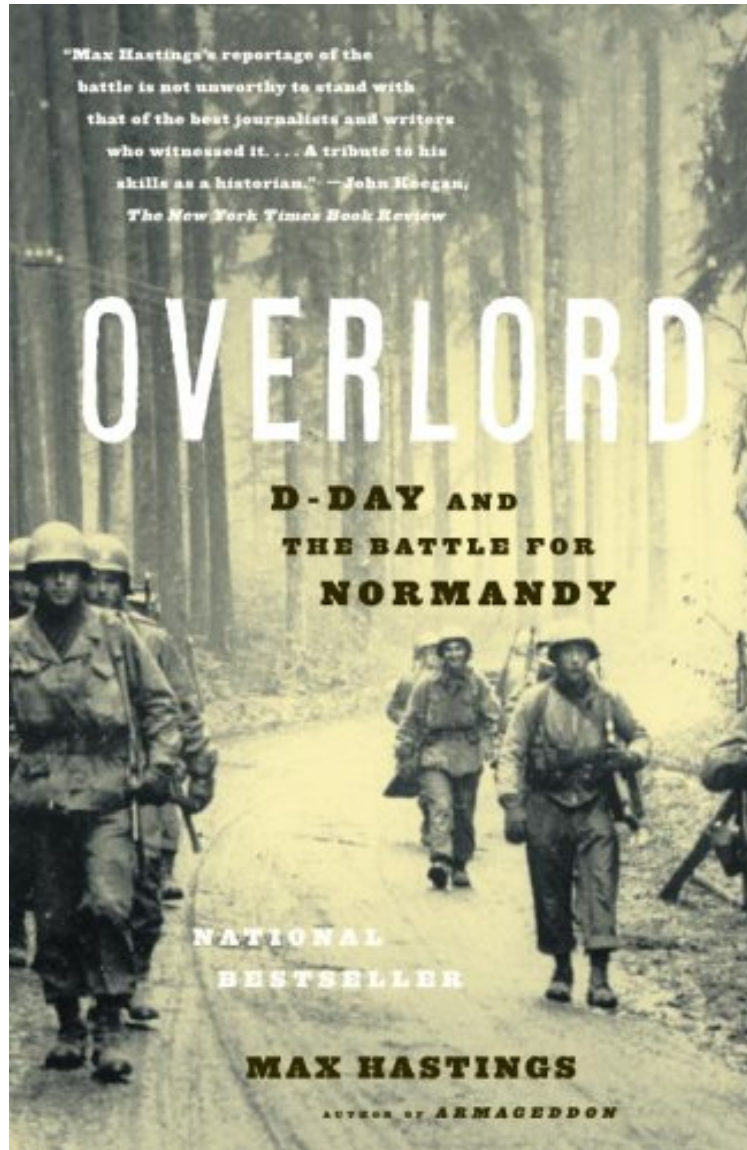


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Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy

Max Hastings

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#80444 in Books Hastings, Max 2006-01-03 2006-01-03Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 7.97 x .83 x 5.17l, .87 #File Name: 030727571X368 pages | File size: 63.Mb

Max Hastings : Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. UnprofessionalBy Ron LLet's dispense with the reason the first star was lost: MAPS!When there is a map included in the book, the particular map dealing with the issue at hand may or may not be close to the discussion of that issue, and if it is, I defy you to find the towns and features mentioned in the copy. For pete's sake, you're describing actions often dictated by the geography and structures, and the reader is

supposed to imagine the battles and their circumstances from your blithe mention of 'on a hill', or some such? MAPS, MAPS, more MAPS and MAPS; why is this so hard to understand by the authors and their editors? Add MAPS with identified locations; Google won't charge you much. Hastings salvaged one star; unlike entirely too many accounts of WWII actions and campaigns, he never once writes "north" when the attention should be directed "south". But then, while he is a writer and I assume he has an editor; the difference between "further" and "farther" must be a mystery to both. He or his editor should have further understood that the troops went farther in certain directions. I'd take another quarter-star off if I could. But for all that, this is not an easy book to read if you have read other accounts and are the least bit skeptical. The author writes as if he has a chip on his shoulder; as if he alone has determined the truth of the matter at hand, and it is not sufficient that he is right, someone else must be *WRONG*. We are introduced early on to the author's conviction that the Nazi troops were better than the Allied troops (Pg. 24) and continuing hints and suggestions that other writers have missed or ignored this point. I can only say that after reading several books on Overlord specifically and many others on the western theater in general, others certainly have noted and remarked at length on the difference. Hastings does mention at intervals (and in what amounts to the summary; Pg. 317) that Germany had a long tradition of celebrating the military and granting prestige to those who make a career of it. England was less subject to such tendencies, but it was certainly not absent in the Isles. In the US, only pockets in the south saw the military as an admirable career; others saw military schools as a chance to get a subsidized education. The US entered the war, as Hastings admits, with an army of 'citizens in uniform', and posting as a US citizen, that seems like a desirable position for any population. Trained and eager killers are not my hope for the pinnacle of a culture. But he goes too far in the claim on the same page that that "Throughout the Second World War, wherever British or American met the Germans in anything like equal strength, the Germans prevailed"; see The Bulge for a corrective of that impression. The Allied troops were capable, later in the war, of more than matching the Nazis under certain circumstances. Similarly, comparisons between the Sherman tank and the Nazi tanks; between Panzerfausts and bazookas; between Nazi light machine guns and the BAR are all subject to what seems breathless reporting, but none of this is new, and all of it simply assumes that the Nazi preference for fewer, more effective weapons was the proper choice in that dilemma. Demonstratively, it wasn't. Further, it is roughly 4,000 miles from Detroit, where the tanks were made, to some port in France. For nearly all of the war, transportation throttled the available materiel on site; shipping defined the weapons at hand. I have to admit an inability to cite the source at this time, but one report had the available ships delivering 6 Shermans compared to 2 larger tanks, and that totally ignores the peripheral logistics to support a new tank in spares, ammunition, etc. Besides which, US doctrine did not presume tanks battling tanks; tank destroyers were to deal with enemy tanks, US tanks were to be cavalry spearheads. Finally, quantity and reliability do matter; suffice to say, the German preferences also lead to more fragile weapons; a Panzer with a blown tread is a sitting duck for a brace of Shermans with smaller guns, and that was certainly common enough. I certainly have other disputes: Hastings' claim that the Villers-Bocage ambush of the Brit tanks said something regarding the disparate quality of the tanks rather than the Brit's tendency to stop for some tea before setting out guards (pg.132); his gratuitous slur regarding Eisenhower's tours of the front (with his "sycophantic" aides and his "driver and perhaps lover"; Pg 240); Churchill's "misgivings" regarding "unconditional surrender", Pg 185 (according to "An Army at Dawn", Atkinson, Pg. 294; Churchill had plenty of opportunities to demur and raised no concern); the claim that Montgomery "was driven to win", where many others have pointed out he was more driven to avoid the appearance of losing; the repeated inference that the Allies could have modified their weaponry in some schedule such that it would have effected a change in the progress of the war in Europe except for parochialism. There are plenty more questionable claims, mistakes, and some 'carefully' selected data; it's fun AND instructive to find them! European war is (or was, we hope) an economic competition, unfortunately often sacrificing human lives in some vain attempt to prove it isn't. See Overy ("Why the Allies Won") for an internally contradictory argument proving it is indeed. And see Toozee ("The Wages of Destruction") for a clear explanation of the German economic imperatives. There is no doubt that the Allies could have done better in Normandy. But there is also no certainty that lives were lost in reliance on gunpowder over flesh or the reliance on caution over heroism. Hastings has every right to argue otherwise, but he would be better off if he stuck to facts to support his claims. Worth the read, but entirely too much second-guessing and counter-factual assumptions. In my opinion that unwarranted (and unsupported) editorializing cost two stars; not a professional effort. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Hastings Is Truly GREAT By Scott Bruneau The book the writing itself is great. The only negatives I can give are the same as so many already have: Perhaps too much emphasis on the British side of things and not very balanced with all of the allies participating BUT UNLIKE SO MANY OTHER AUTHORS AND HISTORIANS Hastings TRYs to have a BALANCE. The other negative has nothing to do with the writer: The PRINT is insanely small. Publishers way of saving paper. Would have been a very large volume had they increased the font size to twice it's size to save on eye strain ;-). I love how Hastings writes the GERMAN side of things. He Tries to find a BALANCE in his reporting in this part of the war as he tries to find balance in all his writings of conflicts. So many American writers do bang the drum of nationalism in their writings about WWII as-if the USA won the war by itself. According to Hollywood films the USA WAS the ONLY one fighting the Germans ;-). I joke with a Russian friend that the "Russians" or "Soviets" won that war. It could be argued

that Hitler LOST the war for the German people. THAT is something else that Hastings shows. Hastings gives the reader a rare wonderful humanizing glimpse into the German soldiers that fought the war. They were human. Soldiers. Doing a job doing their duty just like any Allied soldier. Hastings's addition of this humanizing element makes for an energetic enjoyable rendering of history.² of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Battle Comes Alive By Munseyfloral I bought this book for two reasons. One, I wanted to get a British perspective on Normandy: too often, books written from the American perspective are a one-sided. Second, having read Hastings' excellent description about the Falklands War I wanted to read another of his books. I was not disappointed on either count. Hastings makes the battles come alive with lots of maps, details from interviewed soldiers and a personal interest (his father was in the battle). He doesn't glorify war; both sides made stupid decisions often with poor execution, had ineffective commanders and soldiers, and both sides suffered horribly. Politics aside they were no "good guys". On paper, this should have been a rapid, decisive battle. Despite far superior numbers of men, air power and materiel the Allies barely overwhelmed a largely German army that had far fewer (but superior) weapons, soldiers with a philosophy geared to war and, fortunately, a commander-in-chief who was a liability rather than an asset. The French people who lived in Normandy were victims of both the Allies and the Axis. The Allies were the ultimate "victors", but everyone involved (and their families) lost significantly. If you are planning a trip to Normandy, and have any interest at all in the battle, read this before you go.

On June 6, 1944, American and British troops staged the greatest amphibious landing in history to begin Operation Overlord, the battle to liberate Europe from the scourge of the Third Reich. With gut-wrenching realism and immediacy, Hastings reveals the terrible human cost that this battle exacted. Moving beyond just the storming of Omaha beach and D-Day, he explores the Allies' push inward, with many British and American infantry units suffering near 100 percent casualties during the course of that awful summer. Far from a gauzy romanticized remembrance, Hastings details a grueling ten week battle to overpower the superbly trained, geographically entrenched German Wehrmacht. Uncompromising and powerful in its depiction of wartime, this is the definitive book on D-Day and the Battle of Normandy.

“Max Hastings’s reportage of the battle is not unworthy to stand with that of the best journalists and writers who witnessed it. . . . A tribute to his skills as a historian.” –John Keegan, *The New York Times* Book “Hastings combines a quick, clear prose with provocative and often brilliant analysis. His conclusions are sharp yet sound, his research through, and his history incisive. Of the many books that have been written on Normandy, it is quite simply the best.” –*Dallas Morning News* “A brilliant and concise account.” –*The Washington Post Book World* “A fine account of the strategy and tactics of the campaign. The author has been shot at himself. . . . This has done marvels for quickening his understanding of what such landings are like, and adds an extra cutting edge to his book. He goes over a well-worn path, full of pitfalls, and falls into none of them.” –*The Economist* About the Author Max Hastings is the author of more than twenty books, including *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939–1945*, and *Winston's War: Churchill 1940–1945*. He spent his early career as a foreign correspondent for BBC TV and various newspapers, then as editor of Britain’s *Evening Standard* and *Daily Telegraph*. He has received numerous awards for both his books and his journalism. He lives in the English countryside west of London. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter I “MUCH THE GREATEST THING WE HAVE EVER ATTEMPTED” Not the least remarkable aspect of the Second World War was the manner in which the United States, which might have been expected to regard the campaign in Europe as a diversion from the struggle against her principal aggressor, Japan, was persuaded to commit her chief strength in the west. Not only that, but from December 1941 until June 1944 it was the Americans who were passionately impatient to confront the German army on the continent while the British, right up to the eve of D-Day, were haunted by the deepest misgivings about doing so. “Why are we trying to do this?” cried Winston Churchill in a bitter moment of depression about Operation OVERLORD in February 1944,* which caused in him a spasm of enthusiasm for an alternative Allied landing in Portugal. “I am very uneasy about the whole operation,” wrote the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Alan Brooke, as late as 5 June 1944. “At the best, it will come very far short of the expectations of the bulk of the people, namely all those who know nothing about its difficulties. At its worst, it may well be the most ghastly disaster of the whole war.”* Had the United States army been less resolute in its commitment to a landing in Normandy, it is most unlikely that this would have taken place before 1945. Until the very last weeks before OVERLORD was launched, its future was the subject of bitter dissension and debate between the warlords of Britain and America. For a year following the fall of France in 1940, Britain fought on without any rational prospect of final victory. Only when Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, the most demented of his strategic decisions, did the first gleam of hope at last present itself to enemies of the Axis. For the remainder of that year, Britain was preoccupied with the struggle to keep open her Atlantic lifeline, to build her bomber offensive into a meaningful menace to Germany, and to keep hopes alive in the only theatre of war where the British army could fight—Africa and the Middle East. Then, in the dying days of the year, came the miracle of Pearl Harbor. Britain’s salvation, the turning point of the war, was confirmed four days later

by another remarkable act of German recklessness: Hitler's declaration of war upon the United States. The outcome of the Second World War was never thereafter in serious doubt. But great delays and difficulties lay ahead in mobilizing America's industrial might for the battlefield, and in determining by what strategy the Axis was to be crushed. To the relief of the British, President Roosevelt and his Chiefs of Staff at once asserted their acceptance of the principle of "Germany first". They acknowledged that her war-making power was by far the most dangerous and that following her collapse, Japan must soon capitulate. The war in the Pacific became overwhelmingly the concern of the United States navy. The principal weight of the army's ground forces, which would grow to a strength of eight million men, was to be directed against Germany and Italy. This decision was confirmed at ARCADIA, the first great Anglo-American conference of the war that began in Washington on 31 December 1941. America committed herself to BOLERO, a programme for a vast build-up of her forces in Britain. Churchill, scribbling his own exuberant hopes for the future during the Atlantic passage to that meeting, speculated on a possible landing in Europe by 40 Allied armoured divisions in the following year: "We might hope to win the war at the end of 1943 or 1944."* But in the months after ARCADIA, as the first United States troops and their senior officers crossed to Europe, it was the Americans who began to focus decisively upon an early cross-Channel invasion. The debate that now began, and continued with growing heat through the next 20 months, reflected, "an American impatience to get on with direct offensive action as well as a belief, held quite generally in the U.S. War Department, that the war could most efficiently be won by husbanding resources for an all-out attack deliberately planned for a future fixed date. American impatience was opposed by a British note of caution: American faith in an offensive of fixed date was in contrast to British willingness to proceed one step at a time, molding a course of action to the turns of military fortune."* Here, in the words of the American official historian, was the root of the growing division between the Combined Chiefs of Staff throughout 1942 and much of 1943. At first, American thinking was dominated by fear of a rapid Russian collapse unless the western Allies created, at the very least, a powerful diversion on the continent. ROUNDUP was a plan for an early invasion, with whatever forces were available, which the British speedily took pains to crush. Under strong American pressure, Churchill agreed in principle to the notion of executing ROUNDUP with 48 Allied divisions not later than April 1943. But the British—above all Sir Alan Brooke—privately continued to believe that ROUNDUP neither could nor should take place. Despite their assent to the operation, in the name of Allied solidarity, they began a successful struggle to divert resources towards much more modest—and in their view, more realistic—objectives. In the summer of 1942, the Americans reluctantly acceded to GYMNAST, an operation for the invasion of French North Africa. This was allegedly to be undertaken without prejudice to ROUNDUP, because of well-founded British fears that America would shift the weight of her effort to the Pacific if it became obvious that many months must elapse before major action took place in Europe. But as the BOLERO build-up in Britain fell behind schedule, the desert campaign dragged on without decisive result, and the tragic Dieppe raid demonstrated some of the hazards of cross-Channel operations, it became apparent in Washington as well as in London that there could be no campaign in France in 1943. GYMNAST was translated into reality by the TORCH landings of November 1942. It was at Casablanca in January 1943 that the Anglo-American leadership met for their second major conference. This was to be the last meeting at which, by dint of brilliant military diplomacy, the British gained acceptance of their own ideas about the manner in which the war should be pursued. The Americans reluctantly accepted HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, with the prospect of further operations in Italy. They also undertook a commitment to an even greater combined bomber offensive against Germany, POINTBLANK, designed to "weaken Germany's war-making capacity to the point to which invasion would become possible". The American Chiefs of Staff returned to Washington irritably conscious that they had been persuaded to adopt a course they did not favour—the extension of "sideshow" operations in the Mediterranean which they believed were designed chiefly to serve Britain's imperial and diplomatic purposes. But the British had at least acknowledged that north-west Europe must be invaded the following year. Sir Alan Brooke agreed at Casablanca that "we could definitely count on re-entering the continent in 1944 on a large scale". The Americans were determined to countenance no further prevarication. Throughout the remainder of 1943—while the British argued for extended commitments in the Mediterranean, possible operations in the Balkans, further delays before attempting to breach Hitler's Atlantic Wall—the Americans remained resolute. At the TRIDENT conference in Washington in May, the date for invasion of north-west Europe was provisionally set for 1 May 1944. This commitment was confirmed in August at the QUADRANT conference in Quebec. To the deep dismay of the British, the Americans also pursued most forcefully their intention to execute ANVIL, a landing in southern France simultaneous with OVERLORD, whatever the cost to Allied operations in Italy. This proposal was put to Stalin at the Teheran conference in November 1943; he welcomed it. Thereafter, the Americans argued that, quite apart from their own enthusiasm for OVERLORD and ANVIL, any cancellation or unreasonable postponement of either would constitute a breach of faith with the Russians. Throughout the autumn and winter of 1943, even as planning and preparation for OVERLORD gathered momentum, the British irked and angered the Americans by displaying their misgivings and fears as if OVERLORD were still a subject of debate, and might be postponed. "I do not doubt our ability in the conditions laid down to get ashore and deploy," Churchill wrote to Roosevelt on 23 October. "I am however deeply concerned with the build-up and with the situation

which may arise between the thirtieth and sixtieth days . . . My dear friend, this is much the greatest thing we have ever attempted.”⁵ The Prime Minister cabled to Marshall in Washington: “We are carrying out our contract, but I pray God it does not cost us dear.”⁶ On 11 November, the British Chiefs of Staff recorded in an aide-memoire: “We must not . . . regard OVERLORD as the pivot of our whole strategy on which all else turns . . . we firmly believe that OVERLORD (perhaps in the form of RANKIN) will take place next summer. We do not, however, attach vital importance to any particular date or to any particular number of divisions in the assault and follow-up, though naturally the latter should be made as large as possible consistent with the policy stated above.”^{*} Remarks of this sort aroused the deepest dismay and suspicion among the Americans. They believed that the British were seeking grounds for further delays because they feared to meet major formations of the German army in France, with the prospect of huge casualties that the battered Empire could so ill afford. A sour memorandum prepared in the U.S. Chiefs of Staffs’ office in the autumn, declared that, “it is apparent that the British, who have consistently resisted a cross-Channel operation, now feel OVERLORD is no longer necessary. In their view, continued Mediterranean operations coupled with POINTBLANK and the crushing Russian offensive, will be sufficient to cause the internal collapse of Germany and thus bring about her military defeat without undergoing what they consider an almost certain ‘bloodbath’. The conclusion that the forces being built up in the United Kingdom will never be used for a military offensive against western Europe, but are intended as a gigantic deception plan and an occupying force, is inescapable.”^{*} This document was not a basis for action, but serves to illustrate American suspicion and scepticism at the period. It was patently true that Britain’s strength was waning, her people growing weary: “At the end of 1943, the population of Britain was . . . nearing the limit of capacity to support the Allied offensive,”^{*} wrote the British official strategic historian. “The government was therefore faced by the prospect of conducting the main offensive against Germany and Japan over a period when greater casualties and further demands must lead, after a period of uneasy equilibrium, to a reduction in the war effort.” By May 1944 the British army would attain the limits of its growth—two and three-quarter million men. Meanwhile, the American army would number five and three-quarter millions, still far short of its potential maximum. British production of ammunition had been falling since late 1942, of vehicles since mid-1943, of guns and small arms since late 1943. Whereas in 1940 Britain was producing 90.7 per cent of the Commonwealth’s munitions, buying 5.6 per cent from America and finding the remainder within the Empire, by 1944 Britain’s share of production had fallen to 61.2 per cent, with 8.9 per cent coming from Canada and 28.7 per cent by purchase or Lend-Lease from the U.S. Britain’s leaders were more and more despondently conscious of America’s dominance of the Grand Alliance and its strategy. Americans were not slow to point out either at the time or after 1945 that Alamein remained the only major land victory of the war that the British achieved unaided. Yet the Americans, their minds fixed on the importance of concentrating efforts upon a campaign that they would dominate, often judged British motives and intentions unjustly. For all Churchill’s moments of irrationality, quirkiness, senility, his absurd operational proposals and flights of fantasy and depression, his brilliant instinct for the reality of war sparkles through the archives of the Second World War, and often towers over the judgements of his professional service advisers. At root, the Prime Minister never doubted the eventual necessity for a major campaign in Europe. As early as October 1941, dismissing a demand from the Chief of Air Staff for resources which Portal claimed would enable bombers alone to win the war, Churchill looked forward to “the day when Allied armies would conduct simultaneous attacks by armoured forces in many of the conquered countries which were ripe for revolt. Only in this way could a decision certainly be achieved . . . One has to do the best one can, but he is an unwise man who thinks there is any certain method of winning this war, or indeed any other war between equals in strength. The only plan is to persevere.”^{*} Churchill’s uncertainty concerned not whether to invade Europe, but when to do so. Looking back over the strategic debate that took place between 1941 and 1944, it is impossible to acquit America’s leadership of naivety, just as it is difficult to deny the inability of Britain’s service chiefs to match the American genius for overcoming difficulties. For the Americans, Professor Michael Howard has written, “shortages were not a problem, as for the British, to be lived with indefinitely, but a passing embarrassment which need not affect long term strategy. This view may have led them to underrate not only the problems of organizing production but the difficulties of planning, logistics and tactics which still lay in the way of bringing those resources to bear. But their British Allies were no less prone to regard as insoluble difficulties which American energy and abundance now, for the first time, made it possible to overcome.”^{*} In the winter of 1943–44, the British were by no means certain that the moment had come when OVERLORD might be launched on the overwhelmingly favourable terms that they sought. They saw many hazards in haste, and great virtues in delay. The German army had already suffered vast losses in the east, and was being desperately depleted each day by the advancing Russian armies. The air forces believed that strategic bombing was rapidly eroding the ability of Hitler’s industries to arm and supply his armies. Operation RANKIN, referred to above in the British Chiefs of Staffs’ aide-memoire, was a plan for the occupation of the continent if the bomber offensive or dramatic developments in the east caused German resistance suddenly to collapse. Such a profoundly realistic, even pessimistic, figure as Sir Alan Brooke can never have pinned many hopes on such a remarkable turn of events. But it is a measure of lingering British wishful thinking about the avoidance of a bloody campaign in Europe that, as late as November 1943, the Chiefs of Staff could still refer even to the possibility of implementing RANKIN. A forceful faction among post-war historians

has sought to argue that Germany could have been defeated much earlier had the American strategic view prevailed from the outset and France been invaded in 1943.* They suggest that in that year, Allied air supremacy was already overwhelming; that Italy unliberated would have been a drain upon the Axis rather than an asset to it; that the Atlantic Wall and its garrison were visibly weaker in 1943 than the following year; and that the landing craft lacking could readily have been found by reducing the quota for the Pacific and cancelling further amphibious operations in the Mediterranean. All of this ignores the consideration at the heart of Churchill's and Brooke's fears to the very moment of invasion—their knowledge of the immense and extraordinary fighting power of the German army. Four years of war against the Wehrmacht had convinced Britain's commanders that Allied troops should engage and could defeat their principal enemy only on the most absolutely favourable terms. Throughout the Second World War, wherever British or American troops met the Germans in anything like equal strength, the Germans prevailed. They possessed an historic reputation as formidable soldiers. Under Hitler their army attained its zenith. Weapon for weapon and tank for tank, even in 1944, its equipment decisively outclassed that of the Allies in every category save artillery and transport. (*Reference notes have been deleted from this excerpt. To read the complete list of reference notes, please refer to the actual book.)