



2014-102

John Buckley, *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. ix, 370. ISBN 978-0-300-13449-0.

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War correspondent Chester Wilmot, whom Max Hastings has called “one of the greatest post-war historians,” wrote of the general attitude of British forces during the Second World War that, “Instinctively ... they were averse to a head-on assault against the enemy’s strongest rampart, and they favoured a strategy of *indirect approach*”² (my emphasis). Outnumbered by their enemies, the British had to rely on maneuverability rather than sheer force. The phrase “indirect approach” is now most commonly associated with military historian and theorist B.H. Liddell Hart,³ for whom the term denotes the avoidance of rigid, direct offensives in exchange for the mobility to keep an enemy off balance and unprepared for attack.⁴ According to Liddell Hart, Erwin Rommel’s North African campaign best exemplifies this theory.⁵

Wilmot, Hastings, and Liddell Hart feature prominently in *Monty's Men*, in which John Buckley (Univ. of Wolverhampton) reassesses the effectiveness of the British Army in Northwest Europe in the last eleven months of the Second World War. Buckley contends that army was far more successful than previously acknowledged. By the 1980s, he asserts, an orthodoxy had emerged from writings published in the 1950s by historians like Liddell Hart that tarnished the reputation of the British Army, especially in comparison with the triumphant US forces. Unlike both their allies and their German counterparts, the British have been depicted as ill-organized and dependent on their more capable partners. Buckley exposes this (in his view) biased perspective in the work of well known historians like Hastings, Carlo D’Este, Antony Beevor, Cornelius Ryan, Williamson Murray, Robert Citino, and Raymond A. Callahan, to name a few. He also notes that negative scholarly portrayals of the British Army have been reinforced in popular films, documentaries, and television dramas.

Buckley joins a recent line of scholars seeking to rehabilitate the image of the British Army in the Second World War through revisionist histories⁶ of Bernard Montgomery’s 21st Army Group, which was comprised mainly of British and Canadian forces. He also builds on arguments put forth in his own highly regarded earlier work.⁷ He contends that the criterion of “effectiveness” in war is applicable to much more than fighting in close quarters or use of equipment; it should include

a range of capabilities incorporating intelligence, logistics, planning, firepower, medical support, liaison, communications and engineering, in addition to close-combat tactics, and all such elements have to be brought together in a modern army in order to achieve battlefield objectives.... The effectiveness of the British Army can, therefore, only really be understood by appreciating the context in which Montgomery’s forces were expected to fight, the resources they had available, and the success with which the objectives set out for them were achieved. (15-16)

1. *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-45* (NY: Knopf, 2004) 58.

2. *The Struggle for Europe* (NY: Harper, 1952) 129.

3. See his *The Decisive Wars of History: A Study in Strategy* (London: G. Bell, 1929), often revised.

4. See Alex Danchev, “Liddell Hart and the Indirect Approach,” *Journal of Military History* 63 (1999) 313-37.

5. *The Rommel Papers*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (NY: Harcourt, 1953) 401.

6. E.g., Niall J. A. Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Pr, 2005); David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919-1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2000); Stephen A. Hart, *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000); Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: U Toronto Pr, 2006).

7. *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign* (NY: Routledge, 2004).

In short, the potency of the British Army in the Second World War was largely the result of Montgomery's exploitation of its strengths in firepower, planning, logistics, and his circumvention of its weaknesses in mobility and close-combat tactics.

After the fall of France in June 1940, the British refined their strategy against Germany. Buckley explains that, while equipment was plentiful, the British were primarily concerned about low morale and shortage of troops. The slaughter of soldiers in the Great War must not be repeated a second time. "Let metal do it rather than flesh," remarked the 21st Army Group's chief intelligence officer, "Waste all the ammunition you like, but not lives" (27). Machinery and equipment would be the primary focus of the army. Minimizing risk when and where possible became the refrain for the British.

According to Buckley, besides the total defeat of Nazi Germany, two objectives were paramount. First, the British had to make a discernible contribution to victory in order to play a meaningful role in the restructuring of postwar Europe; otherwise, they risked being cast aside by the Americans and the Soviets. Second, the British Army had to emerge from the war largely intact in order to share in the postwar occupation and governance of Germany. To this end, Montgomery and his staff sought to employ their superior resources, without needlessly endangering their soldiers.

Buckley traces the movements, successes, and failures of the British Army from Operation Overlord to the liberation of Europe and the surrender of Germany. He also, quite correctly, stresses the considerable contributions of Canadian forces. At the end of the first day of the Normandy landings, forward elements of the 3rd Canadian Division had pushed deeper into France than any other division—British or American. From the landings onward, Canadians served in substantial numbers alongside their British counterparts under Montgomery, and the author adequately covers their actions in Northwest Europe.

To buttress his main thesis that the British performed admirably in the final year of the war, Buckley offers an engaging and comprehensive overview of their part in the Normandy invasion. However, though he professes to correct a misimpression of the British contribution to Allied victory, he spends too much time on the army's failures, including more than a chapter on its defeat in the Battle of Arnhem, detailing seemingly every blunder made in the campaign. By contrast, he sketches Operation Plunder, an enormously complicated but ultimately very effective endeavor,⁸ in less than half a chapter. In short, more space should have been devoted to a comprehensive analysis of this and many other British achievements in Northwest Europe.

While British forces had failed miserably in the Far East during the 1941–43 campaigns, they were victorious in continental Europe in 1944–45, principally because of a skillful use of a wide range of resources, from artillery to engineering, medicine, intelligence, logistics, and communications. As John Buckley shows so convincingly in *Monty's Men*, the British Army deserves fuller recognition of its efforts in the Allied liberation of Europe.

8. As Buckley points out, 21st Army Group inflicted thirty thousand casualties on its enemy during the first seven days of the operation, while the British Second Army suffered only three thousand losses (285).