



# **The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War**

*Jonathan Dimpleby*

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The Battle of the Atlantic was -- though often overlooked -- crucial to the Allied victory. If the German U-boats had prevailed, the maritime artery across the Atlantic would have been severed. Mass hunger would have consumed Britain, and the Allied armies would have been prevented from joining in the invasion of Europe. There would have been no D-Day. Through fascinating contemporary diaries and letters, from the leaders and from the sailors on all sides, Jonathan Dimbleby creates a thrilling narrative that uniquely places the campaign in the context of the entire Second World War. Challenging conventional wisdom on the use of intelligence and on Churchill's bombing campaign, *The Battle of the Atlantic* tells the epic story of the decisions that led to victory, and the horror and humanity of life on those perilous seas.

## **The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War Details**

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# From Reader Review **The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War** for online ebook

**Peter Goodman says**

2016

“The Battle of the Atlantic: how the Allies won the war,” by Jonathan Dimbleby (Oxford, 2016). I should stop reading these damn WWII books already. So Richard Overy has explained Why the Allies won. Now Dimbleby describes how, to his thinking, they won. The argument: The crux of the war was fought at sea. It was all about whether the British could get enough food, water, ammo, ships, men, weapons, etc., across the Atlantic or whether the U-Boats could strangle them. Dimbleby does a good job describing all the different elements---how many submarines the Germans had, how the British were forced to ration more and more and more, how Roosevelt had to connive and finagle and almost trick the US into supporting the British, the development of the weapons and counter-weapons, the Air Gap and how it was eventually closed. For me, Dimbleby’s most important contribution is his clear-eyed, even cynical portraits of the leaders and what they contributed. The British---especially Churchill---did not realize how important just a few long-range planes were in defeating the U-Boats. He argues that if just a few planes had been diverted from Bomber Harris’ destructive crusade, just a few months or even a year sooner, the war would have been over more quickly because the Americans could have gotten more supplies across the ocean much more easily, and the cross-Channel invasion would have happened sooner. Churchill was a great war leader with a golden tongue, but he was also often wrong-headed and mistaken. Dimbleby presents Stalin as justified in his anger at the western Allies’ refusal (in fact their inability) to open a second front when they said they would. Hitler interferes, as usual, and when Dönitz finally has the 300 boats he wanted, it’s too late: the antisubmarine forces are too strong. Roosevelt is canny, devious, clever---he knows exactly how far he can go in supporting the British, in the face of a strong isolationist movement in the US. The descriptions of equipment, battles, conditions in the North Atlantic in winter, convoys, tactics, development of ships, etc, are relatively quick but very clear. If you don’t know much about the war at sea, this is the book for you. Even if you do know a good deal about the war at sea, this ties things together and explicates events, tendencies and strategies in a very satisfying manner. The destruction of convoy PQ-17---grrrr how stupid the high command was.

<https://global.oup.com/academic/produ...>

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**Roger Jones says**

This is a very well researched book on a subject that has been extensively written about, but not from this point of view. Beyond general knowledge I first read about the battle for the Western Approaches as a lad when I read Nicholas Monsarrat’s excellent book *The Cruel Sea* which like most books was based upon personal accounts of the terror and horror of the U boat war in arctic waters. Dimbleby’s book certainly covers that but foremost it is an analysis of Strategy and a pretty thorough one at that. He includes German reports to balance Allied reports of specific events and, more importantly command level views from both sides. Critically this demonstrates the challenge for war leaders in making decisions with incomplete intelligence, with the gaps filled with best-guessing, knowing that lives depend on it.

Where I find myself at odds with Dimbleby is in his opinion of the performance of the three main Allied war leaders evolving strategies. It is almost like he considers their individual situations as equal. He is easy on

Stalin, lukewarm on FDR and pretty critical of Churchill. He basically argues the majority of the naval effort should have been invested into protecting the supply routes through the Atlantic against the U Boats and implies that Churchill's failure to do this cost around 600,000 tons of sunken shipping per month for three years.

He does not consider that the three leaders each had different strategies because although they shared a common enemy they each had a different end-game for their Nation and no matter how challenging their problems Churchill's were by far the most complex. Stalin came into the war late having signed a pact early with Hitler and when attacked by Hitler (Barbarosa) his focus was singular, the defence of Russia. FDR was isolationist until slowly Churchill dragged the USA into the war through Lend/Lease then after Pearl Harbour the Europe First Strategy. Britain on the other hand had multiple strategies including the defence of Britain, the supply route across the Atlantic, Malta protecting operations in Egypt without which Suez would fall and provide free access to the Far East and the dominions, and Treaty with Greece which was no less disastrous than Britain's treaty with France from a military point of view, but had to be honoured. Further, strategies shift over time. Churchill could not have known that Russia would ultimately be drawn into the War and when it did much of Britain's war supplies would need to be deflected to Russia. The fact that the war ended with Britain and Europe saved and Germany/Japan/Italy conquered shows that ultimately the strategies were correct. Undoubtedly it would have been better to have achieved that quicker with less loss of life however that is easy in retrospect. Churchill was constantly making these decisions with incomplete information and extremely limited resources. Dimpleby even points out that the game-changer in the U boat war was the technical developments in 1944 before which additional aircraft and ships would not have made a substantial difference. The failure in strategy was entirely Hitler's first in invading Russia before finishing off Britain and second in focusing so much effort into the surface fleet instead of U boats.

Despite my slight reservations of Dimpleby's treatment of Churchill there were some new insights for me on this complex campaign. A good read and I commend this book to you.

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## **John W. says**

The longest campaign of the Second World War and the most destructive naval campaign in all history. more than 3,000 merchant ships were sunk in the Atlantic and more than 30,000 seamen died. On the German side, some 27,000 officers and crew died or 75% of those who went to war.

A very readable account of the battle to maintain the the supply of food, oil, and war materials to Great Britain and Russia. While the emphasis was on bombing Germany, maintaining a presence in the Mediterranean and subsequently invading North Africa, then Italy and eventually the Normandy landing, none of this could have happened if the toll that the U boats were having on shipping to Great Britain, Iceland and Russia had not been reduced and finally marginalized.

While Churchill is frequently cited as championing the demands of the Battle of the Atlantic, his actions frequently emphasized other aspects of the war effort, including bombing of German cities and military targets. The battle was won by improved strategy, including improvements in the use of convoys, technical developments permitting the discovery and tracking of submarines, the sharp increases in the production of merchant ships, naval vessels, airplanes and submarines.

One aspect that I was surprised by was the disregard of basic security measures along the eastern seaboard of the United States when there was no dimming of lights so that the ships steaming north along the coast were targets for the German submarines. Apparently, the seaside business was more important.

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## **Jonny Ruddock says**

This is a very accessible history of the Battle of the Atlantic. Jonathan Dimbleby's premise is that without Allied victory in the Battle, the entire war would have been lost, and he makes his point subtly throughout the book.

The narrative moves seamlessly between the diplomacy and back room tricks of Roosevelt and Churchill and the horror of night U-Boat attacks and sinking ships with an almost disturbing ease. The book itself is easy to read and provides all the information needed to understand the argument and events without any foreknowledge. My only complaints would be that the book to all intents and purposes ends in mid - 1943, and that while air attacks from the Luftwaffe are mentioned, the book is firmly rooted in the U-Boat as the main means of prosecuting the tonnage war.

Minor niggles though, I'd recommend this to one and all.

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## **Andrew Booth says**

Think of a word you've never heard of. Well, Dimbleby has an armful. Although entertaining, informative, and fascinating, I grew tired of having to read this and a dictionary at the same time. Being literary for literary's sake is not clever, and merely distances the reader from the subject. In this case, the subject is a carefully researched and detailed account of possibly the most important battle of world war two. It's just a shame it has been spoiled by the unnecessary use of overly wordy words!

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## **Peter Tillman says**

Clearly written and deeply-researched history of the WW2 U-boat attacks on shipping, primarily from North America to Britain, the lifeline of the UK, which required huge imports (including food) to carry on the war effort. Dimbleby (and other historians) recognize the slow response to the submarine attacks as Churchill's biggest strategic blunder in WW2. The most effective weapons against the U-boats were long-range bombers. These were owned by the RAF and used for massive bombing raids into Germany, largely targeting cities (and civilians), under the direction of "Bomber" Harris, a strategy later discredited. The Royal Navy was unable to get bombers for anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and Churchill did not intervene. Massive losses of shipping (and lives) continued from early 1940 into 1942.

Even more shocking (for an American) were the large-scale U-boat attacks on American shipping off the East Coast in 1942. German submarines sank over 600 merchant ships, with the loss of thousands of lives, with no effective American defense. Even simple measures, such as blacking-out coastal cities, weren't done -- U-boats could easily target ships outlined by city lights. Dimbleby (and others) blame this poor response on Admiral Ernest King, then the Commander in Chief of the US Navy. King inexplicably resisted learning from the British ASW experience. Effective American response began later in 1942, with the loan of British anti-submarine trawlers and corvettes to the US Navy.

For both countries, it's striking how bad decisions (Adm. King, Bomber Harris ) and inter-service rivalries (Air Force vs Navy) damaged the war effort -- particularly in the UK, which was literally fighting for its life in the early years of WW2.

Recommended reading for those interested in WW2 and naval history. Don't be put off by the bulk (650 pp) -- it's a pretty fast read.

The review that led me to read it:

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/water-bom...>

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### **Mr Michael R Stevens says**

This is a very absorbing account of the Battle of the Atlantic. Jonathan Dimpleby proposes that without Allied victory in the Battle, the war would have been lost, he makes this point consistently throughout the book and in the year of the RAF's 100 celebrations probably will not sit well in some quarters!

The book moves seamlessly between the diplomatic wrangling, the relationship between Roosevelt and Churchill and the horror of night U-Boat attacks and sinking ships.

At times I found the book a struggle to read but the subject and the way it is told holds you and in giving the information and statistics Dimpleby does so in a way that makes it easy to understand. Strangely as an ex member of the Royal Navy I found myself getting irrationally angry where the book covers the ego driven decisions by Harris and Portal of the RAF not to supply Coastal Command with the VLR aircraft required thereby contributing to the deaths of both Royal and Merchant Navy seamen and possibly prolonging the war.

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### **Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says**

#### **Immensely readable account of probably the most critical campaign of World War 2**

Well known British broadcaster and author Jonathan Dimpleby has produced a scholarly yet accessible account of the campaign that if won by the Germans would have forced the surrender of the UK and most likely either the defeat of the Soviet Union or a forced peace.

Whilst he visits many areas that are well known such as the sacrifice borne by the merchant navy's 30,000 casualties and the 75% casualty rate amongst U-Boat crews he also challenges many of the received views.

Most notable is the part played by the Ultra decrypts where he claims that whilst they were useful, technological advances in airborne radar and the deployment of long range aircraft were more critical. He argues that the Ultra decrypts were negated to a significant degree by the lesser known German code breaking efforts which resulted in them reading the British and Allied Merchants Ships code and a breakthrough in February 1942 where they broke the code used for communication with many of the Atlantic convoys.

The Battle of the Atlantic is the subject of a number of books but Dimpleby has successfully added several refreshing new viewpoints and created a book that is readable for the general reader too.

I received this book for free from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review.

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## **Alex Diaz-Granados says**

This is a good book. The only complaint I have is that Dimbleby mistakenly calls U.S. Secretary of War "Harold" Stimson. The man's real name was, of course, Henry L. Stimson.

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## **Martin Budd says**

Interesting, if a bit "wordy".

The Author makes a good and well argued case that effort should have been switched from the aerial bombing campaign to protecting the Atlantic convoys far more carefully. Bombing seen as "offensive" (good) and convoy protection defensive (bad). Actually hunting down the subs was very aggressive and if more effort to do so had taken place the war may have been shortened.

Worth reading but short on detail of what it must have been like either on a ship trudging across the Atlantic expecting at any moment to be torpedoed or, as a German submariner, particularly after '43 with a 1/5 chance of surviving a tour of duty.

Frankly both sides were equally beastly to each other, letting people drown or burn with little compunction to save even their own people at times, even less an opponent. War truly is vile.

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## **Bevan Lewis says**

Roger Lancashire was a surgeon aboard the cruiser HMS Exeter in her confrontation with the German battleship Graf Spee. As his ship came under fire he described dealing with the injured:

"The casualties were pretty devastating. There were two or three who literally died in my arms. These were people I had been living with, as it were, for three years. There were cases where, if I'd had the facilities and an endless supply of blood transfusions, things might have been different, but it wasn't like that. I did a quick assessment of who was most likely to benefit and then went to work on them".

Powerful personal testimonies such as this are part of the delight of the new generation of military history, exemplified by Anthony Beevor's work over the past few decades. British broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby has taken this model and applied it to this important theatre of World War 2. Through a range of mostly secondary sources he successfully sweeps from the broad strategic view down to the experiences of those on board the merchant vessels, navy ships and submarines that bore the brunt of the battle. As he points out, the term "Battle of the Atlantic" is a misnomer. It "not only lasted from the very first to the very last day of the war but, so far from being a single battle, it involved hundreds of hostile encounters on a wide variety of fronts" - more of a campaign according to Dimbleby.

He portrays the importance of the battle well, both through the views of war leaders such as Roosevelt and Churchill and through the everyday experiences of (often quoted) Nella Last of Barrow-on-Furness, dealing with the consequences of rationing. The drama is not just portrayed through the life and death struggle of the participants, but also with the battles within the participant powers. Churchill recognised the strategic importance of the theatre, but at the same time allowed the RAF to diminish the importance of Coastal Command's efforts, resulting in a diversion of long range aircraft to bombing instead of maritime duties which almost let the German's win the battle of attrition. On the German's side Raeder and Donitz competed for Hitler's attention and undermined each other with their visions of the relative importance of the surface and submarine fleets. Overarching these conflicts were the disagreements between the war leaders, especially

Stalin's displeasure and distrust of the US and Britain and their ability to meet their commitments for equipment supply via the Arctic convoys.

Interestingly having recently read *Enigma - The Battle for the Code* and seen the film *The Imitation Game* it was fascinating how little coverage Dimbleby gives *Enigma*. After getting the impression that the reading of Ultra (or not) directly correlated with success in the war against the U Boats, this book gives more subtlety, pointing out the many other factors especially the fact that the German's could also read the merchant navy's codes. This meant that when the convoys were diverted as a result of intel from Ultra the German's were able to move their U Boats in response. Dimbleby's viewpoint does carry some weight, as it explains why Donitz in particular, although suspicious never worked out that his communications with U Boats were being intercepted. Arguably in this theatre the two side's efforts in code breaking almost nullified each other. If I have one criticism of the book it is that at times the context about other theatres of war (for example the Russian front) are given a bit more attention that is necessary. This felt a bit like filler at times, although for someone reading this book without a good knowledge of the Second World War I'm sure these passages will be welcome. Overall this book provides a sound explanation of this vital theatre which places it in its justified historical context, providing well balanced coverage of the personalities, strategic decisionmaking, importance of the Atlantic lifeline and most of all conveying the struggles, discomfort and danger confronted by the sailors on the high seas. A recommended book.

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### **Richard Hakes says**

It is a good book one that you do not need to be a war nut to appreciate. It is captivating and reads well. It contains morals and lessons that would be good to learn. The first and big one is that influential people can lead whole nations or services in totally the wrong direction if they are good orators and persuasive. The other is that if anyone thinks plucky little Britain won the war they should read on. The reason we won the war is that we were on the side of the USA and their access to resources. These resources were the people, the material and probably the key factor the technology they produced. In the north Atlantic the subject of the book, the USA had the boats and airplanes, they had the crews to man them and maybe what is not fully understood the technology. Often undersung is the contribution advances in radio and radar made. The technology made the U boats redundant almost overnight. A lesson worth remembering!

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### **Andrew says**

A very readable account of the U boat menace and its threat to the Allied war effort in Europe. Very much in the style of popular war histories.

The positive aspects of the book are the obvious extensive use of biographies of those involved, and the very good efforts to place the campaign in its political and strategic context.

The downsides of the book are that it is highly opinionated and largely ignores objective data except on tonnage or lives lost.

Most participants are labelled as either good or bad based on whether they contributed to more resources being thrown into the U boat war (good), or not (bad). Some time is given to the competing strategic perspectives of Harris or King, but mainly as a platform to demonise them with personal attacks. Bizarrely Doenitz almost becomes a "good" Nazi through this simplistic weighing. The subjectivity reaches a



crescendo in the last chapter which is substantially off topic.

Although the contribution of analytical techniques (operations research is never given its name), very long range planes and the development of location technologies are mentioned, we are given little explanation about the development of these crucial elements in the battle. They simply appear. More photos portraying these elements, and ideally graphical displays illustrating the progress of the battle, were sorely needed.

Overall the book is interesting, but also a bit annoying for its conscious subjectivity.

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### **Jerry Smith says**

A very detailed account of this pivotal battle (war-long battle really) that went a long way, at least in Dimbleby's assessment, to deciding the war. I think the case is fairly well made, but I have studied this arena of WW2 and I was familiar with the closeness that Germany came to winning this battle and the sacrifices made by men on both sides who fought it. "The Cruel Sea" remains one of my favorite books.

This is a book well worth reading since this battle has probably not been given the recognition it deserves in the annals of WW2 history, perhaps because it went on so long and was very much a war of attrition that was eventually, and narrowly won by the allies with improvements in technology and tactics as well as increased machinery available. The most revealing element to me was probably the fact that there was a considerable debate between the Admiralty and Bomber command about the use of aircraft (u-boat patrols vs. bombing of Germany). It was clear that Arthur Harris was much more persuasive in his desire for large raids on German cities than the First Lord of the Admiralty was in his aims. This cost the Allies significant men and ships and the tide very much turned when long range aircraft became available.

I very much enjoyed the book and it added to my knowledge of, and interest in this battle. There was a lot on the ebb and flow of which side had the upper hand at any given time and that balance seemed to shift quite dramatically in 1943. There was good coverage of the relationships between the Allies as well as that between the main protagonists on the German side. Doenitz seems to have been dedicated, but particularly unpleasant character, very much a Hitler loyalist. An interesting account indeed, well written too.

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### **Bob Mobley says**

Jonathan Dimbleby has written a masterful, interesting and very informative book about the longest campaign in World War II, The Battle of the Atlantic. It is a masterpiece of good research and informs the reader in a broad view about the horrific challenges and conflicts that made this such a difficult campaign for the Allies to win. Dimbleby's insights into the nature of the leadership of all sides of the conflict, British, German, Russian and United States, is revealing and highly thought provoking. The author gives a very profound look into attitudes and behaviors of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, and how these set the tone within their distinct staffs for the actions and mindsets that bedraggled the Allies until they finally were able to get air cover across the entire Atlantic Ocean in 1944. This is a gripping account of the Allies' hard won victory at sea. Anyone who is interested in military history at all of its multiple gratifications across a broad spectrum of politics and strategic decision making will find this well worth reading. Much of Dimbleby's information is presented in a way that makes you step back and realize how little we really know about the complexities of global warfare. I found his insights into Franklin Roosevelt's incredible intuition and

political awareness some of the most interesting details and observations I have ever read. I learned a great deal about Franklin Roosevelt that I had never known or was never aware of. Roosevelt truly faced a most difficult time as he tried to move the isolationist attitudes that prevailed in the United States at the beginning of WWII into the recognition that the United States could not sit on the sidelines and not be a participant in protecting freedom.

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