Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-1945 by Max Hastings

The Best Piece Dealing With The Second World War In Europe That I Have Ever Read

Armageddon is the epic story of the last eight months of World War II in Europe by Max Hastings—one of Britain’s most highly regarded military historians, whose accounts of past battles John Keegan has described as worthy “to stand with that of the best journalists and writers” (New York Times Book Review).

In September 1944, the Allies believed that Hitler’s army was beaten, and expected that the war would be over by Christmas. But the disastrous Allied airborne landing in Holland, American setbacks on the German border and in the Hürtgen Forest, together with the bitter Battle of the Bulge, drastically altered that timetable. Hastings tells the story of both the Eastern and Western Fronts, and paints a vivid portrait of the Red Army’s onslaught on Hitler’s empire. He has searched the archives of the major
combatants and interviewed 170 survivors to give us an unprecedented understanding of how the great battles were fought, and of their human impact on American, British, German, and Russian soldiers and civilians.

Hastings raises provocative questions: Were the Western Allied cause and campaign compromised by a desire to get the Soviets to do most of the fighting? Why were the Russians and Germans more effective soldiers than the Americans and British? Why did the bombing of Germany’s cities continue until the last weeks of the war, when it could no longer influence the outcome? Why did the Germans prove more fanatical foes than the Japanese, fighting to the bitter end? This book also contains vivid portraits of Stalin, Churchill, Eisenhower, Montgomery, and the other giants of the struggle.

The crucial final months of the twentieth century’s greatest global conflict come alive in this rousing and revelatory chronicle.

This book is quite literally brilliant. In my opinion this is the finest book on its subject -- the latter part of the Second World War in Europe, that I have ever come across or read. This one ranks five stars both for its content and for its readability. It is literally a page-turner, and I stayed up late several evenings reading through it.

Most history buffs, myself included, have read enough about the Second World War such that we begin to imagine that there is nothing much new to learn. Mr. Hastings Armageddon showed me that I was quite incorrect, for this book provided insight into several areas with which I was not well acquainted.

For example, Mr. Hastings main thesis is that Eisenhower’s armies were limited by the democratic nature of their component countries, mainly the USA, Britain, and Canada. This caused them to generally conduct at most a medium-intensity offensive against the Germans most of the time. Certainly not all of the time as in, to give just one example, the Battle of the Bulge, which featured desperate fighting by the US Army, and commensurately high casualties. But Mr. Hastings makes his case that the Allied reluctance to take casualties, combined with the high level of competency on the part of the German Wehrmacht, resulted in many lost opportunities to end the war much sooner. Would more aggressiveness and daring on the part of the Western Allies have resulted in overall lower casualties by virtue of shortening the war? Mr. Hastings implies that the answer to this question is yes. Personally I am not so sure. The Allies utilized their strengths: industrial production, airpower, and superior logistics, to offset their aversion to winning battles simply by throwing manpower at the enemy, as indeed the Soviets did. The result, of course,
was far greater casualties by the Germans and Soviets. No doubt this question will never be answered satisfactorily. Mr. Hastings certainly makes the point that the Soviets conducted their offensive with a much higher level of aggressiveness than did the Western Allies. For the Russians it truly was a war driven by vengeance, as well as by the frank willingness by Stalin and Zhukov to endure casualty rates that the Western Allies simply would not tolerate. It is quite understandable that as Eisenhowers soldiers came to see that the war was won, and German resistance was increasingly pointless, they came to be increasingly reluctant to take risks. This contrasts totally with the conduct of the Russians, who (Mr. Hastings shows) endured far more casualties than necessary in their taking of Berlin.

Another area that Mr. Hastings covers superbly is the suffering of the European peoples during the last years of the war. Most students of the war are aware that there was a great deal of suffering on the part of the civilian populations, but Mr. Hastings does an outstanding job acquainting the reader with a true appreciation of the extent of this. In particular, the rapine and slaughter that the Soviet armies perpetrated once they entered East Prussia was rightly called by one German: our Holocaust--but nobody cares... Mr. Hastings shows the reader that at least in the Soviet-occupied areas of Germany, the German people paid, and at least arguably paid in full, for the destruction that Germany had visited upon other countries.

Another topic that Mr. Hastings covers is the treatment of prisoners. He makes a pretty good case that the treatment of German prisoners by the Western Allies fell depressingly short of what most of us would have assumed and hoped. On the Western Front, treatment of German prisoners was hit-or-miss, and they were not infrequently shot out of hand. The Germans and Russians were even worse in this respect, of course.

Another fascinating area that Mr. Hastings touches upon is the Soviet attitude towards its own soldiers who became POWs. These unfortunate individuals (those who survived brutal German treatment--many or most did not) were stigmatized for life once repatriated to the USSR. Given the fact that many or most of them became prisoners as a direct result of Stalins dysfunctional pre-war leadership (e.g. pointless and paranoid purges of his own army, lack of preparedness in an attempt to appease Hitler) injustice can go little further. These men were heroes and deserved to be treated as such. They were not.

Overall, this work provides the reader with exceptional insight into the true nature of the Second World War in Europe and about the manner in which the Allied armies conducted their operations. Very highly recommended.

RJB.