



**Roy Adkins, Lesley Adkins.** *Gibraltar: The Greatest Siege in British History.* New York: Viking, 2018. xxvi + 449 pp. Illustrations. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7352-2162-8.

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Historians of the American War of Independence, particularly those from the United States, have often ascribed the thirteen colonies' eventual triumph mainly to the military events that occurred within their geographical confines. The British husband-and-wife team of historians Roy and Lesley Adkins reminds us in their latest book that military events in other parts of the world profoundly affected the course of the American war in its final years, as France, Spain, and the Netherlands posed new threats to other sections of the British Empire. In particular, Spain, with French assistance, sought to retake Gibraltar, which the British had occupied since the War of the Spanish Succession at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Militarily overextended, the British ultimately had to choose which possessions to defend. The authors strongly suggest that the defeat of British forces in North America resulted at least in part from the decision to prioritize the embattled garrison at Gibraltar instead.

Much more than a strategic analysis, though, this book presents a lively account of what British historians still refer to as the "Great Siege," which lasted from June 1779 until February 1783. The authors introduce the reader to a rich cast of characters, civilian and military, female and male, adult and child, who endured years of privation, disease, and enemy fire. Several recorded their

experiences in frequently quoted letters and journals. Throughout the ordeal, the defenders and the civilians under their protection suffered shortages of food, textiles, and other life necessities, as well as of weapons and ammunition. Three escorted convoys of supplies arrived from England (in January 1780, April 1781, and September 1782), and intrepid individual vessels from Morocco occasionally braved the Spanish naval blockade to ease this predicament. However, when the supplies ran low, exorbitant prices on such commodities and theft often resulted. Lack of proper nutrition rendered the garrison particularly vulnerable to recurrent epidemics of smallpox and scurvy. Finally, the defenders had to cope with enemy attacks from land and sea. For much of 1781, Spanish artillery pounded them relentlessly, destroying residences and public buildings as well as inflicting casualties. A heroic and successful attack on the forward Spanish guns early on the morning of November 27, 1781, alleviated, but did not eliminate, this menace. Indeed, in the spring of 1782, the Spanish forces were joined by a large French army, fresh from its conquest of British-held Minorca.

On the other side of the battle lines, the Spanish and the French were no less susceptible to many of the same problems. In addition, deserters often fled to the British and provided valuable in-

telligence on troop strength, gun placement, and, in the later stages of the siege, acrimony between the Spanish and French officers and men. Nevertheless, the attackers persevered, building and rebuilding formidable batteries, braving British fire and frequently harsh weather conditions.

The prolonged stalemate sparked military innovations on both sides. British defenders faced the difficult task of targeting ground-level enemy positions from points atop the Rock of Gibraltar. The garrison's artillery needed to be aimed at a steep downward angle, which made loading problematic and firing frequently destructive of the pieces' mountings. A young lieutenant in the Royal Artillery, George Koehler, solved this problem in early 1782 by inventing a depressing gun carriage that enabled crews to easily elevate the breech end of the barrel and absorbed the recoil by having the gun fixed to a wooden plank that slid backwards over a grooved second plank after discharge. According to the authors, this was the progenitor of later artillery recoil systems. For their part, the French and Spanish besiegers developed floating batteries, heavily armed vessels with extra-thick sloping wooden hulls designed to deflect incoming projectiles. Difficult to maneuver (they needed to be towed into position by other ships), and dangerous to operate, they unleashed an unsuccessful barrage on the garrison on September 13, 1782. Unsupported by the other French and Spanish ships in the area, two of the batteries finally fell victim to determined British fire. Because the Spanish commander was unwilling to tow away the undamaged batteries (which would have put other ships in danger), the French commander ultimately decided to destroy them, to prevent their capture. It was a costly disaster for the attackers, with at least 1,500 fatalities when the batteries were blown up. Still, as a Belfast newspaper noted a century later, "The vessels may be said to have been in a sense unwieldy predecessors of ironclads" (p. 292).

At many junctures, the authors adeptly place this siege narrative within the larger context of the war in its later years. The entry of France, Spain, and the Netherlands into the fray forced Britain's overextended military to choose which possessions to defend. At one critical point in March 1781, the British Channel Fleet, then under the command of Vice-Admiral George Darby, was blockading a powerful French armada in the port of Brest. Darby received orders to escort the second convoy that was sent to bring supplies to the beleaguered defenders of Gibraltar. Once freed to leave port, the French squadron of warships, troop transports, and supply vessels, commanded by Vice-Admiral François Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse, immediately sailed across the Atlantic, bound for the Caribbean and destined to play a crucial role in the Yorktown campaign later that year: "While Darby's convoy sailed to save Gibraltar, across the Atlantic Britain lost America" (p. 185). The tenacity of the garrison, on the other hand, also prolonged the peace negotiations; not until February 1783 did the guns finally fall silent, with the British still firmly in possession of the contested territory.

In the concluding chapter, the authors demonstrate how echoes of the siege continued to be heard up to the present day. Occupation of the promontory provided the British with critical advantages in subsequent wars; weapon emplacement on the Rock in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries benefited from the laborious tunneling work the garrison undertook in 1782. A regiment of Hanoverian troops served with distinction alongside the British defenders during the siege. Over a century later, its descendant unit, by then part of the imperial German army, faced descendant units of the British army in combat during the First World War, clad in uniforms whose sleeves were embroidered with the word "Gibraltar" (p. 386). To this day, this British occupation continues to rankle Anglo-Spanish relations.

Roy and Lesley Adkins have given us a gripping, well-written account of an episode of the greater conflict into which the American War of Independence metastasized during its second half. It is an excellent reminder to American readers, especially, that the spread of hostilities beyond the geographical limits of the thirteen rebellious colonies was a determining factor in their successful fight for independence.

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