

The New History

Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: the World at War 1939–45* (2011) 2012

“Unquestionably the best single-volume history of the war ever written”—*Sunday Times* (etc. etc., three pages of unanimous awe before the title page)

Max Hastings made his reputation as a historian of the Second World War principally by bringing to our attention the fact, which one would hardly gather, for instance, from Churchill’s multi-volume, that Germany lost the war on the Eastern front, when she was proved too weak to maintain and extend the huge initial conquests while having to defend the Atlantic Wall. In the present book Hastings makes much use of eye-witness accounts by “ordinary people” and these (the ones that are not clichés such as the title of the book), together with his vivid sense of the different actualities of battle in Stalingrad, el Alamein or in a Lancaster bomber, make one realise afresh the horribleness of war, and the worse than folly of *homo sapiens* in conducting policy by this means. He reports atrocities committed by all sides, but especially by the Germans, the Russians and the Japanese. The Russians, it seems, regularly had units behind their lines whose sole duty was to shoot deserters. One wonders whether a régime more subject to the rule of law could have beaten Germany.

Hastings’s title and subtitle suggest that the book is something other than history, and the Introduction begins “This is a book chiefly about human experience” (p. xv) and rightly remarks that “people can interpret what happens to them only in the context of their own circumstances.” (p.xvii) So for instance “Victory at Kursk meant little to a soldier such as Private Ivanov of 70th army” (p. 393) Victory at Kursk did mean more than a little in the *history* of the war. (History is a coherent concept!) The enthusiastic reviewers nevertheless treat the book as history, and perhaps Hastings would agree that if the history is unsound the reported human experiences lose the only context within which they can be understood. And as history there is a lot wrong with *All Hell Let Loose*.

The book is sometimes more like criticism of history than history itself, and as criticism Hastings’s “coolly revisionist myth-busting tone” commended by one quoted reviewer too often depends on the kind of would-be authoritative judgement unsupported by evidence that at the time of these events used to characterise the editorials in the Beaverbrook press. The chapter about September 1939 is called “Poland Betrayed”, and much scorn and contempt is shown about the failure of France to mount an offensive in time to rescue Poland, but the question of the military possibility of such an offensive is not discussed. The 20 July 1944 bomb plot against Hitler was “conducted with stunning incompetence” (p. 551: Hitler was indeed stunned) but the only support is a rebuke to von Stauffenberg for not making it a suicide attack, and the reader is assumed to know already all the relevant facts.

The style veers towards the Liza Doolittle for instance in the frequent use of what Wallerstein calls the “addictive genitive”. Poetical phrases, when they are distinguishable from cliché, stand in for actual history, as when during the decisive battles of 1943 the Germans “maintained a tigerish defence” (p. 392: tigers are not renowned for defence)—but what actually happened? And Hastings habitually reports the war as waged not by Germany but by the Nazis or Hitler individually. In the index Hitler invades Russia, which was beyond the capacity even of that powerful man. The United States, we are told (p. 402) declared war on Mussolini. No, on Italy.

Part of Hastings’s successful revision is his recognition of the importance of these battles in the Kursk Salient in the summer of 1943. This was the last chance for the Germans to regain some initiative after the disaster at Stalingrad, and if Creasy were doing his work now would have to count as one of the decisive battles of the world. Before, the Axis forces had successfully resisted the ham-handed Soviet efforts to imitate their own methods of tank thrusts and

encirclement, and had retaken Kharkov. Germany might still avoid outright defeat. Hastings's narrative begins in mid-paragraph after some personal detail or other, and only as the narrative progresses does the importance of the battles begin to come across. And he is so eager to promote the thesis of Western insignificance that he distorts the history.

The chapter begins with a mention of the "modest operations" in the Mediterranean theatre that were all the Western allies could contribute in 1943 while the Soviets were winning the decisive battles of the war. But later, the landings in Sicily on 10 July are reported as "an armada of 2590 warships and transports" carrying 180,000 troops. (p. 444) Hastings emphasises the small scale compared with what was going on in Russia, but this was after all one of the biggest invasion fleets in the history of the world, and Hitler was not so contemptuous. According to Hastings, "Hitler's nerve broke." (p. 391) He gives no evidence for putting it this way, and for instance John Toland gives a different and more convincing account. (*Hitler*, (1976) 1997, p. 746) But both agree that it was the "modest" landings in Sicily that brought about a crisis and caused Hitler to detach two élite divisions from the Kursk region and call off the offensive, a decision that may well have lost the war.

There is also a lot wrong with Hastings's use of individual reminiscences. A minor objection is that references are inadequate and everything foreign is translated into a homogenising contemporary English. Two brief examples of something worse, from both ends of the British political spectrum: on the outbreak of war Aneurin Bevan is said to have "hedged his bets by calling for a struggle on two fronts: against Hitler and also against British capitalism." (p. 8, not indexed) No evidence supports this calumny. Evelyn Waugh is cited in support of Hastings's view that "privileged Britons remained privileged indeed;" in Antony Powell's words, "people who really didn't want to be involved in it were not." (pp. 342-3) The evidence is a quotation from Waugh's diary, recording, on 1 June 1944, that he spent the day checking quotations in the London Library, lunching and drinking in London clubs and finally "in an alcoholic stupor, got the train to Exeter and slept most of the way." Waugh, however, says Hastings, was "untypical" in that several of the friends "with whom he caroused" were dead a year later. (p. 343) So Waugh was typical of the "people who really didn't want to be involved". Would anybody guess from this that his war novels (the best to come out of the war?) were closely based on personal experience? that, over-age, Waugh had made enough of a nuisance of himself with influential friends to be employed in some very dangerous missions, and that later in the same year of 1944 he was in Axis territory to work with the resistance in Croatia?

Don't trust Max Hastings.

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