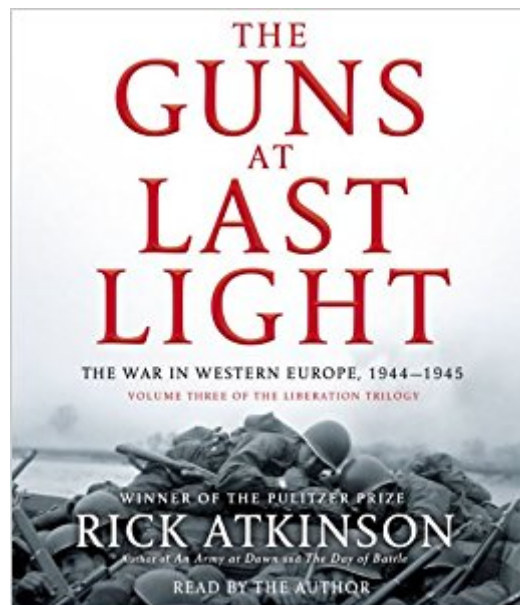




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# The Guns At Last Light: The War In Western Europe, 1944-1945 (Liberation Trilogy)



## Synopsis

The eagerly awaited final volume in Pulitzer Prize-winner Rick Atkinson's New York Times bestselling Liberation Trilogy. It is the twentieth century's unrivaled epic: at a staggering price, the United States and its allies liberated Europe and vanquished Hitler. In the first two volumes of his bestselling Liberation Trilogy, Rick Atkinson recounted the history of how the American-led coalition fought its way from North Africa and Italy to the threshold of victory. Now he tells the most dramatic story of all—the titanic battle in Western Europe. D-Day marked the commencement of the war's final campaign, and Atkinson's astonishingly fresh account of that enormous gamble sets the pace for the masterly narrative that follows. The brutal fight in Normandy, the liberation of Paris, the disaster that was Market Garden, the horrific Battle of the Bulge, and finally the thrust to the heart of the Third Reich—all these historic moments come utterly alive. Atkinson tells the tale from the perspective of participants at all levels, from presidents and prime ministers to ambitious generals, from war-weary lieutenants to terrified teenage riflemen. When Germany at last surrenders, we understand anew both the devastating cost of this global conflagration and the awe-inspiring effort that led to Germany's surrender. With the stirring final volume of this monumental trilogy, Rick Atkinson's remarkable accomplishment is manifest. He has produced the definitive chronicle of the war that restored freedom to the West. His lively, occasionally lyric prose brings the vast theater of battle, from the beaches of Normandy deep into Germany, brilliantly alive. It is hard to imagine a better history of the western front's final phase.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Spanning D-day to V-E Day, Atkinson culminates his three-volume epic of the U.S. Army in Europe during WWII. Readers of the prior volumes (*An Army at Dawn*, 2002; *The Day of Battle*, 2007) will discover a thematic continuation in this one, namely, criticism of American generalship. Debacles such as Operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge, and Patton's zany raid to liberate a POW camp punctuate the narrative of the U.S. Army's otherwise remorseless advance toward victory over the German army. To describe the high command's thinking concerning operations that turned into fiascoes, Atkinson funnels their postwar apologia through his appreciation of a particular battlefield situation, graphically conceptualized in this tome's excellent cartography. While casting generals in the light of human frailty, Atkinson allocates anecdotal abundance to soldiers' ground-war experiences. Emphasizing loss, he quotes many last letters from men destined to die. With a mastery of sources that support nearly every sentence, Atkinson achieves a military history with few peers as an overview of the 1944-45 campaigns in Western Europe. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"A magnificent book! Though the story may seem familiar, I found surprising detail on every page! Atkinson's account of D-Day is both masterly and lyrical! [He] is an absolute master of his material." --Max Hastings, *The Wall Street Journal*

"A tapestry of fabulous richness and complexity! Atkinson is a master of what might be called 'pointillism history,' assembling the small dots of pure color into a vivid, tumbling narrative. . . . The Liberation Trilogy is a monumental achievement, about 2,500 pages in all, densely researched but supremely readable." --*The New York Times Book Review*

"Breathtaking, unforgettable! Atkinson provides us with especially poignant descriptions in a blaze of writing and research that matches the drama and significance of the moment, all without peer in modern history! This volume is a literary triumph worthy of the military triumph it explores and explains." --*The Boston Globe*

"Monumental! As befits a journalist who knows his material inside and out, Atkinson can provide the incisive explanation to a complex situation or personage! A masterpiece of deep reporting and powerful storytelling." --*The Los Angeles Times*

"[Atkinson] reconstructs the period from D-Day to V-E Day by weaving a multitude of

tiny details into a tapestry of achingly sublime prose. With great sensitivity, Atkinson conveys the horrible reality of what soldiers had to become to defeat Hitler's Germany.

The Washington Post: "Detailed in its research, unsparing in its judgments and confident in its prose. This trilogy--on which [Atkinson has] spent 12 years, twice as long as the war itself--may well be his masterpiece.

Time: "Great characters, vivid details. The final volume of Rick Atkinson's 'Liberation Trilogy' proves again that few can re-tell a story as well as he.

USA Today: "A glorious epic. [Atkinson] never stoops to breathless prose in this perfectly paced account and always comes up with fresh and revealing details.

Antony Beevor, The Wall Street Journal: "A remarkable conclusion to his three parts on WWII. A fabulous book.

Tom Brokaw on MSNBC's Morning Joe: "The Guns at Last Light . . . is history written at the level of literature . . . Atkinson's story is propelled by vivid descriptions and delicious details . . . World War II's reverberations will roll down the centuries in its geopolitical consequences, and in the literature it elicited in letters and in histories like Atkinson's trilogy.

George Will, The Washington Post: "The same qualities that garnered Atkinson a Pulitzer Prize for *An Army at Dawn*--meticulous research married to masterful narrative--are apparent in *The Guns at Last Light*. The new book relates the oft-told (but never better) story of the war's final year, from D-Day to the German surrender.

The Chicago Tribune: "Epic, set-piece battle sequences are balanced by deft portraiture. The Greatest Generation is nearly gone. The Liberation Trilogy is the monument it deserves.

Vanity Fair: "A sweeping, prodigiously researched epic. The Guns at Last Light is a definitive, heartfelt work of grandeur, atrocity, and profound sorrow. It is also, along with the two previous volumes, a long, fervent prayer for the fallen.

The Philadelphia Inquirer: "[An] extraordinary accomplishment. This is a beautifully written, moving account of one of the most bittersweet chapters in modern history. The details build a stunning and precise account of major movements--from Normandy to Paris, from the South of France to Grenoble--and close-up portraits of famous figures that make them living, breathing beings.

Smithsonian Magazine: "A riveting book. Few historians have Atkinson's gift for language and few journalists pay as much attention to historical sources. Atkinson writes with the descriptive and lyrical power of a first-rate novelist.

Christian Science Monitor: "The final volume of Atkinson's World War II trilogy is just great reading: From Hemingway's liberating a Parisian hotel (and raiding its bar) to the American soldiers discovering concentration camps, the entire story is absolutely riveting.

People

“Emotionally gripping” | This 850-page military history captivates the reader with the high drama of a spellbinding novel and a cast of characters that a master storyteller would be hard-pressed to invent. | It’s hard to imagine a more engrossing, dramatic, fair-minded and elegantly written account of these 11 months that changed the course of history.

• Associated Press

“In the final volume of his sweeping World War II trilogy, Pulitzer Prize winner Rick Atkinson recounts the battle for Western Europe (from D-Day to V-E Day) through the eyes of those who were on the front lines, masterfully bringing this pivotal chapter of history back to vivid life.

• Parade

“A terrific read” | Atkinson never loses track of the men who fought the war. Mining their diaries and letters, he has produced an account that is achingly human.

• The Miami Herald

“A richly detailed narrative of the war final’s year, with riveting looks at D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge.

• San Diego Union-Tribune

“Atkinson paints on a vast canvas while stressing the details. He cites the experiences of soldiers -- officers and grunts alike -- caught up in a conflagration beyond their comprehension. He preserves the humanity of humans in an inhumane situation” | Passages describe human courage and depravity in such vivid prose that readers need to pause, reflect and regroup” | His book is a fitting tribute.

• The Richmond Times-Dispatch

“Soon, if not already, Atkinson will show up on the list of giants, as later historians stand on his shoulders.

• The Dallas Morning News

“An epic conclusion to an epic historical trilogy about an epic quest to preserve Western freedom, *The Guns at Last Light* is sure to join its predecessor volumes in the best-seller ranks, and confirms the Liberation Trilogy as a new benchmark against which World War II books yet to be written will be measured.

• Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

“A monumental piece of historical writing.

• San Jose Mercury News

“Exhaustively researched, highly readable . . . Just over 16 million Americans served in uniform in the war, and only one million are expected to still be alive at the end of next year. Seven decades later, the story of their service remains compelling, and that’s why so many find it worthy of retelling.

• Buffalo News

“The consummate historian rounds out his prize-winning Liberation Trilogy with a lengthy yet always-engrossing account of the final campaigns on the Western Front, which included D-Day and the well-known Battle of the Bulge. This closing volume is perfect for armchair historians, military buffs, and all those interested in how the Allies finally achieved victory in 1945.

• Charleston City Paper

“A terrific read. . . [The Guns at Last Light] is narrative history at its best, providing not only an excellent chronicle of the war in Europe but also fascinating human interest stories and first-rate character studies of the major figures, as well as stories of ordinary

soldiers. It is truly an outstanding study of the war and a must read for anyone interested in the Second World War. *—Bowling Green Daily News (Kentucky)* “Crisp narrative drive, prodigious research and incisive analysis of people and events ... Atkinson’s latest work is probably the single best volume about the war in Europe from the D-Day invasion to the capitulation of German forces | Rick Atkinson | has become a poet of the war. *—The Washington Independent Review of Books* “Superb | Atkinson writes sensitively, even lyrically | The Guns at Last Light offers an outstanding testament to all who sacrificed to defeat Hitler’s Third Reich. *—The Louisville Courier-Journal* “The master of narrative military history ends his Liberation Trilogy with this admired account of the 1944-45 fighting in Western Europe. *—St. Louis Post-Dispatch* “The Guns at Last Light is an important addition to the World War II bookshelf. *—The Washington Times* “Impressively researched and energetically written, with a brisk pace that carries the reader easily through the narrative’s 600-plus pages. *—The Minneapolis Star Tribune* “Stark photographs complement the excellent prose. *—Richmond Times Dispatch* “[The Guns at Last Light] is deep in detail, narrative and character description. Readers encounter famous generals -- Eisenhower, Montgomery, Bradley, and a host of lower officers -- in illuminated portrayals, warts and all. *—Knoxville News Sentinel* “Rick Atkinson’s triumphant keystone in his three-part arch of World War II, 14 years in the writing, is a masterpiece . . . The Guns at Last Light will stand as the best of books about the biggest of wars. *—The Marine Corps Gazette* “The Guns at Last Light and the Liberation Trilogy is as good as it gets. . . a historical tour-de-force of over 2,000 pages that places Atkinson among the short list of narrative history masters. . . Students and scholars of countless future generations will look to Atkinson for the story of how freedom bested tyranny in Africa and Europe. *—On Point: The Journal of Army History* “Sweeping in scope, Shakespearean in drama and angst, unsparing in its observations, and rich in detail | Atkinson said that he wrote the trilogy as an effort to tell [the story of the frontline troops] “evidently and authoritatively, to current and future generations.’ That he has. *—Defense Media Network* “Atkinson’s zest for research and his evident devotion to hard facts never obscures the grace of his writing. The proof of that lies less in the many accolades and prizes (including a Pulitzer in history in 2003) than simply in the reading. Rare is a 600-page-plus history book that qualifies as a page turner. *—Military History Magazine* “Brilliant | Each volume [of the Liberation Trilogy] is characterized by superb

research and fine writing. The high standard set in the prologue to the first volume carries through the epilogue to the last.

—BG Harold W. Nelson, *Army Magazine*

“Richly rewarding and beautifully crafted | With lyrical | [Atkinson] accurately and objectively tells the greatest story of our time, and does so with the general reader always in mind.

—World War II Magazine

“Triumphant . . . Critics have correctly praised [The Guns at Last Light’s] depth, its evocative nature, and its grasp of the human dimensions of this titanic campaign without losing sight of a broader narrative. . . [Atkinson has] produced a profound work, worthy of being rapidly placed on the service chiefs’ and other senior American commanders’ reading lists.

—Foreign Policy.com

“A marvelous capstone to a trilogy that will make Rick Atkinson to the U.S. Army in the European Theater of Operations what Shelby Foote is to the Civil War | Mr. Atkinson has a 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 hardest grognard.

—New York Journal of Books

“Superb | Atkinson brings his Liberation Trilogy to a resounding close | An outstanding work of popular history, in the spirit of William Manchester and Bruce Catton.

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Superb | The book is distinguished by its astonishing range of coverage | [Atkinson’s] lively, occasionally lyric prose brings the vast theater of battle, from the beaches of Normandy deep into Germany, brilliantly alive. It is hard to imagine a better history of the western front’s final phase.

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“With a mastery of sources that support nearly every sentence, Atkinson achieves a military history with few peers as an overview of the 1944-45 campaigns in Western Europe.

—Booklist

“The book stands out from others on World War II because it successfully explores the fallibility of participants at all levels | This is not a detailed account of any one particular battle but a sweeping epic, yet it is packed with fascinating details. Highly recommended to all who read World War II history.

—Library Journal

“The brilliant, more-than-worth-the-wait final volume of [Atkinson’s] epic Liberation Trilogy. . . The Guns at Last Light should be read not just as a great work of narrative military history, but as an accomplished work of American literature.

—BookPage --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I’m using a D-Day comparison to start this review, but top to bottom, this volume is far more than that. By the end of its prologue, the narrative was already more intense than many comprehensive histories of World War II - and by the time the readers arrives at the ghastly Hurtgen Forest, D-Day

is a distant memory. With so many books and research available about WWII, I don't know that I'd call any one volume (or three in this trilogy's case) truly 'definitive.' However, author Rick Atkinson has provided what the best history does, and that's the motivation to learn even more. As I read this volume, I found myself drawn to do further research into things I'd never heard of - Operation Dragoon in southern France for example - or more details about the landing craft used on D-Day, or more about the mistakes made during the campaign around Antwerp. This is hardly because Atkinson left out information - his amazingly seamless narrative weaves personal stories of soldiers both high ranking and low, with researched documentation from many sources. Unlike historical accounts that keep the reader "above" the action, he very deftly immerses the reader in the tactical battles as easily as the overall strategy. It's never a 'dry' faceless history - the battered humans on the ground, whether it's Eisenhower or a junior private, are almost always the focus. Occasionally, he will offer a quote from a deceased soldier's letter to give a heartbreaking end to a chapter, reminding the reader of the human cost. And what a cost. We as a country have grown so spoiled over the last 10 years of war, and expectations of easy victories, that WWII becomes difficult to relate to - friendly fire on D-Day killed hundreds of soldiers. Mistakes made by various generals - especially at Operation Market Garden, and the early days of the Battle of the Bulge - no doubt prolonged the war or put soldiers in impossible positions, costing thousands more. It's easy to criticize these decisions with hindsight - but Atkinson never criticizes; instead, he lets the documents and testimony do the work, as it should be. It made me appreciate how difficult and frankly, impossible, this war was to manage - and what an beyond amazing job generals like Eisenhower and Montgomery did (and unfortunately, Atkinson details the German generals occasional moments of brilliance - and it's awful to think how hard the Germans fought for such a wretched, awful cause, especially when the war was all but lost, and so many people still had to die). He provided plenty of information that was fairly new to me, even though other works have covered it. For example, the V-1 and V-2 raids over England I knew about in concept - but the accounts he's provided bring it home in much more detail. I had not known what a morale-killer they were to England at the time. That's just one example of many where Atkinson's research and organization and story-telling skills have told so many 'small' stories within this big one. The book's back cover describes WWII as the epic struggle of the 20th century, and that's certainly true. To give justice to those soldiers needed an epic story to be told, and Atkinson has done the job. It's as five-star as a book can be.

**FURTHER READING:** After finishing this book, readers could turn to *A Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, which takes the reader into Europe's next few years. Also, I recently read *The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to*



the Gates of Dachau, which is a battalion commander's story within this larger struggle, and of course *Eisenhower in War and Peace* would be a good additional resource. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* would complement a lot of Atkinson's discussion about the Montgomery-Eisenhower relationship. Also, Ricks deals with the battlefield relief of generals, and it's interesting to note how many commanders Atkinson mentions are 'fired' for their various failures.

Yes, the third volume of the Liberation Trilogy really is that good. *The Guns At Last Light* (hereafter GALL) is a fitting conclusion to Atkinson's excellent series, and is a triumph despite the very tough competition. Volumes One and Two were confronting a (relative) dearth of recent popular works on the African and Mediterranean campaigns, but the main Western Front narrative of combat in France and Germany has been covered in history literature by numerous recent and widely read works by such credible historians as John Keegan, Carlo D'Este, Max Hastings, and Antony Beevor along with second tier "rah rah" populists like Stephen Ambrose and older works that still stand up like those by Cornelius Ryan. Could Atkinson add anything new to such well-trodden ground? He can and does. Here are just a few reasons why Atkinson is at the top of his field: 1) Journalistic integrity. Atkinson is scrupulously fair in covering the controversial personalities and campaign controversies of the Western Front. He presents evidence pro and con, gives impressions of contemporaries that show all valid opinions, and judiciously weighs in with his own tempered assessment. Hastings in comparison is much more opinionated and lets his strong biases show clearly in discussions of events and persons. Hastings can be fun to read because of his vehemence and wit, and I happen to agree with most of his assessments, but at the same time I wouldn't assign his books for a college course or recommend them to a friend who knew nothing about the subject. Atkinson builds his assessments carefully and prudently, and this allows a newcomer or objective reader to reach their own conclusions as to whether they agree or disagree with the author. Too much military history is written with strong authorial opinions that then influence what facts and primary source evidence is presented. Atkinson in comparison is truly "fair and balanced", and his books show his experience as a journalist. This is not to say he lacks opinions or passion; rather, he presents evidence to show why he feels and believes as he does, but he also shows the other side of the coin. 2) Clarity in campaign and battle narratives. I confess that I can never fully visualize what is happening in Antony Beevor's books. His maps are usually poorly done, and his narratives of a given battle or campaign always leave me either just moving on or relying on other explanations I've read in other books. In comparison, Atkinson's works always present battles

and operations clearly, coherently, and with useful maps. The publisher has not skimped on maps here, and Atkinson writes well when discussing the how and why of complex maneuvers. He moves between the sides and up and down the ranks from guy in the trench to Eisenhower and Rommel with wisdom and clarity, and I doubt any reader will be left confused about a given battle.<sup>3</sup>) New detail. Amazingly enough, even when discussing immensely familiar subjects like Overlord, Atkinson finds new things to say, to the extent that I found at least one new interesting fact per page (usually more) in the D-Day section of the book. The end notes are comprehensive and all facts are well-documented, so this book can be a sort of gateway for those wanting to learn more about familiar topics by referrals to new sources.<sup>4</sup>) Quality of Writing. Atkinson and Hastings are my two favorite writers from the list of works I mention above, and Atkinson, though less witty and cynical than Hastings, strikes a magisterial tone in his writing that is hard to achieve. He can mention old Roman and Napoleonic campaigns when discussing the Ardennes and not sound silly, and he can achieve an elegiac and / or patriotic tone without schmaltz (i.e. he is far above Stephen Ambrose!). It is a pleasure to read expository prose that is also literary in quality, and I think this is one of Atkinson's great strengths. Hopefully, these four points of merit cited will convince any skeptic that this volume (and series) deserves five stars. Are there any weaknesses? Some, but hardly worth mentioning. First, because this series focuses on the American experience in the various campaigns, Brits and British Army fans may feel their favorite army gets short shrift. Actually, the coverage of British operations is featured more prominently in GALL than in the other volumes, so the British Army sort of fades in and out of sight frequently. Hastings and Beevor both cover the UK/Commonwealth operations in more detail, and Hastings (in "Armageddon") also covers the Russian advance into Germany, a comparison that is useful and provocative. (Atkinson has virtually nothing at all to say about the USSR war, which is perfectly acceptable given his intent.) Non-American newcomers to WW2 history will probably want a somewhat more coherent account of the UK's experiences and contributions, but there are plenty of other resources they can peruse. (Hastings' "Inferno" is my favorite big picture / UK partial account.) Other than this issue (not really a fault I would say) Atkinson spends a bit too much time (IMO) with WW2 American journalists in the field, but many will find this material enjoyable, and Atkinson obviously feels some kinship with these men who covered the same subject he is now retelling. Obviously, the need to tell the entire history of the War in the West in one volume means some subjects will be short-changed, so if you want more detail on D-Day, read Beevor or Hastings' "Overlord", if you want more detail on Market Garden, read Ryan's "Bridge Too Far", etc. I feel the events are given their proper weight in the scope of narrative coverage, so this also is not really an objective failure. All in all, the Liberation

trilogy is an excellent series, and is the place to begin if you are new to the subject; it is also a great place to learn a few new things if you are already a Western Front enthusiast. Atkinson's series has all the virtues of good history and good books in general: finely written, eloquent, probing, and comprehensive. This series is the new gold standard for the history of the American Western Front experience in WW2.

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