

MAX HASTINGS



TWO BOOK COLLECTION

Sir Max Hastings
Max Hastings Two-Book
Collection: All Hell Let
Loose and Catastrophe

Аннотация

A two-book collection of Max Hastings' bestselling works about the 20th century's most terrible global conflicts. 'Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War 1914': In this centenary year, Hastings' thrilling and also deeply moving account seeks to explain both how Europe plunged into what was then called 'The Great War', what befell the millions of people of many nations caught up in the first months on the battlefield and as civilian victims. 'All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-1945': This is 'everyman's story' of 1939-45 from a host of viewpoints across the world- British fighter pilots and Russians tanker crew, Chinese peasants and French housewives, American naval gunners and Italian partisans. Here, with an extraordinary blend of top-down and bottom-up testimony is Hastings's acclaimed answer to the question 'what was World War II like?'

Содержание

Max Hastings Two-Book Collection:	5
Max Hastings	8
Dedication	9
Contents	10
Maps	13
Introduction	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

Max Hastings Two-Book Collection:

All Hell Let Loose

Catastrophe



Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[*All Hell Let Loose*](#)

[*Catastrophe*](#)

[A Note on the Author](#)

[By the Same Author](#)

[From the Reviews of](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

MAX HASTINGS

ALL HELL LET LOOSE

THE WORLD AT WAR 1939-1945

'Unquestionably the best single-volume history
of the war ever written' **SUNDAY TIMES**



Max Hastings

All Hell Let Loose

The World at War 1939–45



**WILLIAM
COLLINS**

Dedication

TO MICHAEL SISSONS,
for thirty years a princely agent,
counsellor and friend

Contents

MAIN CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

List of Maps

Introduction

1 Poland Betrayed

2 No Peace, Little War

3 Blitzkriegs in the West

1 Norway

2 The Fall of France

4 Britain Alone

5 The Mediterranean

1 Mussolini Gambles

2 A Greek Tragedy

3 Sandstorms

6 Barbarossa

7 Moscow Saved, Leningrad Starved

8 America Embattled

9 Japan's Season of Triumph

1 'I Suppose you'll Shove the Little Men Off'

2 The 'White Route' from Burma

10 Swings of Fortune

- 1 Bataan
- 2 The Coral Sea and Midway
- 3 Guadalcanal and New Guinea
- 11 The British at Sea
- 1 The Atlantic
- 2 Arctic Convoys
- 3 The Ordeal of Pedestal
- 12 The Furnace: Russia in 1942
- 13 Living with War
- 1 Warriors
- 2 Home Fronts
- 3 A Woman's Place
- 14 Out of Africa
- 15 The Bear Turns: Russia in 1943
- 16 Divided Empires
- 1 Whose Liberty?
- 2 The Raj: Unfinest hour
- 17 Asian Fronts
- 1 China
- 2 Jungle-Bashing and Island-Hopping
- 18 Italy: High Hopes, Sour Fruits
- 1 Sicily
- 2 The Road to Rome
- 3 Yugoslavia
- 19 War in the Sky
- 1 Bombers

2 Targets

20 Victims

1 Masters and Slaves

2 Killing Jews

21 Europe Becomes a Battlefield

22 Japan: Defying Fate

23 Germany Besieged

24 The Fall of the Third Reich

1 Budapest: In the Eye of the Storm

2 Eisenhower's Advance to the Elbe

3 Berlin: The Last Battle

25 Japan Prostrate

26 Victors and Vanquished

Picture Section

Notes and References

Bibliography

Searchable Terms

Acknowledgements

Maps

[The Polish Campaign](#)

The Finnish Campaign

The Invasion of Norway

The Last Phase of the 1940 French Campaign

The Invasion of Greece

The German Winter Offensives 1941

The Pacific Theatre

The Battle of the Coral Sea

The Battle of Midway

The Russians Encircle Hitler's Sixth Army

The 1942–43 Advance of Eighth Army

The Russians Exploit Victory at Kursk

Russian Advances Across Ukraine

The 1943 Landings in Italy

The 1944 Thrust into Poland

The Allied Breakout from Normandy

The 1944 Allied Advances on Germany

The 1945 Western Drive into Germany

The Russian Drive to the Oder

The Final Russian Assaults

Introduction

This is a book chiefly about human experience. Men and women from scores of nations struggled to find words to describe what happened to them in the Second World War, which transcended anything they had ever known. Many resorted to a cliché: ‘All hell broke loose.’ Because the phrase is commonplace in eyewitness descriptions of battles, air raids, massacres and ship sinkings, later generations are tempted to shrug at its banality. Yet in an important sense the words capture the essence of what the struggle meant to hundreds of millions of people, plucked from peaceful, ordered existences to face ordeals that in many cases lasted for years, and for at least sixty millions were terminated by death. An average of 27,000 people perished each day between September 1939 and August 1945 as a consequence of the global conflict. Some survivors found that the manner in which they had conducted themselves during the struggle defined their standing in their societies for the rest of their lives, for good or ill. Successful warriors retained a lustre which enabled some to prosper in government or commerce. Conversely, at the bar of a London club thirty years after the war, a Guards veteran murmured about a prominent Conservative statesman: ‘Not a bad fellow, Smith. Such a pity he ran away in the war.’ A Dutch girl, growing up in the 1950s, found that her parents categorised each of their neighbours in accordance with how they had behaved

during the German occupation of Holland.

British and American infantrymen were appalled by their experiences in the 1944–45 north-west Europe campaign, which lasted eleven months. But Russians and Germans fought each other continuously for almost four years in far worse conditions, and with vastly heavier casualties.* Some nations which played only a marginal military role lost many more people than the Western Allies: China's ordeal at Japanese hands between 1937 and 1945 cost at least fifteen million lives; Yugoslavia, where civil war was overlaid on Axis occupation, lost more than a million dead. Many people witnessed spectacles comparable with Renaissance painters' conception of the inferno to which the damned were consigned: human beings torn to fragments of flesh and bone; cities blasted into rubble; ordered communities sundered into dispersed human particles. Almost everything which civilised peoples take for granted in time of peace was swept aside, above all the expectation of being protected from violence.

It is impossible to detail within a single volume the vastness of the war, the largest event in human history. I have already described aspects of it in eight books, most significantly *Bomber Command*, *Overlord*, *Armageddon*, *Nemesis* and *Finest Years*. While any work such as this should be self-contained, I have striven to avoid repetition of either anecdotage or analysis of large issues. For instance, having devoted an entire chapter of *Nemesis* to the 1945 dropping of the atomic bombs on

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it seems fruitless to revisit my own arguments. This book sustains a chronological framework, and seeks to establish and reflect upon the ‘big picture’, the context of events: the reader should gain a broad sense of what happened to the world between 1939 and 1945. But its principal purpose is to illuminate the conflict’s significance for a host of ordinary people of many societies, both active and passive participants – though the distinction is often blurred. Was, for example, a Hamburg woman who ardently supported Hitler, but perished in the July 1943 firestorm generated by Allied bombing, an accomplice to Nazi war guilt, or the innocent victim of an atrocity?

In my pursuit of the human story, wherever possible without losing coherence my narrative omits unit identifications and details of battlefield manoeuvres. I have tried to create a global portrait: the strategic narrative emphasises aspects of the conflict which I have not examined elsewhere, and about which there seems more to be said – for instance, India’s experience – at the expense of others which have been exhaustively explored, such as Pearl Harbor and the battle for Normandy.

The Jewish genocide became the most coherent fulfilment of Nazi ideology. I wrote in *Armageddon* about the ordeal of concentration-camp prisoners, and have here instead addressed the evolution of the Holocaust from a Nazi perspective. So widespread is a modern Western perception that the war was fought about Jews, that it should be emphasised this was not the case. Though Hitler and his followers chose to blame the

Jews for the troubles of Europe and the grievances of the Third Reich, Germany's struggle with the Allies was about power and hemispheric dominance. The plight of the Jewish people under Nazi occupation loomed relatively small in the wartime perceptions of Churchill and Roosevelt, and less surprisingly in that of Stalin. About one-seventh of all fatal victims of Nazism, and almost one-tenth of all wartime dead, ultimately proved to have been Jews. But at the time their persecution was viewed by the Allies merely as one fragment of the collateral damage caused by Hitler, as indeed Russians still see the Holocaust today. The limited attention paid to the Jewish predicament by the wartime Allies was a source of frustration and anger to informed co-religionists at the time, and has prompted powerful indignation since. But it is important to recognise that between 1939 and 1945 the Allied nations saw the struggle overwhelmingly in terms of the threat posed by the Axis to their own interests, though Churchill defined these in generous and noble terms.

One of the most important truths about the war, as indeed about all human affairs, is that people can interpret what happens to them only in the context of their own circumstances. The fact that, objectively and statistically, the sufferings of some individuals were less terrible than those of others elsewhere in the world was meaningless to those concerned. It would have seemed monstrous to a British or American soldier facing a mortar barrage, with his comrades dying around him, to be told that Russian casualties were many times greater. It would have

been insulting to invite a hungry Frenchman, or even an English housewife weary of the monotony of rations, to consider that in besieged Leningrad starving people were eating each other, while in West Bengal they were selling their daughters. Few people who endured the Luftwaffe's 1940–41 blitz on London would have been comforted by knowledge that the German and Japanese peoples would later face losses from Allied bombing many times greater, together with unparalleled devastation. It is the duty and privilege of historians to deploy relativism in a fashion that cannot be expected of contemporary participants. Almost everyone who participated in the war suffered in some degree: the varied scale and disparate nature of their experiences are themes of this book. But the fact that the plight of other people was worse than one's own did little to promote personal stoicism.

Some aspects of wartime experience were almost universal: fear and grief; the conscription of young men and women obliged to endure new existences utterly remote from those of their choice, often under arms and at worst as slaves. A boom in prostitution was a tragic global phenomenon which deserves a book of its own. The conflict provoked many mass migrations. Some of these were orderly: half the population of Britain moved home in the course of the war, and many Americans took new jobs in unfamiliar places. Elsewhere, however, millions were wrenched from their communities in dreadful circumstances, and faced ordeals which often killed them. 'These are strange times,'

wrote an anonymous Berlin woman on 22 April 1945 in one of the great diaries of the war, 'history experienced first hand, the stuff of tales yet untold and songs unsung. But seen close-up, history is much more troublesome – nothing but burdens and fears. Tomorrow I'll go and look for nettles and get some coal.'

The nature of battlefield experience varied from nation to nation, service to service. Within armies, riflemen experienced far higher levels of risk and hardship than millions of support troops. The US armed forces suffered an overall death rate of just five per thousand men enlisted; the vast majority of those who served faced perils no greater than those of ordinary civilian life. While 17,000 American combat casualties lost limbs, during the war years 100,000 workers at home became amputees as a result of industrial accidents. Men who found themselves on battlefields when their nations were in retreat suffered more heavily than others who served in times of victories; Allied warriors who saw action only in 1944–45 had a far better statistical prospect of survival than, say, aircrew or submariners who began operational service earlier, when their cause was faring badly.

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. Contemporary diaries and letters record what people did or what was done to them, but often tell us little about what they thought; the latter is more interesting, but more elusive. The obvious

explanation is that most warriors are young and immature: they experience extremes of excitement, terror or hardship, but only a small minority have the emotional energy for reflection, because they are absorbed in their immediate physical surroundings, needs and desires.

It was fundamental that only a tiny number of national leaders and commanders knew much about anything beyond their immediate line of sight. Civilians existed in a fog of propaganda and uncertainty, scarcely less dense in Britain and the US than in Germany or Russia. Front-line combatants assessed the success or failure of their side chiefly through counting casualties and noticing whether they were moving forwards or backwards. These were, however, sometimes inadequate indicators: Pfc Eric Diller's battalion was cut off from the main American army for seventeen days during the Leyte campaign in the Philippines, but he realised the seriousness of his unit's predicament only when this was explained to him by his company commander after the war.

Even those with privileged access to secrets were confined to their own fragments of knowledge in a vast jigsaw puzzle. For instance Roy Jenkins, who later became a British statesman, decrypted German signals at Bletchley Park. He and his colleagues knew the importance and urgency of the work they were doing, but, contrary to the impression given in sensational films about Bletchley, they were told nothing about the significance or impact of their contributions. Such constraints

were greater, unsurprisingly, on the other side of the hill: in January 1942 Hitler became convinced that too many people in Berlin knew too much. He decreed that even officials of the Abwehr should receive only such information as was necessary for their own work. They were forbidden to monitor enemy broadcasts, a considerable handicap for an intelligence service.

I am fascinated by the complex interplay of loyalties and sympathies around the world. 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 it should emphasise the fact that Churchill and Roosevelt did not have all the best tunes.

It may be useful to explain how this book was written. I began by rereading Gerhard Weinburg’s *A World at Arms* and *Total War* by Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard, probably the two best single-volume histories of the war. I then

composed a skeleton narrative, setting the most important events in sequence, and laid upon it the flesh of anecdotage and my own reflections. When I had completed a draft, I revisited some other outstanding recent accounts of the conflict: Richard Overly's *Why the Allies Won*, Allan Millett and Williamson Murray's *There's a War to be Won* and Michael Burleigh's *Moral Combat*. I thus reviewed my own comments and conclusions in the light of theirs.

Wherever possible, I have favoured relatively obscure anecdotage at the expense of justly celebrated personal recollections – omitting, for instance, the likes of Richard Hillary's *The Last Enemy* and George Macdonald Fraser's *Quartered Safe out Here*. Dr Lyuba Vinogradova, who has researched my Russian material for the past decade, for this work once again identified and translated personal narratives, diaries and letters. Serena Sissons has translated thousands of words from Italian memoirs and diaries, because Mussolini's people seem to me inadequately represented in most Anglo-Saxon narratives. I have explored unpublished Polish accounts in the Imperial War Museum archive and London's Sikorski Institute. I am once again indebted to Dr Tami Biddle of the US Army War College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for insights and documents derived from her own researches, which she has generously shared with me. Various friends, notable among them Professor Sir Michael Howard, Dr Williamson Murray and Don Berry, have been kind enough to read my draft manuscript and

make invaluable corrections, suggestions and comments. The doyen of British naval historians, Professor Nicholas Rodger of All Souls College, Oxford, read the chapter on the British experience at sea, much to the advantage of my final text. Richard Frank, doyen of US Pacific historians, identified an alarming catalogue of egregious mistakes in my draft, for which I am deeply grateful. None of these, of course, bears any responsibility for my judgements and errors.

Any writer's highest aspiration, more than sixty-five years after the war's ending, is to offer a personal view rather than a comprehensive account of this greatest and most terrible of all human experiences, which never fails to inspire humility in its modern students, inspired by gratitude that we have been spared anything comparable. In 1920, when Colonel Charles à Court Repington, military correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, published a best-selling account of the recent conflict, it was considered sinister and tasteless that he chose as his title *The First World War*, for it presumed another. To call this book *The Last World War* might tempt providence, but it is at least certain that never again will millions of armed men clash on European battlefields such as those of 1939–45. The conflicts of the future will be quite different, and it may not be rashly optimistic to suggest that they will be less terrible.

MAX HASTINGS

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