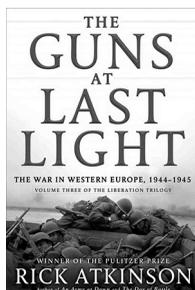


## WORLD WAR II



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## The Guns at Last Light: War in Western Europe, 1944-1945: Volume Three of the Liberation Trilogy

By Rick Atkinson

Reviewed by David T. Zabecki, Ph.D., Major General (USA Retired)

The 1944-45 Allied World War II campaign in Northwest Europe is an oft-told story. In *The Guns at Last Light*, the third volume of his award-winning Liberation Trilogy, journalist-turned historian Rick Atkinson revisits this key episode of the pivotal event of the 20th century. Is there anything fresh in the way he retells this familiar story? If you already have read many books on the subject, is this one worth reading? The answer to both of these questions is an unqualified yes.

This is a large and complex story. As historian Will Durant once noted, “History is so indifferently rich that a case for almost any conclusion from it can be made by a careful selection of instances.” The craft of history, therefore, is based on the art of selecting what to include in your narrative, and what to leave out. In the case of very large and complex events, that largely becomes a function of where you focus the story.

Most military history writing tends to focus at either the high level or the low level. As S. L. A. Marshall wrote in his 1947 book, *Men Against Fire*:

The body of military history is almost exclusively a record of the movement of armies and corps, of decisions by generals and commanders-in-chief, of the contest between opposing strategies and the triumph of one set of logistical conditions over another. The occasional rare passages from the battlefield which are thrown in to illuminate and make zestful the story of the overall struggle are usually of such glittering character or dubious origin to warrant a suspicion that they have little real kinship with the event.

Atkinson is one of those rare writers who can focus on those two widely-separated levels and integrate them into a unified and cohesive story. As he did in his first two volumes, he deftly zooms his lens down to the level of the individual American GIs, British Tommys, and German *Landsers* fighting it out on the line of contact; and then he slowly pans back out, up the chain of command to the senior commanders at the operational and strategic levels and their political masters in Washington, London, and Berlin. The result is a rich tapestry that is a clear and intelligible picture of the western half of the end game of World War II.

Interweaving his own skillful narrative with the voices of those who fought from the shores of Normandy to the banks of the Elbe, Atkinson helps the modern reader understand the agonies and the hardships endured by the soldiers on both sides who faced each other across the line of contact, while at the same time appreciating the gut-wrenching and all too often lose-lose decisions forced upon their generals by the grinding friction of battle and impenetrable fog of war. Nowhere do these conundrums appear more starkly than in Operation Market-Garden and later in the fight for the Hürtgen Forest, arguably the single worst defeat ever suffered by the American Army.

One of the most impressive features of Atkinson's writing style is his authenticity of voice. Any military historian or professional soldier can read his narrative without having to stumble over terms and concepts that are used incorrectly or tossed out loosely in an attempt to establish some sort of level of authority. Yet at the same time that he manages to use precise military expressions in their proper contexts, Atkinson does so without lapsing into jargon or getting bogged down into pseudo-military babble. His narrative is one that can be read, understood, and appreciated by laymen and by military insiders alike—no mean feat of writing.

Although he was never a soldier himself, Rick Atkinson spent a considerable portion of his life around the American military. The son of a career US Army officer, Atkinson was born in Munich, Germany, and grew up on military posts around the world. A three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, he was, from 1983 to 1999, a reporter for the *The Washington Post*, specializing in defense issues. During that period, he was one of the very small number of journalists widely respected by common soldiers and general officers alike. From 2004 to 2005, he held the General Omar N. Bradley Chair of Strategic Leadership at the US Army War College. He understands soldiers at all levels and the world they live in. His empathy shows clearly in his writing, not only for the soldiers on the line, but also for their commanders all the way up the chain. Even when he is dissecting, analyzing, and critiquing the commanders' battlefield decisions, he does it objectively, without moralizing or preaching. In 2010, he received a well-deserved Pritzker Military Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing.

Journalism and history are not quite the same things, and as a historian Atkinson does his homework. The research he has put into all three volumes of the series is impressive by any standards. To develop an understanding for the ground, he went out to many of the key battlefields, including for this volume the still dark, foreboding, and all too-seldom visited Hürtgen Forest. As he wrote in the second volume of the trilogy, *The Day of Battle*, "The ground speaks even when eyewitness no longer can . . ." Any experienced soldier will know exactly what he means here, and Atkinson has taught himself to "read the ground" as a soldier would.

This third volume's exhaustive listing of his chapter notes and sources totals 198 pages. The sources run from books to contemporary newspaper and periodical accounts; to papers, letters, personal narratives, and diaries; and to interviews he conducted with surviving participants of the actions. He made 23 visits, averaging two to three days each, to the US Army Military History Institute, part of the Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which he accurately describes as "among the greatest military archives in the world and a priceless asset to anyone studying World War II."

No matter how many other World War II books you may have on your bookshelf, make room for this one.