drew considerable criticism. Omar N. Bradley was quick to fault Montgomery

for various sins but, as Atkinson notes, even Bradley had his shortcomings: “battlefield clairvoyance, which he [Bradley] had occasionally displayed as a corps commander in Tunisia and Sicily, often eluded him as an army group commander.” Nobody was faultless or immune from criticism. Toward the end, Eisenhower paid minimal attention to Montgomery’s pleas, and the two armies largely operated independently, despite attempts by Winston Churchill to repair friendships. Operation Market Garden, beset with intelligence shortcomings, haphazard execution, and indifferent generalship, was the last occasion of the war when Eisenhower accepted a strategic tender from Montgomery without detailed cross-examination.

The French—and particularly Charles de Gaulle—proved similarly challenging, notes Atkinson. Eisenhower told George Marshall: “Next to the weather, the French have caused me more trouble in this war than any other single factor. They even rank above landing craft.” The cohesion and internal coherence of the Allied coalition were the keys to success, and this was where Eisenhower’s hidden-hand leadership was that of a master craftsman. Churchill wisely recalls, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with Allies, and that is fighting without them.”

Such frictions were inevitable. Commanders at all levels were tired, dispirited, short of ideas, and often bad-tempered. Many were ill or weakened by anxiety. Youthful expressions were gone, replaced by the creases of tension and capricious behavior. Atkinson notes that even the seemingly indefatigable Churchill became ever more erratic and unbalanced—obsessed with inconsequential detail. Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges, commander of First Army (America’s largest fighting force in Europe), was “worn by illness, fatigue, and his own shortcomings.” Although peevish and insulated, as well as lacking in dynamism and imagination, his decision making had become increasingly incoherent and unreasonable. “When the frayed commander of the 8th Division requested brief leave after his son was killed in action, Hodges sacked him,” Atkinson notes. Such irregular behavior was hardly surprising. The pressure of command, particularly considering Allied losses, was enormous. Of the 156,000 men who took part in D-Day, 3,000 Allied troops died, with a further 9,000 wounded or missing. In the Hürtgen Forest alone, one battalion in

the 110th Infantry was reduced to 57 men even after being reinforced. Losses degraded the 112th Infantry from 2,200 to 300. In less than three months, six U.S. Army infantry divisions were engaged in the Hürtgen Forest, plus an armored brigade, a Ranger battalion, and sundry other units. In total, 120,000 soldiers sustained 33,000 casualties. It is little wonder that commanders and soldiers became unhinged by constant war, mounting casualty figures, and the innumerable atrocities they came across. At Natzweiler, American soldiers overran their first concentration camp. Most of the 17,000 inmates were still alive, but clear evidence of atrocity remained—a sobering sight that was telegraphed quickly across the First Army. Atkinson observes that as the campaign progressed, enemy prisoners were beaten to obtain intelligence, captured villages were rampaged, and for some, the question of killing ceased to be a moral dilemma. More of the enemy were killed, and fewer prisoners were taken. Atkinson quotes one Canadian soldier, “When the Jerries came in with their hands up, shouting ‘*Kamerad*,’ we just bowl them over with bursts of Sten [gun] fire.” A lieutenant in the 15th Infantry wrote in his diary, “Some of our best men are the most murderous.” The horrors of war make for compelling, if unsettling, reading.

Atkinson also notes that in addition to casualties from enemy action, soldiers’ foot problems plagued the American war effort in Europe. Combat boots fitted in warm weather were often too tight to accommodate more than a single pair of socks. Trench foot—a crippling injury—became epidemic as winter approached and freezing autumn rains set in. Atkinson posits that the United States was unprepared for winter campaigning in 1944. In November and December, trench foot and other cold weather health problems hospitalized 23,000 men—nearly all of them infantrymen. By late November, trench foot accounted for a quarter of all hospital admissions. It could be argued that almost nothing relating to clothing and equipment had been learned from campaigning in the Atlas Mountains of Tunisia in 1942 or the Apennines of Italy in 1943. However, while the Army had failed to pull through the lessons of cold weather injuries, it had learned to deal with combat exhaustion. Atkinson recalls, “Most patients were treated as temporarily disabled and kept close to the front, to preserve their self-respect and emotional links to

their unit.” However, despite such an approach, most experts concluded that the soldiers were “worn out for good” after 200 to 240 days of battle.

Atkinson also uncovers another interesting facet of the war as the balance of persuasion and power transitioned over the course of the campaign. After D-Day, proportions of Allied forces changed rapidly. By May 1945, the United States predomi-

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nance was about three to one. Atkinson posits that “Britain’s stature and influence seemed to diminish with each new arrival of a Liberty ship jammed with GIs; the empire’s future was uncertain at best ...” Militarily, the United States was evolving from trainee status at war to full-blown professional. By war’s end, the Americans had provided more than two-thirds of Eisenhower’s 91 divisions and half of the Allies’ 28,000 combat aircraft. “Thirteen U.S. divisions in Europe suffered at least 100 percent casualties—five more exceeded 200 percent ...” The United States also shipped 18 million tons of war material to Europe. Despite the cost—roughly \$4 trillion in 2012 dollars—America emerged from World War II, Atkinson notes, with extraordinary advantages that would ensure prosperity for decades. The Russians, too, were growing in power, reach, and influence. Having quickly rolled the Eastern Front back toward Berlin, Marshal Joseph Stalin was very much at the top table during the infamous meeting at the Crimean resort of Yalta, alongside Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Each head of state shared native shrewdness, political acumen, and a conviction that his nation was about to become a superpower—but only two would emerge from the war with this status. This was to be the end of the period of European supremacy and the British Empire.

The author is adroit at uncovering the growing military sophistication during World War II, including the cat-and-mouse game to defeat, or at least mitigate, technological advances. This was much more than the value of “Ultra” decrypts and the wider vulnerability of German radio transmissions. For example, the advanced German radar network—stretching from Norway to Spain—was bombed for a month before Operation Overlord, with key sites receiving particular attention to include intense electronic jamming. This alone was insufficient to disguise Allied intentions, and additional trickery included balloons with radar reflectors to simulate invasion ships, and metal “confetti” to mimic the electronic signature of bomber formations. Atkinson notes, “The actual Overlord fleet deployed an unprecedented level of electronic sophistication that foreshadowed twenty-first-century warfare.” Over six hundred “jammers” were distributed to disrupt search and fire control radars. However, solutions to technological advances were often more straightforward and basic. The devastating German V-1 flying bomb, which “sucked workers from office windows, incinerated mothers in grocery stores, and butchered pensioners on park benches,” is a case in point. Despite attempts to target launch areas, supply dumps, and related sites, 2,000 barrage balloons were situated carefully on the anticipated approaches to London. The hope was that their tethering cables would bring down the bombs in flight, but, instead, the Germans fitted the V-1 wings with sharp blades to cut the cables. To help counter this, Atkinson recalls, “Fighter pilots grew adept at shooting down the bombs with 20mm cannons . . . and some even learned to use their wings to create enough turbulence to send a bomb spiralling out of control.”

While Atkinson is right to dwell on the battles in France, Belgium, and Holland, he is equally prudent to discuss in detail the challenges of logistics and resupply throughout the campaign. As a wise critic once noted, strategy is for amateurs; logistics are for professionals. By September 1944, fewer than four rounds per day were available for the largest guns. Only a month later, ammunition shortfalls were truly “critical” across the front. Shortages kept American armies largely on the defensive in October: “attacks required more firepower than sitting,” and strict firing limits were placed on some divisions. Why such shortages happened is revealed skillfully in *The Guns at Last Light*. Although U.S. plants failed to

meet demand in some areas, supply routes routinely deteriorated in poor weather conditions, and cargo became jumbled and misplaced (troops regularly had to rummage through holds to find critical items).

Shortages also tended to be a problem of distribution rather than supply. Fuel is another case in point. To help overcome shortages, an elaborate nexus of pipelines was built to reduce reliance on ships, vehicle transportation, and jerricans. Despite such initiatives, deficiencies were common across many items. Tent canvas was in short supply, and spare tires were stripped from vehicles in the United States and shipped to Europe. So too were uniforms, which were often “consumed” at double the War Department’s estimates. Despite this, “surfeits piled up: one quartermaster depot would report receiving 11,000 brooms, 13,000 mops, 5,000 garbage cans, and 33,000 reams of mimeograph paper.” This was all “stuff” that was not necessarily needed. Shortages were not unique to the Allies. Fuel was also a problem for the Germans. Hundreds of tanks and assault guns were immobilized on the Eastern Front because of a lack of supplies. Logistics and resupply were to pose a significant challenge throughout the campaign, often driving or impeding operations.

All told, *The Guns at Last Light* is a brilliant study of the war in Western Europe. Despite its off-putting length (almost 900 pages), it is rich with insights without getting lost in the detail. It is truly captivating and almost impossible to put it down. Simply put, Atkinson has done it again: the final volume of the Liberation Trilogy is eye opening, persuasive, brilliantly researched, and wonderfully comprehensive without being unnecessarily exhaustive. The author has tackled a bottomless subject with incredible skill, nimbleness, and aplomb. He writes stylishly and with uncommon precision and shade. The wide-ranging account is told with drama, color, and texture. Complimented by black and white photographs, exceptionally clear maps, and an invaluable wiring diagram of the Allied chain of command, *The Guns at Last Light* is a true *tour de force* and deserves to be on the bookshelf of every soldier and historian. I recommend this volume unreservedly; it stands out from the crowd. However, a single question remains: how definitive is this account? Time will tell, but I would be surprised if *The Guns at Last Light* did not prove to be an authoritative version of the Allied triumph in Europe during World War II. **MR**