



Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945

By Max Hastings

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**Winner of the Pritzker Prize for Military History
A New York Times Notable Book**

From one of our finest military historians, a monumental work that shows us at once the truly global reach of World War II and its deeply personal consequences.

For thirty-five years, Max Hastings has researched and written about different aspects of the war. Now, for the first time, he gives us a magnificent, single-volume history of the entire conflict. Through his strikingly detailed stories of everyday people—of soldiers, sailors and airmen; British housewives and Indian peasants; SS killers and the citizens of Leningrad—Hastings provides a singularly intimate portrait of the world at war. Remarkably informed and wide-ranging, *Inferno* is both elegantly written and cogently argued. Above all, it is a new and essential understanding of one of the greatest and bloodiest events of the twentieth century.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Inferno*:

"The best one-volume history of the war yet written. . . . It is in all ways a monumental achievement. . . . A relatively brief review can only begin to indicate the depth, breadth, complexity and pervasive humanity of this extraordinary book. The literature of World War II is, as Hastings notes at the beginning of his bibliography, so vast as almost to defy enumeration or comprehension, but *Inferno* immediately moves to the head of the list."

—*The Washington Post*

"Balanced and elegantly written prose. . . . *Inferno* is a magnificent achievement, a one-volume history that should find favor among readers thoroughly immersed in World War II and those approaching the subject for the first time. As the years thin the ranks of those who fought in the war, Hastings's balanced and elegantly written prose should help ensure that the bloodshed, bravery and brutality of that tragic conflict aren't forgotten."

—Associated Press

"A work of staggering scope and erudition, narrated with supreme fluency and insight, it is unquestionably the best single-volume history of the war ever written. . . . Oddly enough, good single-volume histories of the war are relatively rare. By and large, its sheer scope intimidates writers: while there are hundreds of books about individual episode, from the Battle of Britain to D-Day, surprisingly few historians have tried to pull all the threads together. But Hastings, as the author of several splendid volumes on various aspects of the conflict, is the ideal candidate to conquer this historiographical Everest. His book is at once a 'global portrait,' emphasizing events in Asia as well as in Europe, and a 'human story,' saturated in the details of ordinary people's experience. . . . Hastings has a terrific grasp of the grand sweep and military strategy of the war, showing how a combination of Russian blood, American industry and German incompetence made the allied victory inevitable. But what makes this book so compelling are the human stories. . . . This is the book he was born to write."

—*The Sunday Times*

"A fast-moving, highly readable survey of the entire war, in all its phases and on all fronts. . . . This is military history at its most gripping. Of all Max Hastings's valuable books, this is possibly his best—a veritable tour de force. . . . Though the Second World War has been the subject of immense historical research, Max Hastings here demonstrates how much there is still to know. . . . Hastings draws on eye-witness accounts and anecdotes from soldiers of all armies to show graphically what the war was like for the ordinary people who fought it, and, overwhelmingly, how terrible it was for the combatants. While many of the frontline commanders of each of the belligerent powers come in for some harsh treatment for their ineptitude or bungling, the valour, heroism and, above all, the extraordinary stoicism of their troops amid scarcely imaginable pain, suffering and losses are repeatedly highlighted."

—*The Evening Standard*

"A new, original, necessary history, in many ways the crowning of a life's work. A professional war correspondent who has personally witnessed armed conflict in Vietnam, the Falkland Islands and other danger zones, Hastings has a sober, unromantic and realistic view of battle that puts him into a different

category from the armchair generals whose gung-ho, schoolboy attitude to war fills the pages of a great majority of military histories. He writes with grace, fluency and authority. . . . *Inferno* is superb."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"If there is a contemporary British historian who is the chronicler of World War II, it would be Max Hastings . . . [*Inferno*] is a true distillation of everything this historian has learned from a lifetime of scholarship—and more important, of real thought—on what he calls 'the greatest and most terrible event in human history.'"

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Compellingly different . . . 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."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

"This book is packed with fascinating and surprising statistics and facts . . . Hastings has an extraordinary ability to throw a bucket into the ocean of wartime papers, diaries, letters and documents of every kind, and bring up something fascinating and worthwhile every time."

—*Financial Times*

"[A] huge, majestic book . . . The Second World War took place in the skies, the oceans and the lands of five different continents. It encompassed fighting in Arctic blizzards, as well as in jungles and deserts. Any military history must encompass all of this and more. And at the same time it must reconcile the grand strategy of generals and politicians with the more violent experiences of ordinary soldiers . . . Hastings shapes all these stories, almost miraculously, into a coherent narrative. Overlaid upon this tapestry is an analysis of how the war brought out the best and the worst in people, how it could be won only through the use of astonishing brutality and how it changed society forever."

—*The Telegraph*

"[Hastings's] nine books on aspects of [World War II] have given him a claim to be our pre-eminent military historian. In *All Hell Let Loose* he attempts to tell the whole story in a single volume, and succeeds triumphantly, combining fluid narrative with some piercing insights and unsentimental judgments. . . . As this enthralling book shows, in the right hands, the study of war – like the study of sacred text – can generate and endless stream of new meanings and insights, illuminating in their turn the wider mysteries of existence."

—*Standpoint*

About the Author

Max Hastings is the author of more than twenty books. He has served as a foreign correspondent and as the editor of Britain's *Evening Standard* and *Daily Telegraph*. He has received numerous British Press Awards, including Journalist of the Year in 1982, and Editor of the Year in 1988. He lives outside London.

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On the outbreak of war: 'France, Britain and its dominions were the only major nations to enter World War II as an act of principle, rather than because they sought territorial gains or were themselves attacked. Their claims upon the moral high ground were injured, however, by the fact that they declared support for embattled Poland without any intention of giving this meaningful military effect'.

On Stalin's 'devil's bargain' with Hitler: 'If Stalin was not Hitler's co-belligerent, Moscow's deal with Berlin made him the co-beneficiary of Nazi aggression. From 23 August 1939 onwards, the world saw Germany and the Soviet Union acting in concert, twin faces of totalitarianism. Because of the manner in which the global struggle ended in 1945, with Russia in the allied camp, some historians have accepted the post-war Soviet Union's classification of itself as a neutral power until 1941. This is mistaken. Though Stalin feared Hitler and expected eventually to have to fight him, in 1939 he made a historic decision to acquiesce in German aggression, in return for Nazi support for Moscow's own programme of territorial aggrandisement. Whatever excuses the Soviet leader later offered, and although his armies never fought in partnership with the Wehrmacht, the Nazi-Soviet Pact established a collaboration which persisted until Hitler revealed his true purposes in Operation *Barbarossa*'.

On the Battle of Britain: 'The latter months of 1940 were decisive in determining the course of the war: the Nazis, stunned by the scale of their triumphs, allowed themselves to suffer a loss of momentum. By launching an air assault on Britain, Hitler adopted the worst possible strategic compromise. As master of the continent, he believed a modest further display of force would suffice to precipitate its surrender. Yet if, instead, he had left Churchill's people to stew in their island, the prime minister would have faced great difficulties in sustaining national morale and a charade of strategic purpose. A small German contingent dispatched to support the Italian attack on Egypt that autumn would probably have sufficed to expel Britain from the Middle East; Malta could easily have been taken. Such humiliations would have dealt heavy blows to the credibility of Churchill's policy of fighting on.'

As it was, however, the Luftwaffe's clumsy offensive posed the one challenge which Britain was well-placed to repel. The British army and people were not obliged to confront the Wehrmacht on their beaches and in their fields- a clash which would probably have ended ignominiously. The prime minister merely required their acquiescence, while the country was defended by a few hundred RAF pilots and- more importantly though less conspicuously- by the formidable might of the Royal Navy's ships at sea. The prime minister's exalting leadership secured public support for his defiance of the logic of Hitlerian triumph, even when cities began to burn and civilians to die'.

On France's role in the war: 'Even allowing for the significant role of French troops in the final campaigns in north-west Europe, the statistical fact remains that Vichy's armies and domestic security forces made a more numerous contribution to Axis interests than those Frenchmen who later joined the Gaullists, other Resistance groups or Eisenhower's armies provided to the allied cause. Most French people persuaded themselves in 1940 that the Petain regime constituted a lawful government; however uncomfortably, they indulged its rule until the eve of liberation. Once defeat in 1940 had denied the French a heroic role in the struggle against Nazism, many remained confused for the remainder of the war about the least ignoble part their nation might play'.

On Britain's war with Rommel in the desert: 'the war in North African engaged only a handful of British and imperial divisions, while most of Churchill's army stayed at home. This was partly to provide security against invasion, partly for lack of weapons and equipment, partly owing to shortage of shipping to move and supply troops overseas. The clashes between desert armies were little more significant in determining the outcome of the global conflict than the tournaments between bands of French and English knights which provided *entre'actes* during the Hundred Years' War. But the North African contest caught the imagination of the western world, and achieved immense symbolic significance in the minds of the British people. It became what will surely prove to have been history's last campaign fought overseas between European powers attempting to advance European objectives'.

On the 1941 invasion of Russia: ‘It did not occur to Hitler, after his victories in the West, that it might be more difficult to overcome a brutalized society, inured to suffering, than democracies such as France and Britain, in which moderation and respect for human life were deemed virtues’.

On the allied relationship: ‘The Grand Alliance, the phrase with which Churchill ennobled the wartime relationship of Britain, the United States and Soviet Union, was always a grand charade; it was a necessary fiction to pretend that the three powers fought the war as a shared enterprise directed towards common purposes.

‘In Britain and America, confidence that our parents and grandparents were fighting ‘the good war’ is so deeply ingrained that we often forget that people in many countries adopted more equivocal attitudes; colonial subjects, and above all India’s four hundred millions, saw little merit in the defeat of the Axis if they continued to endure British suzerainty. Many Frenchmen fought vigorously against the allies. In Yugoslavia, rival factions were far more strongly committed to waging civil war against each other than to advancing the interests of either the allies or the Axis. Large numbers of Stalin’s subjects embraced the opportunity offered by German occupation to take up arms against a hated Moscow regime. None of this implies doubt that the allied cause deserved to triumph, but should emphasise the fact that Churchill and Roosevelt did not have all the best tunes’.

On the Soviet war effort: ‘It was probably true that only Russians could have borne and achieved what they did in the face of the 1941 catastrophe; it was less plausible to attribute this to the nobility of communist society. Until *Barbarossa*, Stalin sought to make common cause with Hitler, albeit to attain different objectives. Even when Russia became joined with the democracies to achieve the defeat of Nazism, Stalin pursued his quest for a Soviet empire, domination and oppression of hundreds of millions of people, with absolute single-mindedness and ultimate success. Whatever the merits of the Russian people’s struggle to expel the invaders from their country, Stalin’s war aims were as selfish and inimical to human liberty as those of Hitler. Soviet conduct could be deemed less barbaric than that of the Nazis only because it embraced no single enormity to match the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the Western allies were obliged to declare their gratitude, because Russia’s suffering and sacrifice saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of young British and American soldiers. Even if no exalted assertion of principle- instead, only a breach between rival monsters- caused Russia to become the principal battleground of the war, it was there that the Third Reich encountered the forces that would contrive its nemesis’.

On the confusion of loyalties around the world: ‘The leaders of the Grand Alliance depicted the war as a struggle for freedom against oppression, good against evil. In the 21st Century, few informed people even in former colonial societies doubt the merit of the allied cause, the advantage that accrued to mankind from defeat of the Axis. But it seems essential to recognise that in many societies contemporary loyalties were confused and equivocal. Millions of people around the world who had no love for the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini or Hirohito felt little greater enthusiasm for allied powers whose vision of liberty vanished, it seemed to their colonial subjects, at their own front doors’.

On British wartime rule of India: ‘Britain’s wartime treatment of its subject races remained humane by German or Japanese standards; there were no arbitrary executions or massacres. But it was among the ugliest aspects of British conduct of the war, that in order to hold India, it was necessary not merely to repulse external invaders, but also to administer the country under emergency powers, as an occupied nation rather than as a willing co-belligerent. Some of the repressive measures adopted in India were similar in kind, if not in scale, to those used by the Axis in its own subject societies.

On the revelation that the German economy was too weak to overcome Russia: ‘In 1942, the Axis would enjoy spectacular successes. But it is a critical historical reality, that senior functionaries of the Third Reich realised as early as December 1941 that military victory had become unattainable, because Russia remained undefeated. Some thereafter sustained hopes that Germany might negotiate an acceptable peace. But they, and perhaps Hitler also in the innermost recesses of his brain, knew the decisive strategic moment had passed’.

On the war crimes of Britain’s Soviet ally: ‘Stalin deported eastwards vast numbers of Soviet citizens from minorities whose loyalties he deemed suspect, notably Chechens and Crimean Tatars, some 3.5 million in all. An unquantified but large proportion of these peoples died in consequence, some from typhus which broke out during their transportation. Their sufferings, unlike those of Hitler’s victims, are scarcely recorded, but it is known that four Heroes of the Soviet Union were among the deportees; Beria’s purges spurned discrimination. Among other victims of the Soviets were 1.5 million Poles deported to Siberian exile or the gulag in 1940-41, in furtherance of Stalinist ethnic cleansing policies; at least 350,000 perished of starvation or disease, and a further thirty thousand were executed’.

On The U-Boat war: ‘Perhaps the most vivid statistic of the Battle of the Atlantic is that between 1939 and 1943 only eight per cent of slow and four per cent of fast convoys suffered attack. Much has been written about the inadequacy of allied means to respond to the U-boat threat in the early war years; this was real enough, but German resource problems were much greater. Hitler never understood the sea. In the early war period, he dispersed industrial effort and steel allocations among a range of weapons systems. He did not recognise a strategic opportunity to wage a major campaign against British Atlantic commerce until the fall of France in June 1940; U-boat construction was prioritised only in 1942-43, when allied naval strength was growing fast and the tide of the war had already turned. Germany never gained the capability to sever Britain’s Atlantic lifeline, though amid grievous shipping losses it was hard to recognise this at the time’.

On Guadalcanal: ‘the myth of the invincibility of the Japanese Army was shattered on this island just sixty miles by thirty. The Japanese laid bare their limitations, especially a shortage of competent commanders. Even during Japan’s victory season, while Yamashita conducted operations in Malaya with verve and skill, the campaigns in Burma and the Philippines suggested that some of his fellow-officers lacked initiative. When defending a position, their ethic of absolute conformity to orders had its uses; but in attack, commanders often acted unimaginatively. Man for man, the Japanese soldier was more aggressive and conditioned to hardship than his allied counterpart: British Gen. Bill Slim characterised the enemy condescendingly as ‘the greatest fighting insect in the world’; until 1945, Hirohito’s men displayed exceptional night-fighting skills. Collectively, however, the Japanese Army had nothing like the combat power of the Wehrmacht, the Red Army- or America’s ground forces.

On The Holocaust: ‘The edifice of Holocaust literature is vast, yet does not satisfactorily explain why the Nazis accepted the economic cost of embarking upon the destruction of the Jewish people, diverting scarce manpower and transport to a programme of mass murder, while the outcome of the war still hung in the balance. The answer must lie in the deranged centrality of Jewish persecution not merely to National Socialist ideology, but to Germany’s policies throughout the global conflict. The Nazis were always determined to exploit the licence granted to a government waging total war to fulfil objectives that otherwise posed difficulties even for a totalitarian regime.

‘Even when Hitler embarked on his rampage of hemispheric conquest, the democracies found it difficult to conceive that the people of a highly-educated and long-civilised European society could fulfil their

leaders' extravagant rhetoric and implement a genocide. Despite mounting evidence of Nazi crimes, this delusion persisted in some degree until 1945 and even for some time afterwards'.

On war crimes trials in 1945: 'Only a tiny fraction of those guilty of war crimes were ever indicted, partly because the allies had no stomach for the scale of executions, numbering several hundreds of thousands, which would have been necessary had strict justice been enforced against every Axis murderer. Less than a thousand retributive executions took place. Many convicted mass killers served jail sentences of only a few years, or even escaped by paying a fine of fifty almost worthless Reich marks. The Germans and Japanese were not entirely mistaken in regarding the international war crimes trials which took place in 1945-46 as 'victors' justice'. Some British and Americans, and many Russians, were guilty of offences under international law, the killing of prisoners notable among them, yet very few faced even courts martial. To have been on the winning side sufficed to secure amnesty; few allied war crimes were even acknowledged. British submarine commander 'Skip' Myer, for instance, who in 1941 distressed even some of his own crew by insisting that German soldiers struggling in the Mediterranean after the sinking of their caiques should be machine-gunned, was awarded a Victoria Cross and eventually became an admiral. American, Canadian and British troops who routinely shot snipers and Waffen SS prisoners on the battlefield, usually in supposed retaliation for similar enemy actions, went unindicted. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials and sentences represented not injustice, but partial justice'.

On casualties: 'An average of 27,000 people perished each day between September 1939 and August 1945 as a consequence of the global conflict. The Soviet Union suffered 65% of all allied military deaths; China 23%; Yugoslavia 3%; the US and UK 2% each; France and Poland 1% each. About 8% of all Germans died, compared with 2% of Chinese, 3.44% of Dutch people, 6.67% of Yugoslavs, 4% of Greeks, 1.35% of French, 3.78% of Japanese, 0.94% of British and 0.32% of Americans. '95% of all German soldiers killed in the war perished on the Eastern front or in Soviet captivity'.

My story emphasises bottom-up views and experiences, the voices of little people rather than big ones; I have written extensively elsewhere about the warlords of 1939-45.

On the outcome of the Second World War: 'Within the vast compass of the struggle, some individuals scaled summits of courage and nobility, while others plumbed depths of evil, in a fashion that compels the awe of posterity. Among citizens of modern democracies to whom serious hardship and collective peril are unknown, the tribulations which hundreds of millions endured between 1939 and 1945 are almost beyond comprehension. Almost all those who participated, nations and individuals alike, made moral compromises. It is impossible to dignify the struggle as an unalloyed contest between good and evil, nor rationally to celebrate an experience, and even an outcome, which imposed such misery upon so many. Allied victory did not bring universal peace, prosperity, justice or freedom; it brought merely a portion of those things to some fraction of those who had taken part. All that seems certain is that allied victory saved the world from a much worse fate that would have followed the triumph of Germany and Japan. With this knowledge, seekers after virtue and truth must be content'.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jesica Demarco:

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Homer Holmes:

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