

**Max Hastings, *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45*,
London, HarperCollins, 2007.**

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In his first work on the Pacific War the historian and former war correspondent Max Hastings, whose previous publications on the war in Europe and coverage of the Falklands War are well recognised amongst their respective historiographies, places a sharp focus upon the final years and campaigns leading up to the eventual defeat of Japan in 1945. As a work that sits firmly within the military history genre, *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45* (interestingly re-titled *Retribution* for its US release), analyses the conflict in much greater detail than a straightforward analysis of generals, politicians, grand strategies, and battlefield statistics.

Overwhelmingly, the strength of Hastings' narrative is that the story is not told exclusively through the lenses of generals, admirals and national leaders. The inclusion of experiences of many ordinary rank-and-file soldiers and officers who fought upon the frontlines, outlining the experiences, fears and aspirations of fighting men from a variety of backgrounds provides much depth and detail to Hastings' narrative. Most importantly, Hastings' gives voice to those who are often overlooked within discussions of the Pacific War in western scholarship, by including within his narrative the experiences of Indians and Africans who served in the British and Indian armies, Chinese veterans, and Japanese veterans. Japanese servicemen have been much stereotyped in the West both during the conflict and in the years since, but Hastings' book represents their views with dignity and humility as he describes the often futile and stubborn actions by Japanese defenders, the ferociousness of which stunned Allied servicemen at the time.

Hastings must be commended too, for the attention he gives to the so-called forgotten campaigns of the Pacific War: the Burma campaign and the war in China. Western scholarship of the war in the Pacific has had a tendency to

focus mainly on the American campaigns in the Southwest Pacific and Central Pacific area of operations. The Burma campaign was the single longest confrontation of the Second World War, the incessant fighting spanning forty-two months was only disrupted by seasonal monsoons. Not forgetting to critique upon the hypocrisy and the overall strategic irrelevance of the British campaign in Burma – a campaign in which Britain, attempting to recapture its colonial possessions in Southeast Asia, and the United States, attempting to aid China's Nationalists, did not entirely approve of the other's intentions – Hastings exemplifies the fact that the Pacific war was, amongst other things, a war of imperialism. This is illustrated by the inclusion of the experiences, views and attitudes within the narrative from Indian and African troops that were brought to Burma from far and wide across the British Empire. In addressing the other forgotten war between China and Japan, which was of course a precursor to the expansion of the conflict into Asia and the Pacific, Hastings documents the vain American attempts of turning China into a major military power, and its own hypocrisy of continuing support for the corrupt and absolutist regime of Chiang Kai-shek who was unable and unwilling to fulfil American ambitions for his nation.

Running over 600 pages, there are of course also plenty of detailed descriptions of the battles and campaigns of 1944 and 1945. Of particular note is his meticulous retelling of the complex events surrounding the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the largest naval engagement in history (to give some perspective: the American Third Fleet, a portion of the combined Pacific Fleet, occupied an area 9 by 40 square miles). Not only does he comment and critique on the battle from a strategic perspective – such as by examining how the Japanese Imperial Navy which had so impressed and dominated strategy within the early months of the war had within just two years adopted such a fatalistic approach to the looming confrontation in the Philippines – he provides adequate insight into what such a confrontation meant to men in the respective navies, whether they be ship captains, pilots, gunners or those working deep beneath decks within the steel hulls amidst the armadas. Other notable campaign analysis include the reconquest of the Philippines and the horrors of Iwo Jima, Okinawa and the fire bombing of Japanese cities. The

section of prisoners of war is notable in that it recognises that captivity brought the out both the best and worst in people, whilst the inclusion of tales of goodwill and generosity between some captives and some captors is uplifting. This said, Hastings is in no way apologetic about nor ignores the atrocities inflicted upon Allied prisoners of war by the Japanese military.

The discussion within the section on the Philippines of the egotistical Douglas MacArthur – whose disregard for his own intelligence officers' briefings and self-serving ambitions to liberate the entire Philippine archipelago proved costly in both the lives of American soldiers and the lives of the Filipino people whom he devoted himself to liberate – was intriguing. The overall campaign itself was poorly planned and was indeed questionable in terms of overall Allied war strategy. This section includes a fine examination of the horrendous battle for Manilla from February to March 1945, a battle that has been largely overlooked by Second World War historians because of its strategic irrelevance to the outcome of the war but a battle in which civilian casualties outnumbered those of combatant soldiers and Japanese atrocities reflected those committed at places such as Nanjing. Indeed in his work on the closing campaigns of the Pacific War, Hastings does not fail to describe the suffering of civilians across the region. As horrendous as the battles for places such as Manilla, Iwo Jima and Okinawa were, overall battlefield casualties pale into comparison compared to the tens of millions of civilians who perished throughout Asia during the conflict due to starvation, bombings, battles, or the brutal Japanese occupation.

Nemesis, however, received condemnation in the Australian press, receiving criticism from veterans and heads of the RSL (Returned and Services League).¹ This is not the first time (nor probably the last) that the critical insights of a British historian regarding the battlefield performance of the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) are dismissed without regard from sections of the Australian public. In large, this is due to the chapter in Hastings' book, entitled 'Australians: "Bludging" and "Mopping Up"', in which he critically examines the

¹ See for example, *The Age*, 2 December 2007.

performance of the AIF in the final years of the war and highlights the low morale which accordingly, Hastings argues, bred mutinous behaviour in certain locations. Hastings' chapter, however, does not start well, miscounting the number of Australian divisions that had been raised for overseas deployment by the end of 1942 at three (it was four: the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th divisions, Hastings' missed the 6th). Nevertheless, some very important points are raised. Criticism is largely aimed at the Australian homefront – and not upon the voluntary members of the AIF who were serving on the frontlines – whom Hastings observed had few peers as a fighting force by the end of 1942. Indeed, Hastings in fact appears sympathetic to their situation, as these men, many of whom were veterans from the Middle East and North Africa, were left with the 'thankless task' of 'mopping up' stranded Japanese elements in New Guinea, New Britain, Bougainville, and Borneo, in campaigns that appeared to many men on the ground who fought them, as clearly not contributing to the overall Allied strategy of advance upon the Japanese home islands. Furthermore, some men questioned why these roles were good enough for Australian 'Diggers' when they were not good enough for the American 'GIs' and Marines whom they had replaced and had moved on to fight in more relevant campaigns in the Philippines, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

Hastings places the blame for the low moral of Australian troops, and their lack of engagement in meaningful campaigns from 1944 squarely on political leadership and Australia's uncertain place on the international stage between the powers of Great Britain and the United States, poor leadership within the army (particularly by the Commander-in-Chief General Thomas Blamey), MacArthur, as well as the lack of support given to those who had volunteered for overseas service from the homefront. According to Hastings, compared to other Allied nations, the loss of workdays to strikes and absenteeism, particularly in the coal mines and on the docks (at which he claims US Army quartermaster details were often kept to ensure jobs were finished), caused alarm amidst Australia's allies. In summing up Australia's contribution to the final campaigns of the war, Hastings writes that: 'For a people whose soldiers, sailors and airmen won such admiration in other theatres, it was a tragedy

that in their own hemisphere the wartime experience was poisoned by domestic strife and battlefield frustration. It seemed perverse that having won so much honour far away in the Mediterranean, Australia's share of the Pacific war ended in rancour and anti-climax' (p. 372).

Although Hastings' claims may appear overstated or exaggerated, perhaps due to the difficulty of summarising such a situation with such varying dynamics within a single chapter, such issues have in fact been discussed before in one degree or another, and in more detail, by several Australian military, political and social historians. Nevertheless, exaggerated or otherwise, Hastings' discussion does raise several important issues about Australian independent foreign policy, bilateral ties with world powers, and not least, the way in which successive Australian governments, the media and its people have strived to remember and commemorate the Second World War. Most amazingly, one of the most notable incidents that was most pertinent to Hastings' argument about low morale and feelings of futility amidst Australian military forces was not even cited. That being what became known as the 'Morotai Mutiny' in April 1945 in which leading members of the RAAF's First Tactical Air Force refused to fly missions in which they deemed the risks of attacking targets in the Netherlands East Indies outweighed their overall tactical significance.

Overall, *Nemesis* provides a well-balanced and detailed account of the final campaigns of the Pacific War. Not only are particular campaigns covered at a political, overall strategic and battlefield level, but much voice is given the experiences of those on the ground, from both sides, whom actually fought on the frontlines in the campaigns. Furthermore, with a number of titles abound examining the causes of the war in the Pacific and opening battles and campaigns within the first two years of the conflict, Hastings work detailing the final campaigns in 1944 and 1945 are a welcome addition to the growing historiography of the war against Japan.

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