

**THE GUNS AT LAST LIGHT: THE WAR IN WESTERN
EUROPE, 1944–1945¹**

REVIEWED BY COMMANDER I. C. LEMOYNE*

*You will enter the continent of Europe and, in
conjunction with the other united nations, undertake
operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the
destruction of her armed forces.²*

I. Introduction

I wanted to dislike this book. Asked to read another historical account of the Allied victory in WWII centered exclusively on the ground war in Western Europe, yet another paean to “the Greatest Generation” focused entirely on the United States Army, filling more than 600 pages of text with copious notes, was not exciting to me. It is the contrarian in me, my own venal service pride, a sense that I had been over this ground enough already; I truly expected to dislike this book.

Guns at Last Light, the final installment of Rick Atkinson’s *Liberation Trilogy*,³ is a masterpiece of contemporary narrative history. Mr. Atkinson, already an award-winning journalist and historian,⁴ has crafted a seminal work that is important reading for all military officers and civilian policy-makers in military affairs.

After identifying in Part II Atkinson’s reasons for writing *Guns at Last Light*, Part III of this review explores his background as a

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¹ RICK ATKINSON, *THE GUNS AT LAST LIGHT: THE WAR IN WESTERN EUROPE, 1944–1945* (2012).

² *Id.* at 12 (quoting from the order of the Combined Chiefs of Staff to Commander, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower before the invasion in June 1944).

³ *Rick Atkinson, The Liberation Trilogy* consists of three books: *AN ARMY AT DAWN: THE WAR IN NORTH AFRICA, 1942–1943* (2002), *THE DAY OF BATTLE: THE WAR IN SICILY AND ITALY, 1943–1944* (2007), *GUNS AT LAST LIGHT: THE WAR IN WESTERN EUROPE, 1944–1945* (2012), <http://liberationtrilogy.com> (last visited Sept. 11, 2013).

⁴ Notably, 1982 Pulitzer Prize for National Journalism, 2003 Pulitzer Prize for History are available at <http://www.pulitzer.org/1999> and <http://www.pulitzer.org/2003>. Additional awards may be found at <http://www.liberationtrilogy.com>.

journalist and how it informs his approach to this topic and extensive use of sources. Part IV delves into the organization and style of *Guns at Last Light* as well as the applicability of the book's principles today. Finally this review notes criticisms of the work and analyzes Atkinson's own summation of the book.

II. Purpose and Thesis

The clearest statement of Atkinson's purpose with all the works in the *Liberation Trilogy* appears in the Prologue to the first book, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943*. It is more than to set out “the choreography of the armies” for the reader's understanding or to explain why in battle “topography is fate.” His purpose is to provide “intimate detail” of individuals through “their diaries and letters, their official reports and unofficial chronicles” and their memories, “even as we swiftly move toward the day when not a single participant remains alive to tell his tale” And his task as a historian is “to authenticate: to warrant that history and memory give integrity to the story, to aver that all this really happened.”⁵ Mr. Atkinson takes his role seriously, as shown by his flawless research and extensive sources.

The scope of *Guns at Last Light* is encapsulated in the quotation at the beginning of this review, but it is best understood by reference again to the Prologue to *An Army at Dawn*.⁶ There, Mr. Atkinson explains his view that the “liberation of western Europe is a triptych” with *Guns at Last Light* as the final panel presenting “the invasion of Normandy and the subsequent campaigns across France, the Low Countries, and Germany.”⁷ Although this scope makes clear that his focus is on the campaigns in Western Europe, Atkinson is careful to point out the importance of Adolf Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union at enormous cost in energy, blood, and treasure of both Germany and the Soviet Union.⁸

⁵ AN ARMY AT DAWN, *supra* note 3, at 2.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 3 (Atkinson avers that each panel in this triptych informs the others. The campaigns in North Africa established patterns and motifs that were echoed in Italy, and culminated with the invasion of Normandy and final victory over Germany.)

⁸ *Id.* at 7–8 (noting Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union as one of two seminal events fundamentally altering the course of the war, the other being the attack on Pearl Harbor); *see also* ATKINSON, *supra* note 1, at 5, 228, 523, 637 (noting that final defeat of Hitler required the massive invasion by the Western Allies coupled with the tying up of

Atkinson's thesis is not set out clearly in the opening of *Guns at Last Light*, but is referred to in the epilogue. Viewed in conjunction with his prologue to *An Army at Dawn*, Atkinson's main point is that the Allied Powers in WWII prevailed largely because of the "prodigious weight of American industrial might" provided to the "Allied arsenal." Atkinson further argues that this "brute strength" had to be coupled with the "generalship and audacity, guile and celerity, initiative and tenacity" to bring the combat power produced by the American "economic juggernaut" to bear on the enemy in order for the Allies to succeed.⁹

III. Professional Background and Sources

Atkinson started his professional life as a journalist, most notably for the *Washington Post*. His personal biography lists numerous awards during his years as a reporter.¹⁰ He subsequently expanded his endeavors to include writing historical books. Again, he was nationally recognized for the quality of his work.¹¹ As discussed in greater detail below, his background as a reporter is clearly evident in the style and organization of *Guns at Last Light*. That very same background as a journalist also informs his approach to his audience. This is a book that can be read, understood, and enjoyed with little or no specialized knowledge of the campaigns in Western Europe, the strategic and political issues motivating significant parties to the conflict, or much knowledge of large army confrontations at all.¹²

two-thirds of German combat forces on the Eastern Front. The Soviet Union suffered more than 26 million casualties and killed far more Germans in combat "than all other allied forces combined.")

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Atkinson is credited with the following notable awards: 2003 Pulitzer Prize for history, 1982 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting, 1999 Pulitzer Prize for public service (awarded to the *Washington Post* for a series of investigative articles directed and edited by Atkinson), 1989 George Polk Award for national reporting, 2003 Society for Military History Distinguished Book Award, 2007 Gerald R. Ford Award for Distinguished Reporting on National Defense, and 2010 Pritzker Military Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing, <http://www.liberationtrilogy.com> (last visited Sept. 7, 2013).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *E.g.*, Ben Macintyre, *The Price of Victory* (review of *Guns at Last Light*, *supra* note 1), N.Y. TIMES, May 23, 2013, at BR9 ("supremely readable"), and ("rare ability to combine a historian's eye with a reporter's pen to simultaneously provide a sweep and detail to combat that is both unique and enjoyable for the novice student and the hardiest grgnard"), Jerry D. Lenaburg, *Review of The Guns at Last Light*, N. Y. J. OF BOOKS,

Mr. Atkinson frequently explains the macro aspects of his story by involving the reader in small, relatable elements of that story. He does not assume the reader is an expert in the subjects he chooses for inclusion in the story. Mr. Atkinson provides background information where he believes it will be important to explaining the significance of an event or decision by a participant, and he has done his homework. The Prologue to *Guns at Last Light* contains 136 separate citations, many referring to multiple works supporting his assertions. The substantive portion of the Notes section consists of 164 pages alone. His Selected Sources include primary source materials, first-hand accounts, and the work of other historians and commentators. This extensive bibliography includes periodicals, newspapers, papers, letters, collections, personal narratives, diaries, interviews, questionnaires, oral history transcripts, and other assorted miscellany to support his work. And books—more than 781 separate books are listed here as well.¹³

IV. Organization, Style, and Usefulness

Mr. Atkinson turns his substantial journalistic skills to crafting a work of history for the 21st century. The structural style is impressionistic rather than completely linear, with many carefully placed details that can overwhelm the reader who focuses too intently on them. Atkinson's work is best understood taken as a composite whole, with almost microscopic details that slowly pile up with mesmerizing effect. An interactive, multi-media accompaniment to enhance comprehension is helpfully provided by the author.¹⁴

Guns at Last Light begins with an extensive Prologue detailing the preparations and political maneuvering leading up to Operation OVERLORD.¹⁵ The first portion of this Prologue is largely expository and provides much of the necessary strategic, political, and operational background to provide context for the importance of the struggle that is the main focus of the text.¹⁶ The Prologue then transitions into

(May 14, 2013), <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/guns-last-light-war-western-europe-1944%E2%80%931945-liberation-trilogy>.

¹³ ATKINSON *supra* note 1, at 647–841.

¹⁴ See <http://www.liberationtrilogy.com> (last visited Sept. 7, 2013).

¹⁵ ATKINSON, *supra* note 1, at 1.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1–6.

“pointillism history”¹⁷ the predominant style of the rest of the work; a careful compilation of enormous amounts of minute details woven into a comprehensive tapestry with effective narrative impact. The final pages of the Prologue hurtle from detail to detail, aiding the author’s obvious attempt to convey the roiling emotions that wracked the invasion force like the angry sea they were now crossing.¹⁸ This style helps Mr. Atkinson create genuine drama as he deftly incorporates a wealth of detailed information into a compelling narrative where we all know how the story ends.

Interspersed throughout *Guns at Last Light* are personalized details of pathos and tragedy, sparingly covered in a few lines.

Officers ordered men in landing craft approaching the shore to keep their heads down, as one lieutenant explained, “so they wouldn’t see it and lose heart” Without firing a shot, Company A was reportedly “inert and leaderless” in ten minutes; after half an hour, two-thirds of the company had been destroyed, including Sergeant Frank Draper, Jr., killed when an antitank round tore away his left shoulder to expose a heart that beat until he bled to death. Among twenty-two men from tiny Bedford, Virginia, who would die in Normandy, Draper, “didn’t get to kill anybody,” his sister lamented.¹⁹

In addition to piles of facts leavened by these personalized details, Mr. Atkinson employs narrative arcs by relatively unknown or under-appreciated contributors. These narrative arcs are welcome additions, knitting together the complex story and providing a human face to the enormous amount of information being presented.

¹⁷ “[A]ssembling the small dots of color into a vivid, tumbling narrative.” Ben Macintyre, *The Price of Victory*, N.Y. TIMES, May 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/books/review/the-guns-at-last-light-by-rick-atkinson.html>.

¹⁸ ATKINSON, *supra* note 1, at 25–40.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 69 (describing the near complete destruction of two infantry regiments on “Hell’s Beach,” part of the far Western flank of Omaha Beach).

One of the most poignant examples of this device involves Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., who is introduced in the Prologue.²⁰ This Roosevelt, namesake son of the twenty-sixth President of the United States, appears repeatedly in the portion of *Guns at Last Light* dealing with the battle in Normandy, leading American troops at Utah beach in the early hours of the invasion.²¹ Already decorated for valor in previous campaigns, he is described as bearing the pain of his war wounds, the weight of his father's reputation, and ominous "chest pains gnawing beneath his service ribbons" into battle in Normandy.²² The day after the beach assault, Brigadier General Roosevelt arrives at the 82nd Airborne Division command post, "helmet pushed back and waving his cane from *Rough Rider*"²³ 'as if the bullet that could kill him had not been made,' one witness reported.²⁴ He accompanied the 4th Division in its assault on the town of Cherbourg and subsequently served as the region's military governor.²⁵ Previously judged "too softhearted to take a division" by General Omar Bradley,²⁶ General Bradley later chooses Roosevelt for division command after D-day and Roosevelt was nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor for his exploits at Utah beach.²⁷ After having dinner with his son in mid-July 1944, the fearless Brigadier General Roosevelt dies of a heart attack, never knowing of his division command; the Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously.²⁸ Atkinson's epitaph for this less famous Roosevelt, quoting from a letter to Roosevelt's wife, "I don't believe there are many people in the world like that.' And now, one less."²⁹

²⁰ *Id.* at 27 (This is the first reference to Brigadier General Roosevelt, who writes to his wife on the eve of the invasion of Normandy, "The black bird says to his brother, if this be the last song ye shall sing, sing well, for you may not sing another.").

²¹ *Id.* at 59-63 (describing a "nearly fearless" man living not in the shadow of his more famous father, but trying to be worthy of such a responsibility).

²² *Id.* at 60.

²³ *Id.* at 62 (*Rough Rider* was the name of Brigadier General Roosevelt's jeep, an homage to his father's regiment in the Battle of San Juan Hill.)

²⁴ *Id.* at 91 ("'Fellows,' Roosevelt bellowed upon his arrival, 'where's the picnic?").

²⁵ *Id.* at 126 (General Bradley had relieved Brigadier General Roosevelt as Deputy Commander of 1st Infantry Division in Sicily due to "rowdy indiscipline" under Roosevelt's leadership.)

²⁶ *Id.* (Both the division command and Medal of Honor citation were on General Bradley's desk at the time of Roosevelt's death.)

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 127 (Roosevelt's jeep, *Rough Rider*, was returned to the motor pool where the name was painted over and the jeep reissued.)

²⁹ *Id.*

Another passage, from the Epilogue of *Guns at Last Light*, displays Mr. Atkinson's detail-rich style in direct support of his thesis. He relates how America produced and delivered "18 million tons of war stuff to Europe, equivalent to the cargo of 3,600 Liberty ships or 181,000 rail cars." This prodigious output ranged from "800,000 military vehicles" to shoes "in sizes 2A to 22EEE." It included "40 billion rounds of small arms ammunition and 56 million grenades." During the final campaigns from June 1944 to May 1945, American troops expended "500 million machine-gun bullets and 23 million artillery rounds." Ever the journalist, Mr. Atkinson quotes Churchill (describing America as a "prodigy of organization"), an artillery gunner ("I'm letting the American taxpayer take this hill"), and a German prisoner ("Warfare like yours is easy") to frame and support his point.³⁰

To be clear, Mr. Atkinson does not aver that the American way of war was actually easy. The quotes provide context for the details from the perspective of the participants, and the piling up of these details supports the central message of *Guns at Last Light*. Victory in Western Europe was due in significant part to the staggering material superiority of the Western Allies, coupled with their ability to marshal it into battle effectively and relentlessly. It is this central message that warrants the attention of military officers and civilian policy-makers alike.

For other potential readers somewhere along the spectrum from WWII expert to a reader with a casual interest in history, *Guns at Last Light* is an excellent addition to the historical canon. It provides an illuminating narration of the final push to victory in Europe in WWII and a solid foundation for understanding the international relations surrounding the subsequent Cold War.

V. Criticisms

Mr. Atkinson ambitiously takes as his subject all of the Western Allied forces, their leaders, and an array of subordinates. He throws in the major political figures of the era³¹ and the geopolitical fears driving

³⁰ *Id.* at 633.

³¹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt receives thirty-one separate references, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill seventy-two separate entries, and Russian Marshal Joseph Stalin ten separate entries. *Id.* at 855, 870, 872.

their decisions.³² Even when coupled with the personalized facts and narrative arcs described above, the wealth of information can at times be dizzying. This treatment, however, helps convey the very nature of the war, “clear in hindsight, but bewildering and chaotic to those caught up in it.”³³

Additionally, as critics have noted elsewhere, his descriptions of actual battle occasionally drift into “overheated prose” and are less convincing than many other portions of *Guns at Last Light*.³⁴ Mr. Atkinson’s weakness in this area may be excused as a credible attempt of a writer accustomed to direct observation or at least first-hand sourcing of information having to rely on second- and third-hand accounts of an experience he has had the good fortune to avoid. Some critics have also noted that he ignores the contributions of other nations and focuses too intently on the American part of the story.³⁵

VI. Final Argument

Guns at Last Light ends with an economy made all the more effective considering it resolves a story that comprises three separate books. Perhaps an inspiration for this economy is the message dictated by Eisenhower himself to the Combined Chiefs of Staff regarding the surrender ceremony just transpired: “The mission of this Allied force was fulfilled at 0241, local time, May 7, 1945. Eisenhower.”³⁶ *Guns at Last Light* contains four main parts comprised of twelve numbered sections and forty-six separately titled chapters in its 640 pages of text. Yet the book presents the factual elements of final victory in only eight pages. The Epilogue adds an additional thirteen pages of detailed

³² For example, quoting a War Department report from late 1944,

The defeat of Germany will leave Russia in a position of assured military dominance in Eastern Europe . . . [bringing] a world profoundly changed in respect to relative military strengths . . . The British Empire will emerge from the war having lost ground both economically and militarily.

Id. at 381.

³³ Macintyre, *supra* note 12.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/10144098/The-Guns-at-Last-Light-by-Rick-Atkinson-review.html>.

³⁶ ATKINSON, *supra* note 1, at 626.

aftermath, tallying the enormous human tragedy WWII encompassed. It also briefly discusses how the conclusion of hostilities set the stage for the next conflict, the Cold War. Mr. Atkinson's style shines as he effectively sums up the achievement and impact of the events just laid out without waxing unnecessarily eloquent. True to his opening statements, Mr. Atkinson's work in *Guns at Last Light* supports his position that the true facts taken together comprise a much more satisfying and complete story.³⁷

VII. Conclusion

I hefted this 900-page book with trepidation. Having made my way through its wealth of information conveyed by an author of substantial gifts and obvious command of his subject, I read the following quote from General George C. Marshall, United States Army Chief of Staff, to General Eisenhower: "You have completed your mission with the greatest victory in the history of warfare You have made history, great history for the good of all mankind, and you have stood for all we hope and admire in an officer in the United States Army."³⁸ I now set down *Guns at Last Light*, disappointed only by my out-of-order introduction to Mr. Atkinson's *Liberation Trilogy*. This naval officer has already ordered the first installment, *An Army at Dawn*.³⁹

³⁷ AN ARMY AT DAWN, *supra* note 3, at 2.

³⁸ ATKINSON, *supra* note 1, at 636.

³⁹ AN ARMY AT DAWN, *supra* note 3.