

Book Reviews

RETRIBUTION: THE BATTLE FOR JAPAN, 1944–45¹

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*Thus using fire to aid an attack is enlightened, using water to assist an attack is powerful. Water can be used to sever, but cannot be employed to seize.*³

The book *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45*, written by noted British war correspondent Max Hastings,⁴ describes the last year of warfare in the Pacific Theater of World War II, a subject prolifically dissected by prior historians.⁵ Hastings' richly detailed narrative immerses the reader in a vivid, empirical account of the war in the Pacific. By addressing the personal struggles and experiences of participants at all levels, Hastings reveals strategic lessons that remain relevant today.

The book has two primary themes. The first is that Japan's brutal conduct of the war gave rise to a spirit of retribution among her enemies. This spirit of retribution explains, and may justify,⁶ the use by Allied Forces of incendiary bombing and atomic weapons against Japan. Having equipped his reader with a narrative both broad and convincingly detailed, Hastings argues in his second theme that Japan must accept responsibility for its institutionalized brutality in the prosecution of the war before it can regain credibility with its neighbors in the region.⁷ During an interview with the Pritzker Military Library,⁸ Hastings remarked that "you can't understand what Asia is today unless you understand what happened there all those years ago."⁹ The challenges leaders faced in the Pacific still resonate with the challenges leaders face on today's battlefields.

Having written extensively on matters of military history, Hastings is quite familiar with the scholarship surrounding the Second World War.¹⁰ He wrote *Armageddon*,¹¹ which details the closing days of the war in Europe and to which *Retribution* is a companion volume.¹² The Pritzker Military Library provides a bibliography to *Retribution*, crediting Hastings with ten scholarly works on warfare and military history.¹³ With an abundant arsenal of prior research, Hastings attacks the project of synthesizing accounts from all sides of the Pacific campaign to shed new light on the conflict and its modern implications.

While grounded in established literature, Hastings brings new light to his topic by incorporating personal interviews, recorded oral histories, and original sources such as "minutes of meetings, unit war diaries or ships' logs."¹⁴ Acknowledging

¹ MAX HASTINGS, *RETRIBUTION: THE BATTLE FOR JAPAN, 1944–45* (Alfred A. Knopf 2008).

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³ SUN TZU, *THE ART OF WAR* 227 (Ralph D. Sawyer, trans., Barnes & Noble Books 1994) (ca. sixth century B.C.E.).

⁴ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, inside back cover.

⁵ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at xxi (acknowledging that "the specialized literature is vast"). A search for the term, "World War II Pacific" at the website of online bookseller Amazon.com, revealed almost 6000 items available for sale. See http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field_keywords=World+War+II+Pacific&x=10&y=25 (last visited Sept. 12, 2008).

⁶ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at xix.

⁷ *Id.* at 550.

⁸ The Pritzker Military Library is located at 610 North Fairbanks Court 2nd Floor, Chicago, IL 60611, telephone: 312.587.0234, FAX: 312.587.0536. See Pritzker Military Library, *available at* <http://www.pritzkermilitarylibrary.org> (last visited May 20, 2009).

⁹ Web video: *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45, Sir Max Hastings*, http://www.pritzkermilitarylibrary.org/events/2008-05-01-max_hastings.jsp (The Pritzker Military Library video of an interview with Max Hastings May 1, 2008).

¹⁰ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, inside back cover (crediting Hastings with "more than 15 books").

¹¹ MAX HASTINGS, *ARMAGEDDON: THE BATTLE FOR GERMANY, 1944–1945* (Alfred A. Knopf 2004).

¹² HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at xvii.

¹³ Pritzker Military Library, *Selected Bibliography for Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45*, <http://www.pritzkermilitarylibrary.org/events/2008/files/2008-05-01-bibliography.pdf> (last visited May 31, 2009).

¹⁴ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at xxiii.

the limitations of such evidence, Hastings cautions the reader that “[f]ew official narratives in any language explicitly acknowledge disaster, panic, or failure, or admit that people ran away.”¹⁵ Concerning eyewitness interviews, Hastings candidly observes that,

old people have forgotten many things, or can claim to remember too much. Those who survive today were very young in the war years. They held junior ranks and offices, if indeed any at all. They knew nothing worth rehearsing about events beyond their own eyesight and earshot. . . . It is essential to reinforce their tales with written testimony from those who were at the time more mature and exalted.¹⁶

With his readers thus informed about the method and limitations of the research supporting the book, Hastings draws them, willing or otherwise, into a compelling and suspenseful narrative of the battle for the Pacific.¹⁷

Hastings argues that until Japan fully acknowledges the depravity of its wartime conduct, “it will remain impossible for the world to believe that Japan has come to terms with the horrors which it inflicted upon Asia almost two-thirds of a century ago.”¹⁸ At the beginning of the text, Hastings explains the origins and nature of the Japanese prosecution of the war, first contextualizing it in the politics of the time. “Japan perceived itself merely as a latecomer to the contest for empire in which other great nations had engaged for centuries. It saw only hypocrisy and racism in the objections of Western imperial powers.”¹⁹ Since Japan’s efforts in China and elsewhere sought primarily to “strip [occupied lands] of food and raw materials for the benefit of Japan’s people,”²⁰ occupying forces were “inhibited from treating their conquests humanely, even had they wished to do so.”²¹ The result, Hastings argues, was the “Japanese wartime inhumanity to British, Americans, and Australians who fell into their hands. This pales into absolute insignificance beside the scale of their mistreatment of Asians.”²²

Early in the text, Hastings mentions “systemic brutalities against Allied prisoners and civilians in the Philippines, East Indies, Hong Kong and Malaya . . . long before the first Allied atrocity against any Japanese is recorded.”²³ He cites “the slaughter of Chinese outside Singapore in February 1942” as one example.²⁴ Throughout the text, Hastings details important military atrocities, a notable example of which is Japanese action during MacArthur’s capture of Manila in early 1945. When Japanese General Shizuo Yokoyama and Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi learned their superiors had ordered them to pull out, they elected to stay and fight on the basis of personal honor.²⁵ MacArthur’s forces shortly surrounded the city, trapping the Japanese.²⁶ The Japanese “fought accordingly,”²⁷ committing themselves to a house by house, street by street defense against the Allies and “asserting that everyone found in the battle area was a guerilla,” and was therefore subject to wholesale slaughter.²⁸ This assertion included the civilian inhabitants of Manila, who were exterminated as a matter of policy.²⁹ Japanese soldiers went so far as segregating women and girls from groups of doomed civilians to provide Japanese soldiers

¹⁵ *Id.* at xxiii to xxiv.

¹⁶ *Id.* at xxiv.

¹⁷ Hastings focuses appropriately, though by no means exclusively, on the United States and Japan in the conflict. For a five-volume British account of the Pacific campaign, written from a strategic perspective, see generally S. WOODBURN KIRBY, *THE WAR AGAINST JAPAN* (Her Majesty’s Stationary Office 1957) (acknowledging that, among the Allies, “the United States assumed primary responsibility for the Pacific”). *Id.* at xvii.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 550.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 5.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 6.

²³ *Id.* at 8.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 230.

²⁶ *Id.* at 231.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 234.

²⁹ *Id.* at 236 (citing REPORT ON THE SACK OF MANILA, U.S. CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AFFAIRS 14–15 (1945) (describing a Japanese Battalion order stating that, “[w]hen Filipinos are to be killed they must be gathered into one place and disposed of in a manner that does not demand excessive use of ammunition or manpower”).

“who were soon to die a final exalting sexual experience.”³⁰ As a result of this and other atrocities across Asia, many of which Hastings describes in ghastly detail, “it became impossible for Japan’s leaders credibly to deny systematic inhumanity as gross as that of the Nazis.”³¹

Hastings argues that the predictable result of Japanese conduct on and off the battlefield was that “Allied commanders favored the use of extreme methods to defeat them.”³² “After years in which Japan’s armies had roamed Asia at will, killing on a Homeric scale, retribution was at hand,”³³ Hastings summarizes pithily. This retribution ultimately included Major General Curtis E. LeMay’s controversial firebombing campaign and the decision to deploy atomic weapons.³⁴ Hastings addresses the moral debates surrounding these actions in the context of his two larger themes. While the morality of these actions is not a primary theme of the book, it plays an important part of the author’s argument.

Hastings does not specifically defend the bombing campaign. Instead, he defends its participants with the persuasive argument that “if the destruction of Japan’s cities and massacre of its civilians were deemed inappropriate objectives for the [U.S. Army Air Force], the onus rested squarely on the media and the political leadership of the U.S.A. to demand that the campaign be prosecuted differently. They never did so.”³⁵ In this context, it makes sense that “[i]f striking at cities was the best means of inflicting damage upon the enemy’s industrial base with available navigational and bomb-aiming technology, then this was what the XXth Bomber Command would do.”³⁶

Commanders relied upon a perception of “operational necessity” as well as “strategic desirability” in authorizing these attacks.³⁷ The American public, in contrast, sought retribution for Pearl Harbor and the subsequent Japanese atrocities. Hastings points out that when the campaign commenced, “[n]o moral doubts were expressed” in the public press³⁸ and that “[w]hereas the adoption of nonvisual bombing techniques in Europe signified that civilian casualties were a matter of decreasing concern . . . by the time such methods were applied against Japan, civilian casualties were of no concern at all.”³⁹

Regardless of the popularity of the action, the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) “clung to fig leaves,”⁴⁰ claiming its “object *was not* to indiscriminately bomb civilian populations. The object *was* to destroy the *industrial and strategic targets* concentrated in the urban areas.”⁴¹ These word games demonstrate self-consciousness among USAAF leaders of their own participation in potential wartime atrocities.⁴²

Hastings addresses the use of the atomic bombs similarly, pointing out that American forces “had already participated in bombing campaigns which killed around three-quarters of a million German and Japanese civilians, and to which public opinion had raised little objection.”⁴³ Hastings argues that the American demand for retribution also played a role in the atomic project.⁴⁴ Events after the bombings seem to support this argument as “the vehement demands of the American public for retribution . . . subsided immediately after the news of the bombings had been broadcast.”⁴⁵

³⁰ *Id.* at 235.

³¹ *Id.* at 236.

³² *Id.* at 8.

³³ *Id.* at 18.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 309.

³⁶ *Id.* at 296.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 298.

³⁹ *Id.* at 296 (citing CONRAD C. CRANE, BOMBS, CITIES AND CIVILIANS 76 (Kansas Univ. Press 1993)).

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 298.

⁴¹ *Id.* (citing an unspecified XXIST BOMBER COMMAND REPORT (n.d.)).

⁴² Hastings describes these rationalizations as truthful “in a narrow, absurdly literal sense.” *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.* at 473.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at xix.

⁴⁵ STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, RISE TO GLOBALISM 49 (7th rev. ed., Penguin Books 1993).

Some have suggested that an invasion of the Japanese home islands would have been unnecessary even without atomic weapons, due to the effective strangulation of the Japanese war machine by naval blockade.⁴⁶ Hastings offers that we will never “be sure what an enemy nation which had displayed such a resolute commitment to mass suicide might do, when confronted with the last ditch.”⁴⁷ We can merely consider “the plight of civilians and captives, dying in thousands daily under Japanese occupation, together with the casualties that would have been incurred had the Soviets been provoked into maintaining their advance across mainland China.”⁴⁸ Hastings concludes that with or without an invasion, “far more people of many nationalities would have died in the course of even a few further weeks of war than were killed by the atomic bombs.”⁴⁹

The most important lesson for modern military leaders is that perception of a nation’s conduct may carry ramifications at a strategic level for decades to come.⁵⁰ Japan’s atrocities made any compromise impossible in the Allied objective to achieve unconditional surrender by any means.⁵¹ Japan’s acts also degraded their international legitimacy, an effect that remains significant more than sixty years later.⁵² Japan represents an extreme example of wartime conduct resulting in retribution rather than victory. Japan’s actions contributed to the annihilation of the state. In the cases of America’s current conflicts, poor conduct can lead to “lives and resources . . . wasted for no real gain”⁵³ and can threaten the perceived legitimacy of our efforts.⁵⁴ To put it more simply, the book cautions us not to bring retribution upon ourselves.

In addition to this general lesson, the book is replete with examples of leadership choices and tactical decisions that drastically impacted the effectiveness of fighting formations. For example, the author points out certain Japanese military leaders’ “reckless insouciance towards the technological development of warfare.”⁵⁵ By 1943, this resulted in Japanese air, ground, and naval weapons being “decisively outclassed” by those of the Allies.⁵⁶ Although Japanese “front-line soldiers urged the importance of developing more advanced weapons,” they were ignored.⁵⁷ Japan’s resulting failures affirm the importance of developing and refining the technology of war to ensure success on future battlefields, even as current battles unfold.

Hastings argues that the Japanese indifference to technology reflected a failure by Japanese leaders to adapt fighting doctrine to their present circumstances. Prior to the Pacific campaign, “Japan’s [most recent] experience of war had been gained entirely against the Chinese.”⁵⁸ The Chinese possessed very little advanced military technology.⁵⁹ Japanese leaders failed to adjust their attitudes and doctrine when they turned their efforts to the United States, which possessed a very high level of military technology.⁶⁰ The annihilation of Japan starkly illustrates the importance of continually developing new doctrine in light of new experience. Hastings’ description of Japan’s failure to adapt to a new type of war in the Pacific invites us to consider our own adaptation to a new type of war in the Middle East.

⁴⁶ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at 475.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 513.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ U.S. DEP’T OF THE ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY para. 1-157 (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24] (“[Y]oung leaders—so-called ‘strategic corporals’—often make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences.”).

⁵¹ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at 8, 474.

⁵² *Id.* at 550.

⁵³ FM 3-24, *supra* note 50, para. 1-156.

⁵⁴ *Id.* para. 1-123.

⁵⁵ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at 47.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.* After 1942, “Allied weapons decisively outclassed Japanese ones.” *Id.*

Retribution is incredibly readable and persuasive. Compelling narrative and graphic descriptions of human struggle engross the reader and build an effective platform for Hastings's arguments. This study of direct war-fighting experiences is especially rewarding for the military professional. For general readers, the narrative style makes this period of history accessible, even compelling, and will likely enable Hastings's arguments to penetrate popular, as well as academic, opinion.

The book's primary weakness is the difficulty of tracing specific themes through the narrative structure. As the war developed across fronts, some challenges remained the same while others evolved. Topics of particular interest to current military practitioners, such as methods and effects of military discipline, appear as they arose on the various battlefields, scattered throughout the text instead of reposing in a single chapter under easily identifiable headings.

Hastings, however, did not set out to prepare discreet essays on a scattering of subtopics. He developed an involving narrative of the Pacific Campaign to persuade readers of his primary themes. As a result, readers fall into his story and vicariously live the experiences of the various actors. Lessons learned arise from these experiences and are fully informed by vivid context. This approach makes the book not only involving, but also persuasive on both a scholarly and a visceral level.

A second weakness of the text is that readers may lose track of the two primary themes. Although Hastings devotes the final chapters of the work to a substantial recitation of his two main arguments, in the body of the text the reader often becomes immersed in the moment, losing track of the larger picture. While in some cases this level of detail may be essential to support Hastings's conclusions, at times the book appears merely to recite the experiences of those interviewed.⁶¹ Ironically, Hastings dismisses John Toland's similarly empirical *The Rising Sun*⁶² as "not a scholarly work."⁶³

Quibbling criticisms pale beside the monumental contribution *Retribution* makes to the reader's understanding of the events and context of the Pacific Theater. Hastings's arguments assume great persuasive power in the context of empirical narrative. The book aims to persuade readers that Japan's behavior during World War II precipitated its destruction, and that Japan should account for its atrocities. In this endeavor, *Retribution* succeeds brilliantly.

⁶¹ Posting by Blog Host to Blogging the Second World War, <http://secondworldwar.wordpress.com/2008/03/28/retribution-by-max-hastings-review-by-jonathan-d-beard/> (Mar. 28, 2008, 19:41) ("All too often [Hastings] simply drops three or four paragraphs of testimony from American pilots, Chinese civilian victims, or others into a chapter without their adding much to its message.").

⁶² JOHN TOLAND, *THE RISING SUN: THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE JAPANESE EMPIRE 1936-1945* (Random House 1970).

⁶³ HASTINGS, *supra* note 1, at xxi.