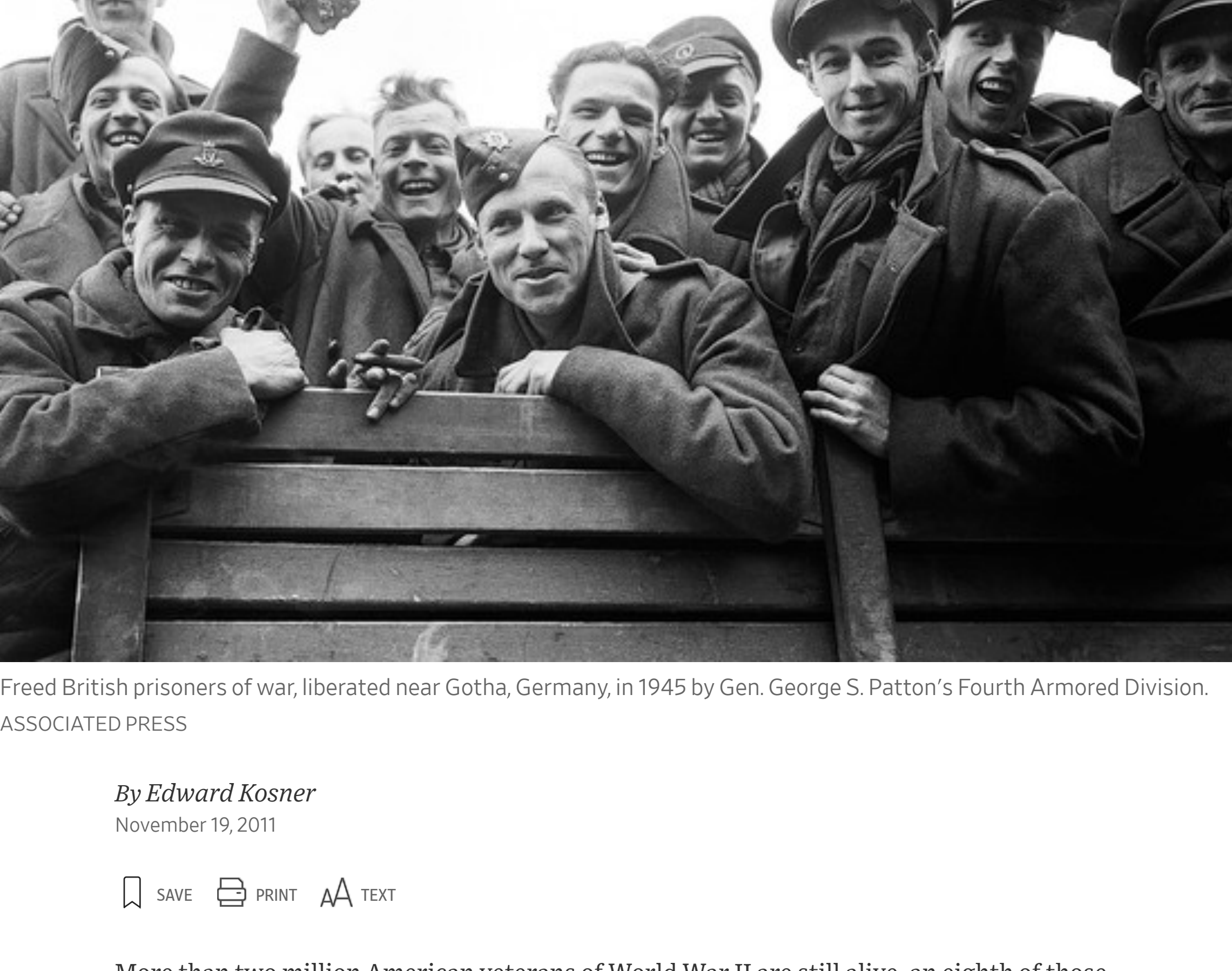


# Those Desperate Hours



Freed British prisoners of war, liberated near Gotha, Germany, in 1945 by Gen. George S. Patton's Fourth Armored Division. ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Edward Kosner  
November 19, 2011

SAVE PRINT TEXT

More than two million American veterans of World War II are still alive, an eighth of those who fought, the last witnesses to what Max Hastings rightly calls “the largest event in human history.”

For the rest of us, the war is like an impressionistic mashup of grainy old newsreels, Churchill sound bites, classic movies and self-congratulatory evocations of The Greatest Generation: The British were resolute but doomed, the French pathetic, the Germans and Japanese bestial, the Italians comical, the courageous Russians cannon fodder for the Nazis. Finally, the Americans saved the civilized world with the D-Day invasion, Iwo Jima and the atom bombing of Japan.

In the modern imagination, World War II seems closer to the Civil War than to today's computerized drone strikes in Waziristan. Still, seven decades after Hitler invaded Poland, this savage, infinitely complex epic overwhelms all the horrors that have followed in its ghostly wake.

The victors have written the story of the war—Eisenhower's “Crusade in Europe” and Churchill's six volumes—and so have many, many others. Writers who have tried to capture the conflict in a single volume include John Keegan, Basil Liddell Hart, Andrew Roberts, Martin Gilbert and Gerhard L. Weinberg. Their door-stop works have uniformly been judged “masterful” and—in that embarrassing cliché—“magisterial.”

Now, Max Hastings, the British newspaper editor and author of a shelf of other works related to the war, has produced something compellingly different—“Inferno,” a panoramic social history that not only recounts the military action with admirable thoroughness, crispness and energy but also tells the story of the people who suffered in the war, combatants and civilians alike. It was, writes Mr. Hastings, “a human experience which changed the lives of hundreds of millions of people, many of whom never saw a battlefield.”

## INFERNO: THE WORLD AT WAR

By Max Hastings  
Knopf, 729 pages, \$35

From the first page, where a young Pole about to face the German invaders is blithely cautioned by his sister not to take too much clothing —“You aren't going to Siberia. We'll have you on our hands again within a month”—to nearly the last, where a German apologetizing, “2007, “I think we have done enough apologizing,”

book is salted with the evocative words of the great and the forgotten. Mr. Hastings and his researchers scoured diaries, troves of letters and archives of all the combatant nations for fresh material. Not every one of Churchill's or FDR's greatest hits is rehearsed here, but there are hundreds of pointed and poignant eye-witness accounts.

Dubbing these voices into his chronological narrative differentiates Mr. Hastings's work from, for example, the rightly celebrated accounts of the war by Martin Gilbert, “The Second World War” (1994), and by Andrew Roberts, “The Storm of War,” issued in the U.S. earlier this year.

“I thought everybody was going to shoot us, especially as being regular soldiers, we'd run away,” says a survivor of Dunkirk. “But instead there are people cheering and clapping us as if we are heroes.” An English girl trapped at the fall of Paris watches the Nazis' victory parade; it appeared “like a gigantic green snake that wound itself around the heart of the broken city which waited pathetically to be swallowed up.” A Greek soldier tearfully abandons his broken horse in the snow: “It might be an animal, but it had been my comrade in war.”

## ORDER OF BATTLE: WORLD WAR II IN ONE VOLUME

The Second World War: A Military History

By Gordon Corrigan (2010)  
A new take on the war written by a career British officer in a lively, sometimes cheeky voice with a distinctive revisionist approach, especially about Churchill's heroics.

The Second World War, 1939-45: A Strategic and Tactical History

By J.F.C. Fuller (1948)  
A celebrated British general's tightly focused analysis of the strategic and tactical conduct of the war, with emphasis on the foibles and failures of the war-makers.

The Second World War: A Complete History

By Martin Gilbert (1989)  
A fine, readable narrative with much more granular detail of military decisions and actions than many of the other books.

Inferno: The World at War

By Max Hastings (2011)  
A vivid and opinionated book, distinguished by poignant and illuminating letters, diary entries and personal experiences of combatants and civilians on both sides.

The Second World War

By John Keegan (1989)  
An elegant, seamless account of the strategic, military and industrial dimensions of the war, with penetrating analysis of its leading figures.

Delivered From Evil: The Saga of World War II

By Robert Leckie (1987)  
Deft portraits of all the political and military leaders in an accessible narrative studded with evocative incidents and anecdotes.

On the Eastern Front, a Jewish member of the Soviet army confesses: “I have told myself that I will be killed whatever happens today or tomorrow. I go into battle without any fear because I have no expectations.” On Guadalcanal, a couple of ragged young Marines lop off the heads of three Japanese prisoners and stick them on poles facing the enemy. When an officer chastises them for acting like animals, one of the Marines snaps back: “That's right, colonel, we are animals. We live like animals, we eat and are treated like animals, what the f--- do you expect?”

Mr. Hastings is almost as free with judgments and startling statistics as he is with vivid quotations and smart anecdotes. As others have, he singles out Hitler's failure to invade the British Isles when they were most vulnerable and his disastrous later decision to divert the forces about to take Moscow to try to master his foe's namesake citadel, Stalingrad. The author is unsparing of the feckless leadership of the British forces in Southeast Asia and North Africa, the ruthless treatment of the Commonwealth and colonial troops fighting for Britain, and the abandonment of the people of Burma and Malaya to the Japanese.

He calls America's Caesarian Gen. Douglas MacArthur “a vainglorious windbag” and condemns his campaign to recapture the Philippines as a wasteful, ego-driven sideshow in the struggle to conquer Japan. Stalin's refusal to let his people retreat or surrender ultimately saved Russia, but Hitler's and Japan's refusal to give up in the face of certain defeat at the end cost countless lives and suffering.

The statistics paint a picture of the war familiar to specialists but one that will come as a revelation to many readers. “The Soviet Union,” Mr. Hastings reports, “suffered 65 per cent of all Allied military deaths, China 23 per cent . . . the United States and Britain 2 per cent each. Only

3.66 per cent of U.S. Marines died, 2.5 per cent of the Army, 1.5 per cent of the Navy.”

For all the talk of U-boat wolf packs, 99% of the ships convoyed from the U.S. to Britain made it safely. American production of merchant and war ships, planes, tanks, guns, and ammunition was prodigious a year after Pearl Harbor, much of it delivered to Stalin's forces, who were fighting the heart of the war: The Germans suffered 90% of their casualties on the Eastern Front. The Russians lost more people at Leningrad than the U.S. and Britain lost in the entire global war.

Of the other great works about the conflict, John Keegan's “The Second World War” (1989) is the Apollonian counterpoint to Hastings. Mr. Keegan purges much of the blood and guts from the story: The million who died in the siege of Leningrad are a dependent clause. But he delivers a narrative of such intelligence, clarity and grace that the reader leaves the book with an elevated understanding of what happened and why. Mr. Keegan, the author of “The Face of Battle” and other books in the military canon, is superb on the war lords.

“Hitler's attitude towards Russia,” he observes, “. . . was suffused by ideology drawn from many sources—racial, economic, historical—and fermented by his own rancours and ambitions into a self-intoxicating potency.” Contrasting FDR with “the devious, double-dealing and treacherous” Stalin and Churchill, “transparently a patriot, a romantic and an imperialist,” Mr. Keegan writes: “Roosevelt had dozens of attitudes and a few deeply held values, which were precisely those of Americans of his class and his time: He believed in human dignity and freedom, in economic opportunity and in political compromise; . . . he had few policies, either for peace or for war, while war itself he found utterly distasteful.”

Robert Leckie, who fought as a Marine at Guadalcanal and spent the rest of his life writing about America at war, draws deft profiles of FDR and Churchill and of many other warlords and military leaders, including Charles de Gaulle, and Hideki Tojo, who drove the Japanese in a crusade against the hated Americans. These sketches give Leckie's “Delivered From Evil” (1987) an added dimension.

At 946 pages of text, the book is the heftiest of the single-volume histories, but one of the easiest reads. It provides glimpses of the war unmatched by others—Hitler's dawn pilgrimage to the Paris Opera during his single, four-hour visit to the fallen city; Rudolph Hess's ridiculous parachute sally to Scotland on his 1941 “peace” mission; Japanese officers and airmen dressed in spotlessly clean garments in homage to the Samurai on the morning of Pearl Harbor. His book is so crammed with fascinating detail that he can be forgiven for misquoting Roosevelt as saying “a date that”—instead of “which”—“will live in infamy” in FDR's Dec. 8, 1941, address to Congress. The author even describes what the Germans' demonic Enigma machine looked like and how Polish and British mathematicians went about breaking its coded keys.

Martin Gilbert's “The Second World War” (1989) is another fine, readable account, with a bit more emphasis on the decisions that drove the war rather than on the decision makers themselves. Mr. Gilbert manages the neat trick of telling the stories of the war on the Eastern Front, in North Africa and Italy and in the Pacific in a nearly simultaneous narrative. Time and again, he points out where Enigma decrypts and U.S. “Magic” breaks off the Japanese code gave the Allies an edge. And his meticulous notations of Nazi deportations and slaughter of Jews resonate through the story like tolling bells until just days before the fall of Berlin.

More than Mr. Gilbert's history of the war, Gerhard L. Weinberg's “A World at Arms,” first published in 1994 and reprinted five times since 2005, focuses on the underlying strategic, industrial and economic factors that determined the course of the war. There is no mystery, he argues, about Hitler's decision to declare war on the U.S. after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. “Hitler had long intended to fight the United States” but felt his navy was inadequate. “If the Japanese . . . took the plunge, then his naval deficit would automatically disappear.” Mr. Weinberg is less engaged by actual military action: He describes the epic naval Battle of Midway in barely two pages of a 920-page book.

Gordon Corrigan's “The Second World War,” newly published in America, delivers the familiar story with a revisionist tang. A career British officer in the Far East, Mr. Corrigan ridicules Churchill as a meddlesome “muntebanish” whose major contribution to winning the war was his cultivation of FDR. Gen. Bernard Montgomery, the “hero” of the battle of El Alamein in North Africa, Mr. Corrigan says, was a vain, querulous glory hound. The author writes with more authority about British operations than other action. Still, his engaging narrative is unmatched for flair and sprightly footnotes.

World War II is grand opera—a sprawling epic of power, anguish, loss and death. The great episodes in the war are like arias, familiar but so entrancing that they can be savored over and over, long after their first performance. Working from essentially the same material, Max Hastings and the authors of these and other works about the great war tease fresh meaning and insight from the score and find previously unheard grace notes that give perpetual life to this bloody extravaganza.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, “It's News to Me,” about his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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