



Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45

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With an introduction read by Max Hastings. A companion volume to his best-selling *Armageddon*, Max Hastings' account of the battle for Japan is a masterful military history.

Featuring the most remarkable cast of commanders the world has ever seen, the dramatic battle for Japan of 1944-45 was acted out across the vast stage of Asia: Imphal and Kohima, Leyte Gulf and Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and the Soviet assault on Manchuria.

In this gripping narrative, Max Hastings weaves together the complex strands of an epic war, exploring the military tactics behind some of the most triumphant and most horrific scenes of the 20th century. The result is a masterpiece that balances the story of command decisions, rivalries, and follies with the experiences of soldiers, sailors, and airmen of all sides as only Max Hastings can.

Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45 Details

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Nikola Jankovic says

Sjajna, ipak. S obzirom da nas Hastings bez preteranog uvoda, katapultira u poslednju godinu rata na Pacifiku, a da osim najosnovnijih informacija ne blistam baš u poznavanju azijske istorije tridesetih i ?etrdestih, ponekad nije bilo najjednostavnije ispratiti likove, geografiju i posledice prethodnih doga?aja. Me?utim, kako sam se približavao kraju ove 30-satne audio epopeje, shvatao sam da je iskusiti istoriju sa ovim autorom, vrhunska stvar.

Autor piše o visokoj politici, bitkama, stotinama hiljada mrtvih, ali i prenosi anegdote i pri?e pojedinaца, ?ime nam dodatno približava strahote najinteresantnijeg perioda ljudske istorije.

Osim toga, prvi put mi je kao velikom protivniku koriš?enja nuklearnog oružja za okon?anje 2. svetskog rata, jasno zašto su bombe morale biti ba?ene. Nije da se sad odjednom slažem sa takvom odlukom, ali potpuno razumem zašto je na osnovu njihovih tadašnjih saznanja i na?ina razmišljanja najviših ljudi ameri?ke administracije odluka prakti?no morala biti donešena.

1. Bombe su postojale. Otprilike kao kod ?ehova - jednom kad staviš pištolj u dramu, on do kraja drame mora da opali.
2. Potrošeno je mnogo novca na njihov razvoj.
3. Na atomske bombe su gledali samo kao na "efikasniju" verziju bombardovanja napalmom, kojim su dotad ve? pobili nekoliko stotina hiljada japanskih civila (mnogo više nego što ?e ih umreti u Hirošimi i Nagasakiju).
4. ?ak ni nau?nici koji su radili na Projektu Manhatan, nisu bili svesni kakve ?e biti kasnije posledice radiacije.
5. Ono što se naj?eš?e i pominje - skra?enje rata i realno gledano, verovatno ve?i broj ukupnih žrtava u slu?aju da se rat nastavio.
6. Pokazivanje svetu (pre svega Sovjetskom Savezu) šta imamo.

?esto se u ovom kontekstu pominjala i invazija na Japan, koja bi donela fanati?nu samoubila?ku odbranu i do milion žrtava sa obe strane. Me?utim, Hastings argumentuje da je ovo pogrešna pretpostavka. Prema njegovom mišljenju, Japan je prakti?ki bio na kolenima, pa do iskrcavanje ne bi ni došlo. Kombinacija pomorske blokade, koja je carstvo ve? izglednela, i sovjetske invazije na Mandžuriju, bi najverovatnije vrlo brzo dovela do kapitulacije.

I, kao poslednja stvar na tu temu - interesantno je da nije postojao trenutak u kom je ameri?ki predsednik odlu?io i dao naredbu da se bombe bace. Jednostavno je razgovarao sa vojnim vrhom na tu temu u junu, i kasnije bio obaveštavan o napretku. Moja zamišljanja crvenog dugmeta, dva kompleta klju?eva i sli?nog - potpuno su bila pogrešna. Jednostavno, Truman je doneo jedino odluku o tome da ne donese odluku da spre?i bacanje bombi. Što je navodno i uradio i spre?io bacanje tre?e na Tokio, pre potpisa kapitulacije.

Chris says

This is a very good analysis of the last year of WWII in the Pacific. Hastings goes into detail about the Burma Campaign, the war in China, the Battle of Leyte, and the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Russian invasion of Manchuria. He balances the narrative by explaining the higher-level view and then quoting from soldiers on what they were experiencing during the battles. My favorite part of the book was his analysis towards the end in which he laid out how Japan finally capitulated. Highly recommended for those interested in a thorough analysis of the end of the War in the Pacific.

Nick Black says

highly idiosyncratic for sure. hasting **hates** douglas macarthur, Chiang Kai-shek and "bull" Halsey (and most Japanese people), loves William Slim, and (like the rest of us) feels a reverent but dirty awe for "Hap" Arnold, the same awe one feels regarding Jose Canseco(**) or Kim Kardashian(*). Great vocabulary, though it's marred by repeated, clustered use of "guesstimate" and gratuitous puns involving "haversack". More deeply scarring are at least a dozen grotesque grammatical errors (**they seem damning of the history-copyediting complex in its entirety. i mean, this is not a technical book, or a serial romance, or the ravings of some southern newspaper columnist regarding the nighttime vociferousness of Varsity chilidawgs; it's an "acclaimed historian" and his invisible dog team of grad students, and surely well-bearded copyeditors versed in military history and the Queen's English both? froth!**). We'll see how Armageddon goes.

points for nice coverage of the Soviets' Manchurian excursions following Hiroshima, detailed coverage of Burma and the Hump, the unimportance of Leyte Gulf, graphic and intense coverage of island battles, and repeated emphasis on the central oversight of Pacific Command: island hoppers ought have leaped **faster**; the majority of Japanese garrisons were utterly immaterial. Also, no nauseating anti-Bomb platitudes.

(*) hottest woman on earth. I brook no disagreement.

(**) the 1988 A's remain the greatest team of all time, nevermind shitty stupid Herschieser and his LA Slimfast dodgers

Paul says

I believe this is the first World War II history I've read that was written by a non-American author. It was a revelation to me. Max Hastings confines himself to the last year of WWII in the Pacific, the campaign against Japan. But when I say "confines," I don't wish to be misleading -- this history is enormous in scope, because Hastings doesn't limit himself to the history most Americans know. He explores the entirety of the final year of the war in the Pacific, from mid-1944 to the war's end in 1945: from the actions of the Japanese in the countries they had invaded and occupied; to the American re-invasion of the Philippines and the Navy's island-by-island advance (including details of diplomatic, espionage and intelligence, ground, sea, and air operations); to the British campaigns in Burma and Malaya; the actions of the nationalist and communist armies in China; the Australians' reluctant participation; the Russian invasion of Manchuria,

North Korea, and Sakalin Island; and as always, the relentless jockeying for supremacy between military services and rival allied military leaders.

Hasting's history is peppered with quotes and statements from people who were there -- interviews, memoirs, diary entries, letters home -- from participants of all nations, enemy and allied, from refugees to enslaved Chinese peasants to women abducted to serve as "comfort girls," from battlefield grunts and sailors to generals and admirals, from diplomats to heads of state.

Hastings' work is scholarly and thorough, yet anything but dry. This was one of the most engaging war histories I have ever read, and probably due to my own American myopia, full of things I didn't know. I swear, I learned something new on almost every page. Here's a taste to whet your appetite: when US Army soldiers went ashore on Okinawa, during the brief lull before the Japanese began firing back, enterprising troops sewed up fake Japanese flags from parachute silk, shot them to create bullet holes, and sold them as war souvenirs to the sailors of the invasion fleet. You have to love learning things like that, right? I sure did.

Beyond these fascinating details, Hastings puts you into the mindset of the decision-makers of the time, helping you to understand why they took the actions they did by explaining what they knew at the time, minus the benefit of hindsight. One understands, after reading this history, why allied military forces showed little mercy to the Japanese, why the people of Japanese-occupied countries hate and fear the Japanese to this day, and why American military and political leaders undertook the firebombing of Japanese cities, and later, the employment of atomic bombs.

Max Hastings has written a companion WWII history covering the last year of the allied campaign against the Nazis. It is titled Armageddon. I will certainly read it, and soon.

Σωτ?ρης Αδαμαρ?τσος says

?να βιβλ?ο που τιμ? για ?λλη μια φορ? την εικ?να των Αγγλων ιστορικ?ν στην χ?ρα μας! ?να καταπληκτικ? αφηγημα και μια πραγματικ? αξι?πιστη ιστορικ? περιγραφ?!. Αν κ?ποιος ?χει διαβ?σει Ρανσιμαν ? Μπηβορ ? Τονυ Τζαντ (με το μνημειωδες ?ργο του Postwar) καταλαβα?νει την ιστορικ? αξ?α και την αναγνωστικη ποι?τητα του ?ργου... Μετ? το Αρμαγεδδων και την περιγραφ? του τελευτα?ου ?τους του πολ?μου στην Ευρ?πη, ο Χαστινγκς αποφασ?ζει να γρ?ψει κ?τι παρ?μοιο για το τελευτα?ο ?τος του πολ?μου στον... Ειρηνικ?! ?ναν ?γνωστο στην Ευρ?πη π?λεμο, που ?πως λ?ει κ το βιβλ?ο, εκτ?ς των συμμετ?χοντων Ιαπωνων, Αμερικαν?ν, Βρεταν?ν, Κινεζων και Ρ?σων, για τον υπ?λοιπο κ?σμο ε?ναι παντελ?ς ?γνωστος σε γεγον?τα και στιγμ?ς. ? μ?πως ?χι αφο? η πιο γνωστ? στιγμ? - δ?ο μ?λλον - ε?ναι οι ριψεις των ατομικων βομβων στη Χιροσιμα και στο Ναγκασακι...;

Δεν ε?ναι ?να βιβλ?ο για να διαβ?σει κανε?ς την στρατιωτικ? και πολιτικ? ιστορ?α του Β παγκοσμ?ου πολ?μου. Αναφ?ρεται σε συγκεκριμ?νο χρονικ? σημει?ο το 1944-1945 ?ταν στην Ευρ?πη ο π?λεμος βα?νει προς το τ?λος του αλλ? στον Ειρηνικ?... ακ?μα πολεμο?ν. Μ?χες ?πως των Φιλιππ?νων, του Πελελιου, της Ιβοτζιμα, της Οκινάουα ξεδιπλωνονται με περισιες λεπτομ?ρειες και περιγραφ? εν? η παρ?θεση απ? συνεντε?ξεις πρωταγωνιστων του πολ?μου, στρατιωτ?ν, αξιωματικ?ν, πολιτ?ν, πολιτικ?ν δ?νουν στο βιβλ?ο εικ?να ντοκιμαντ?ρ! Η ζω? των καθημερινων ανθρω?πων ε?τε στα πεδ?α των μαχ?ν, ε?τε στα ριζοχωραφα της Κ?νας, ε?τε στα υπ?γεια των στρατηγε?ων των Ιαπωνων ε?τε στα β?θη του ωκεανου? αναπαριστατε τ?σο ζωνταν? που καθιστ? το βιβλ?ο... ζωσα ιστορ?α!

Αυτ? το τελευτα?ο, οι ?γγραφες και προφορικές μαρτυρ?ες των πρωταγωνιστών, απ? τον στρατι?τη στην πρ?τη γραμμ? της Ιβοτζιμα μ?χρι την Κινεζα αγροτισσα στη Ματζουρια και απ? τον υποστρατηγο υπε?θυνο του προγρ?μματος Μανχ?ταν μ?χρι τον επιστολογραφο του Αυτοκρ?τορα Χιροχίτο, ?λα μάζ? κ?νουν την αφ?γηση τ?σο ζωνταν? και την αν?γνωση τ?σο απολαυστικ? που δ?νουν στο βιβλ?ο μια μορφ? μυθιστ?ρηματική και ?χι στεγνή ιστορικ?!

Δ?ο σημεία που αξ?ζουν, προσωπικ?, είναι η πιστ? περιγραφ? και σκιαγραφήση των ανθρ?πων και των συνθηκ?ν που οδ?γησαν τους Ι?πωνες να ζητ?σουν απ τους πιλ?τους τους να πεθ?νουν ως Καμικάζι να αυτοκτον?σουν δηλαδή ως μαχητ?ς πολ?μου! Και φυσικ? η αγωνι?δης περιγραφ? των συζητ?σεων των Ιαπωνών μ?σα στα Αυτοκρατορικά αν?κτορα την επ?μενη της 9ης Αυγο?στου μετ? το Ναγκασακι ?ταν προσπαθο?ν απεγνωσμ?να να πε?σουν η φιλειρηνική πλευρ? την φιλοπολεμική ?τι ο π?λεμος χ?θηκε και χρει?ζεται να υπογραφ? το τελεσ?γραφο των ΗΠΑ, την ?δια στιγμή που ?ξω στη χ?ρα ο Ιαπωνικ?ς λα?ς κα?γονταν κυριολεκτικ? απ? τις πυρηνικ?ς β?μβες! Γιατ? η Ειρ?νη, δεν ?ρχεται ποτ? τ?σο ε?κόλα ?σο ο π?λεμος...

Matt says

When I was a kid - but a kid who loved history - my mom got me a ticket for a dinner and lecture featuring World War II pilots speaking about their experiences. The thing that struck me then, as it does now, was how hard it was to imagine these old, frail, wrinkled, stooped men as heroes, hale and true. One of these men was Chuck Albury, co-pilot of a B-29 Superfortress called "Bock's Car." On August 9, 1945, shortly after 11:00, Bock's Car dropped a single bomb - Fat Man - from its belly. Fat Man exploded 1500 feet above the City. In a double clap of light, at least 40,000 people were immolated.

The discussion about the Bomb was brief, ancillary, and was explained simply as something that had to be done to end the war. The dissonance between the nice old man on the dais, and the bomb he dropped, and the destruction it wrought, was never touched upon.

We have been in a long period of World War II commemoration. The ugliness and brutalities of the conflict are often lost amid the platitudes, parades and foreign legion hats.

Max Hastings's *Retribution* is focused on the ugliness and brutality. It is a companion piece to *Armageddon*, which detailed the last year of World War II in Europe. This sequel-in-kind tells the horrible, bloody history of the last year of World War II in the Pacific. It culminates, of course, in one of the most destructive events ever perpetrated by man: the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I really like Max Hastings. I don't always agree with his conclusions, but he is always evocative. He takes familiar history and makes you look at it from entirely new angles; once you read his books, you feel you have a new understanding, or at the very least, that your mind has been taught to think a little more critically.

Retribution skips the over the beginnings of the Pacific War. There is little discussion about the reasons for the war, no analysis of Dutch oil, co-prosperity spheres, or missed warnings. There is no Pearl Harbor, Bataan, Guadalcanal, Coral Sea, or Midway. Instead, the reader is plunged right into the final, bloody months: Burma; China; Iwo Jima; Okinawa; the Philippines; submarine warfare; the bombings of Japan; kamikazes; the atomic bombs; and finally, the surrender on the USS Missouri.

Hastings is not a great writer, but he does a superb job of deftly limning characters, creating short,

compelling sketches of General William Slim, Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, Admirals Nimitz and Halsey, and General Curtis LeMay. Hastings also has time to pound a few more nails into the coffin of General Douglas MacArthur's reputation. But Hastings doesn't get caught up top. Instead, he has done a great deal of primary research on the ordinary soldiers and civilians who lived through this time (of course, only the ordinary soldiers and civilians were young enough at the time to be alive for Hastings to do primary research, but I digress). The result is a seamless transition from top to bottom to top, where you get the command decisions from the generals and admirals, and then feel the consequences felt by the privates and corporals.

I wouldn't call *Retribution* a military history of the Pacific. As Hastings states in his forward, he hasn't set out to relate the ins-and-outs of each battle. You can get a strategic overview, but nothing about the tactics. I don't know what you'd call this type of book. Perhaps "historical mood piece." You get an unvarnished feel for the war.

This book is best read by people who already have a working familiarity with the Pacific War. It moves quickly and assumes a lot. It's good to know the tropes, the currents, the way it all plays out, because there's not a lot of handholding. Indeed, there are some interesting chapters on the war in Burma, the fight in China, and especially the post-atomic invasion of Manchuria by the Russians. However, these are necessarily dealt with swiftly, so you are only getting a nibble of a vaster story. Also, by starting at the last year, you lose all the context. So, beware: you must bring your context with you.

The thrust of this book is a critical analysis of the battles, decisions, and sacred cows of the Pacific. For instance, even while giving credit to John Dower's *War Without Mercy*, Hastings disagrees with Dower's belief that the savagery of the war came from its racial nature.

Hastings gives even more time to the firebombings of Tokyo and the decision to drop the atomic bombs. This takes up the last third of the book, and here I had some quibbles. When I first started reading, I knew that Hastings was in the pro-bombing camp. Now, I've read Richard Frank's *Downfall*, which pretty much tears apart the argument that any invasion of Japan was necessary. To my surprise, Hastings was in complete agreement with Frank. Hastings shows persuasively that Japan was in no condition to repel an invasion. Sure, they would have put together their kamikaze corps, their suicide ships, their dogs with bombs strapped to their bellies. The reality, though, was that there were only a few and battered planes left; no oil to fly them; no pilots to pilot them; that the suicide ships had failed completely at Okinawa; and that the citizenry probably wasn't as gung-ho about mass suicide as the military clique thought. Besides, American submarines had effectively blockaded the island nation, making it impossible for them to get more oil. Japan would not have been able to hold out for long. Yet, Hastings believes there were still good reasons for the atomic bombs (though he is oddly of the belief that the Tokyo firebombings were unnecessary in light of the airtight sub blockade). Hastings thinks that the bomb served the twin aims of retributive justice and keeping the Russian bear at bay. I'm not going to get into a lengthy discussion on this, but suffice it to say, I did not find his moral arguments compelling.

Hastings is a historian, not a philosopher, and when he starts getting into philosophical arguments, the book just gets muddled. It would've been better if he had delineated a philosophical school and then applied it to these facts. Instead, he speaks in moral vagaries, saying that the Japanese had to be punished for starting the war. Essentially, the argument is that the "brought it on themselves." That begs the question: how is burning 12 year-old school girls, old men and women, infants and invalids, punishment for those who started the war? What did they do? Is this an argument for collective guilt, such as the Germans were convicted of? If so, Hastings should have made that contention, rather than the specious and brutal notion that innocent and ordinary civilians should be crisped by the splitting of atoms for the sins of its political leaders.

(Ironically, I recall that when Doolittle's bombers took off from the Hornet and bombed Tokyo back in 1942, they were told not to bomb the Imperial Palace, which would've been one way of actually punishing the wrongdoers. Apparently, it is passe for one government to try and kill the leaders of the opposing government. This is why the British refused to get on board with attempts to assassinate Hitler. Isn't that funny in a disgusting way? One government has a problem with another government, so they bring fire down upon the civilians who have no say or control over what takes place, as a way to punish that government. Maybe John Lennon was on to something. Imagine, indeed.)

Anyway, I heartily endorse this book, and all of Max Hastings work. It is, at the least, provocative.

Tony says

Add Bill Slim to my very short list of officers I admire.

The blurb on the jacket of my edition of *Nemesis* says that the Pacific theatre had the most extraordinary cast of characters and having just finished the book I would have to say I agree. Hastings uses the by-now familiar device of interweaving the stories of ordinary people into the broader context of strategic and political decisions by generals and statesmen. And it works a treat, shining the light on the human consequences of warfare.

The book greatly improved my limited knowledge of many of the key figures of the war in the Far East , particularly Macarthur, Chiang Kai Shek and one of the great forgotten British heroes, Bill Slim.

It also convincingly showed how the psyche of an entire nation can be shaped and perverted by a small, influential, determined and ruthless group. The Japanese military, which effectively ruled Japan and directed its expansionist policies, were truly the ayatollahs of 20th century Asia and the grotesque brutality inflicted on captured enemy combatants and occupied civilians defies any attempt at rational explanation. Hastings is unflinching in his condemnation of Japanese atrocities while still managing to find enough individual acts of decency and kindness to prevent his criticism becoming a demonisation.

Hastings also put paid to, in my mind at least, any lingering doubts about the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The fire-bombing of Tokyo had shown that conventional 'terror tactics' by the USAAF would do little to persuade the Japanese to abandon their policy of forcing the Americans to the negotiating table and the experience of Okinawa had shown what price they were willing to pay to stave off unconditional surrender.

As with most histories of war containing personal accounts I finished the book both shocked and awed by what human beings are capable of doing to one another.

Jur says

Reads smooth like sunshine. Broad strokes narrative. Adds the touching anecdote. A bit of biography a dint of analysis. History for the lazy chair.

Marcus says

Let me start by pointing out that this is not a book dedicated to a detailed study of offensives, battles and orders of battles. This is not this kind of book. Instead, Max Hastings dedicates this volume to a sweeping narrative of the last twelve months or so of Second World War in the Pacific in Asia. By weaving together a mosaic of personal recollections, accounts of key events and descriptions of prominent personalities he somehow manages to present a surprisingly complete, but perhaps even more importantly, remarkably nuanced picture of conflict's final phase.

"Retribution" is special in other respects than for its very special narrative style and the way Max Hastings chooses to present this vast tragedy to the reader. This volume is to my best knowledge the only single volume about this topic that dedicates as much space to the seemingly never-ending war in China, struggle between British and Japanese in Burma and Soviet attack of 1945, as it does to the American drive toward Japanese home islands and bombing offensive against Japan's urban centers. That in itself makes this book unique.

The most important and admirable quality of "Retribution" lies however in its relentless, sometimes even scathing critical analysis of events described in this book and people who took part in them, both as nations and individuals. It is, for me at least, so very refreshing to read work of an author who isn't afraid to present his own conclusions, even if they will ruffle feathers and raise complaints about their political incorrectness.

G.G. says

The *Sunday Times* review quoted on the cover of my copy--"compassionate but unsparing in its judgements"--is about right. Hastings is compassionate towards civilians on both sides whose lives were destroyed by the war, as well as common soldiers on both sides exposed to "the demented culture of bushido" (p. 465); and unsparing in his criticisms of leaders, also on both sides, who showed such contempt for human suffering.

Hastings' account of the last year of the Asia-Pacific War is comprehensive. There are chapters about the British in Burma ("as so often in wars, brave men were to do fine and hard things in pursuit of a national illusion" p. 77); chapters about the slaughter meted out by both sides in the Philippines ("one post-war estimate suggests that for every six Manileros murdered by the Japanese defenders, another four died beneath the gunfire of their American liberators. Some historians would even reverse that ratio" p. 256); and chapters about the war in China ("the principal consequence of the huge Allied commitment was to intensify the miseries of China's people" p. 240); as well as chapters on prisoners of war, the battles for Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and Manchuria, and the fire- and atomic-bombing of Japanese cities. The cumulative effect is--rightly, of course--grim and horrifying.

Hastings is especially concerned to expose the "culture of massacre in which the entire Japanese military was complicit" (pp. 256, 595). Even though I thought I was well informed about atrocities committed by the Imperial Army, reading Hastings' book made me realize I didn't know the half of it. I hadn't known, for example, that "at least a million Vietnamese died in their country's great famine of 1944-45, which was directly attributable to Japanese insistence that rice paddies should be replanted with fibre crops for the

occupiers' use" (p. 13); or that "when a cholera epidemic struck Tamil railway workers at Niekke in June 1943, a barracks containing 250 infected men, women and children was simply torched" (p. 375). That "culture of massacre" was also directed at other Japanese:

Japan's human catastrophes were crowded into the last months of war...during the futile struggle to avert the inevitable. Japan's commanders and political leaders were privy to the desperate nature of their nation's predicament, but most remained implacably unwilling to acknowledge its logic. In the last phase, around two million Japanese people paid the price for their rulers' blindness, a sacrifice which availed their country nothing. (p. 18)

In his chapter on submarine warfare, Hastings notes that the "Japanese empire was uniquely vulnerable to blockade. Its economy was dependent upon fuel and raw materials shipped from China, Malaya, Burma and the Netherlands East Indies." (p. 289) Thus by 1945, there was:

overwhelming evidence that Japanese industry was already being strangled to death by the American naval blockade when B-29 bombs began to fall upon it; that aerial bombardment in the last five months of the war contributed little towards the destruction of Japan's war-making powers.... (p. 334)

In Hastings' conclusion, he argues that "wartime Japan was responsible for almost as many deaths in Asia as was Nazi Germany in Europe" (p. 598) and thus Japan should pay reparations to its victims, as Germany and Austria have. This reader was convinced.

Mikey B. says

This is an engrossing book focusing on the last year of the war with Japan. At times, there is even some sardonic humour.

Mr. Hastings makes a strong case for Japan being at fault for needlessly prolonging the war. Every battle was to be the last and determining one – Saipan, then the Philippines, followed by Iwo Jima then Okinawa. The last one would have been Japan proper, where the Japanese people were to drive the invaders from the homeland. He also cites the kamikaze volunteers, of which there were thousands in support of this death struggle. There was a cult of self-immolation that extended from the individual to the entire nation. When islands were attacked like Iwo Jima and Okinawa many defenders fought to the bitter end, even though there was no chance to win or escape. The Bushido code was anti-humanitarian and was responsible for inflicting cruel punishment, rape and death on all the countries occupied by Japan. The enmity for Japan exists to this day in countries like China and the Philippines.

All the events of the last year of war are well depicted - from the American island invasions, the British in Burma, the Chinese mainland (where fighting started in 1933), and even the Russian invasion of Manchuria after the atomic bombs were dropped.

Mr. Hastings acknowledges the cruelty of the atomic bombs, but argues convincingly that it finally prompted some Japanese to realize the futility of their position. The emphasis is on 'some' because, as he points out there was still a significant war faction who wanted the Japanese to continue the final struggle. Mr. Hastings also states that the onus was on the Japanese (with many of their cities in utter devastation) to end the war. Prior to the dropping of the bombs the Japanese were bargaining futilely with the Russian government to obtain favourable terms from the Allies. Mr. Hastings discusses at length the ludicrousness of this approach when the Americans had made public the Potsdam Declaration at the end of July 1945 to end the war. Japan completely ignored and dismissed the Potsdam Declaration.

He looks at these events in the context of 1944-45 – not as a retrospective of later years, when we are far removed from six consecutive years of the most brutal war in the history of mankind against relentless enemies – Germany and Japan. By the summer of 1945 the Allies were not looking forward to an invasion of Japan. They were searching for an end-game.

Stephen says

Hastings has much excellent research to present, though too much of it went into the writing and not enough of it into thinking about humanity in general. He argues for the true historian's creed, to judge the past based only on what those of the past were presented with, not with what *we* think they should have done, then proceeds to disgrace this creed by making judgments on some of the most controversial aspects of the American defeat of Japan, the fire-bombing of civilians on a mass scale, the use of atomic bombs, by drawing conclusions based solely on what we know now. A British, he doesn't write like a brainwashed American on these controversies, but ends up writing in defense just the same which is inexcusable.

Hastings writes that after Pearl Harbor American command knew from the beginning that Japanese cities would be directly attacked. The viciousness and cruelty of Imperial Japan directed against America, which began with Pearl Harbor, had been directed solely against the American military and not its civilians. This small point was lost on Curtis LeMay, general for the air force responsible for "strategic bombing" against civilians, who described his policy as "Bomb and burn 'em till they quit." The rape and murder Imperial Japan inflicted on Asian countries was not especially "Japanese", as the racial thinking goes, but an example of humanity at large when international order has not been established. You couldn't say of the Japanese what one ill-educated American boy said about Mount Fuji as seen from the cockpit of one of the Superfortresses, the B-29: "It was a beautiful site, and one that very few people will ever witness during the war. It was hard to believe that below us lay one of the rottenest countries that ever existed." Americans' lack of historical understanding has never been better expressed.

The world economy had already begun to shift dramatically away from the disastrous European model the moment Hitler invaded Poland so that by late 1942 the American government knew it would be its responsibility to take the reins of free capitalism to try and control and guide it once the war in Europe and Asia concluded. Why America felt it was her responsibility - how was it that Americans throughout government had the faith and confidence that this would now become the American job - is to me one of the most fascinating aspects of this war. The administration of FDR in its first two terms, as it was preoccupied with saving its citizenry from free capitalism's destructive forces at home, was isolationist, into regulation and not the kind of unfettered nature the atomic bomb represents.

The 9 March 1945 American (fire)bomber attack on Tokyo killed around 100,000 people, and rendered a

million homeless.

Hastings says that the most astonishing aspect of the new "strategic bombing" campaign led by LeMay was that it was implemented without reference to the political leadership in Washington. He also says there is no documentation to suggest that either Roosevelt or Truman was ever consulted about LeMay's campaign. I am almost relieved to hear that, as I have been ready to assign Truman to the depths of hell where LeMay belongs. His post-war rationalization for this fire-bomb attack on Tokyo and other cities: "We were going after military targets. No point in slaughtering civilians for the mere sake of slaughter... All you had to do was visit one of those targets after we'd roasted it, and the ruins of a multitude of tiny houses, with a drill press sticking up through the wreckage... The entire population got into the act and worked to make those airplanes or munitions of war... men, women, and children. We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we burned that town. Had to be done." The tone of the barbaric "Had to be done" with its inarticulate half-thought represents uneducated America at its worst. Describing it as the "entire" population shows how little he knew about the nation he was assigned to defeat, even when he had time to digest what he had done.

Hastings admits "neither LeMay personally nor the air force as an institution welcomed the overwhelming evidence that Japanese industry was already being strangled to death by the naval blockade" when the indiscriminate bombing began. Hastings argues that once American industry went ahead with creating the B-29 and the atomic bomb, given the Japanese determination to fight to the end and general war-weariness on the part of the combatants, the uses of these technologies was inevitable. This is not "you are there" history. It is an apologia for technology being the beast that we as human beings can at best only ride - so let us ride it. LeMay wasn't typical as there were many honorable American leaders in the military. But he also wasn't the exception. His savagery represents a strain in American life that should be feared by Americans if we are to value our country. We can only hope we have more individuals of influence involved in the military and civilian nexus such as Brig. Bonner Fellers, one of Gen. MacArthur's closest aides, who could see what anyone who isn't sycophantic to power could see: the American air raids on Japan was "one of the most ruthless and barbaric killings of non-combatants in all history." If history is to judge those Japanese responsible for "the rape of Nanking" as war criminals (another instance where civilian and military control was severed), then the same should apply to those like Curtis LeMay.

Michael Gerald says

The first time I made a review of this book years ago, I didn't like it. But upon rereading it and cross-checking with other references, this turns out to be a decent book.

Joseph says

"How much bad news will pampered European and American voters take? Not that much, I suspect, in the absence of bombs raining down around their heads, figuratively or literally. We get the political leaders we deserve. Recent evidence suggests that in America, especially, charlatans prosper on the hustings, while good people flinch from exposing themselves to the humiliations and deceptions essential to secure public office. Unless or until electorates become more rational, I doubt we shall see leaders much better – though, please God and the Tea Party, no worse – than today." (Max Hastings, Financial Times)

Why on earth would I start a review of this book with that quote, well, because in researching Max Hastings, it popped up near the top of my search list. Max Hastings is an iconoclast. This book has real strengths and, in the main, is well put together. However, it is riddled with attacks on key American, British, and Australian figures in World War II. Some of it deserved, some gratuitous.

There are several things that make this book worth reading. One is the honest and detailed description of Japanese brutality. Those who fought the Japanese were considered by the Japanese to be almost subhuman and were treated accordingly. The recounting of the infamous unit 731 including vivisection of prisoners is one instance. Use of PWs and Chinese and others for live bayonet practices is another. These atrocities were not confined to unit 731. Captured B-29 crews were beheaded and in Fukuoka sixteen B-29 crew members were hacked to death with swords AFTER the Japanese surrendered. Japanese ministry officials began destroying records on 14 August, the day before the Emperor's famous surrender recording was broadcast. They were able to spend a good two to three weeks – and probably much longer – getting rid of what had to have been incriminating evidence.

The recounting of wartime Japan's government resisting the calls for surrender and the emperor's roll in finally making it happen are well told down to the attempted coup by field grade officers. The Soviet advance into Manchuria and into the Kurile Islands is also well told. British and American war efforts in the China-Burma-India Theater are also well detailed and fascinating. Additionally, the account of Curt LeMay's firebombing of Japanese cities is chilling and accurate. Death and destruction from B-29 napalm drops greatly exceeded that of the two atomic weapons. Finally, the use of atomic weapons is well explained and Hastings is masterful in providing the reasons for it and why it was a choice that had to be made then and most likely the only real choice.

The book depends heavily on anecdote and personal memory or "oral histories" in some cases, in fact in many cases, stories told more than thirty years after the event. Since there is no bibliography it is a bit difficult to determine and check sources. Additionally, some sources appear to have been neglected, for instance, Haruko and Ted Cook's remarkable "Japan at War: An Oral History." Additionally no mention is made of the efforts of the US Military Intelligence Service, an organization manned by AJAs (Americans of Japanese Ancestry). Well over 3000 MIS soldiers were a key part of the intelligence efforts in the Pacific and their efforts were probably as critical to our success as those of the MAGIC personnel at Pearl Harbor. In fact, code books captured on Guadalcanal and recognized for their intelligence value by three AJA soldiers were probably critical to early MAGIC efforts. These MIS soldiers were where the fighting was starting with Guadalcanal. Hastings loves to retell stories he had translators gain during interviews. Too bad he didn't interview Terry Doi, who fought on Iwo Jima and entered a cave full of Japanese soldiers with his shirt off to show he was unarmed to talk the Japanese into surrendering. Too bad he didn't tell the story of Hoichi Kubo, another AJA, on Saipan. Kubo's heroic activity saved 8 Japanese soldiers and 122 women and children. It could be that Hastings was unaware of the activities of the MIS or that including their stories just didn't not lend itself to his theme. I'm not sure which.

Finally, there is a bit of a problem with General Douglas MacArthur. Now, I will readily admit that Douglas MacArthur was arrogant, headstrong and that he was sometimes a lousy judge of character especially in the selection of his senior staff. Hastings misses no opportunity to bash MacArthur and certainly there are things he can be bashed for. When Hastings recounts MacArthur's meeting with Roosevelt at Pearl Harbor, he talks about MacArthur being late for a meeting with FDR on board the Baltimore which had docked at Pearl Harbor. Hastings also says that MacArthur harbored Presidential ambitions. Hastings' footnote to that commentary cites D. Clayton James "The Years of MacArthur." I reread James' account of that meeting. What Hastings omits is that MacArthur had just gotten off a 26 hour flight to get to that meeting. If you read the James account you come away from Hastings shaking your head. The James account does not deny that

MacArthur could be arrogant, but it clearly indicates that MacArthur and Roosevelt enjoyed each other's company. James leaves the reader with the impression that two old BS artists, Mac and FDR recognized each other for what they were and thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. Read the account by James for yourself and make up your own mind. I came away thinking that Hastings clearly 'cherry picked' from James' book.

On the other hand, it is clear that there were too many big egos involved and that these egos sometimes cost the war effort. Admiral Ernest King comes in for a beating which I suspect was well deserved. James' book also relates that when MacArthur returned to his staff he told them he was struck by how frail FDR look. FDR would be dead eight months later. Other accounts -- the Yalta Conference, for example, indicate that by Feb 1945, FDR was so sick as to be virtually unable to function at that conference. Basically, I have to wonder how effectively FDR was able to function as Commander in Chief, especially since he Roosevelt was fixated on the 1944 election. In fact, as MacArthur suggests FDR's travel to Pearl Harbor was probably a "purely political" excursion.

As much as I enjoyed this book and as much as I agree with most of the conclusions Hastings draws, I am just a little bit skeptical about his research and how much his theme was driven by agenda as opposed to research.

Arrgh, I want to give this book a higher rating than I did, but I just can't. My problem is the omissions, the "cherry picking," and over reliance on evidence that is anecdotal.

Postscript, next day, after doing a little more checking. William Manchester gives a much more credible account of the meeting of FDR, Nimitz and MacArthur in American Caesar. That account provides probably the best summary of what went on and it credits both FDR and Roosevelt for their roles. It starts on p. 424 Interestingly, Manchester notes that FDR's "wasted appearance" shocked MacArthur. The General told his wife, "He is just a shell of the man I knew." MacArthur also told another person regarding FDR "Doc, the Mark of death is on him! In six months he'll be in his grave." FDR died about eight months later. This is another source Hastings omitted because it clearly ran counter to Hastings' attempt to denigrate MacArthur. Hastings pretty much totally missed the mark on the Pearl Harbor Conference.

Yair Zumaeta Acero says

Una obra titánica cortesía del historiador británico Max Hastings dedicado a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, pero centrado exclusivamente en el teatro del Pacífico y específicamente, en los dos últimos años de guerra contra el imperio del Japón. Hastings es un excelente narrador de guerra y provisto de un amplio abanico de fuentes históricas y de testimonios de los protagonistas de todos los bandos (desde soldados norteamericanos pasando por civiles chinos y filipinos, hasta integrantes del ejército imperial japonés), nos regala un libro

amplio en extensión y datos, pero cargado de una narrativa impresionante gracias a que rescata el lado humano de la guerra, siendo narradas sus atronadoras brutalidades directamente por víctimas y victimarios. La lectura se hace entretenida gracias a que Hastings hace los relatos necesarios -en aras de contextualizar al lector- sobre tácticas bélicas y estratégicas, y se centra más en la narración de los hechos en general. Si algo hay que agradecerle por siempre a este libro, es que no permite que olvidemos campañas asiáticas que también hicieron parte de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, y que se vieron eclipsadas por el teatro de operaciones europeo, pero a la postre, resultaron incluso más sangrientas y despiadadas. El "ejército olvidado" de los británicos en Birmania, la barbarie a la que fue sometida más de la mitad de Asia bajo el yugo de los soldados japoneses, el código de honor japonés del bushido y la explicación a la inmólación de los kamikazes, el aporte final de la Unión Soviética al invadir un territorio tan vasto y agreste como Manchuria, y especialmente, la reivindicación de China no sólo como combatiente aliado en la Segunda Guerra Mundial, sino el padecimiento abominable que tuvieron que soportar los civiles chinos bajo la espada del ejército invasor japonés, tanto o más inclemente y despiadado que los nazis en Europa.

Otro gran aporte de Hastings con su libro, es el análisis que introduce, sobre todo en los últimos capítulos, a temas que han generado discusión desde la capitulación de Japón en septiembre de 1945. La necesidad de invadir Filipinas, Iwo Jima y Okinawa con un coste en vidas y sangre tan alto, la responsabilidad del emperador Hirohito, los amañados juicios de Tokio de 1946, el negacionismo japonés de posguerra y especialmente, el mayor tema de debate desde entonces: La real necesidad de haber apelado a las bombas atómicas de Hiroshima y Nagasaki frente a un enemigo agónico y derrotado. Las conclusiones de Hastings permiten abrir el debate.

Como puntos negativos, hay dos que sobresalen: El primero, que para un lector poco avezado en la guerra del Pacífico, el libro de entrada parecerá como si lo hubiesen lanzado en una balsa a la mitad del océano en 1944... se echan de menos algunos apartes introductorios que dieron forma a lo que pasó al final de la guerra, y eventos tan decisivos como la batalla del Mar de Coral, Midway, Guadalcanal y Saipán, apenas son mencionados. En segundo lugar, se hace supremamente evidente el odio que Hastings destila por Douglas MacArthur, a quien se encarga de dar palo durante las más de 800 hojas del libro, a quien tilda de megalómano, inepto, egocéntrico, vanidoso e incompetente, entre otros adjetivos. Si bien es cierto, su astucia militar no puede compararse a la de genios como Rommel, Montgomery, Slim o Patton, no puede dejarse de lado su papel preponderante en la Guerra del Pacífico y el traje de héroe con el que tuvo que vestirse para unificar a una nación en guerra.

Poco más que decir, un gran libro al que de seguro volveré en unos cuantos años!!!
