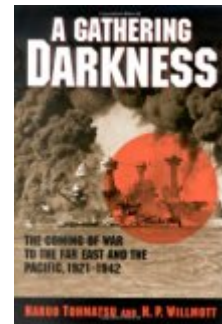


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Haruo Tohmatsu, H. P. Willmott. *A Gathering Darkness: The Coming of War to the Far East and the Pacific, 1921-1942*. Lanham: SR Books, 2004. xxvi + 169 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-5151-4; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-5153-8.

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## An Idiosyncratic View of Japan's Path to War with the World

How and why did Japan so multiply its enemies as ultimately to war against the entire nascent United Nations? There are many distinct perspectives and frames from which to view this historic conundrum. The authors, respectively an international-relations and history scholar with interests in military history, and a widely published military historian, have chosen a frame centered firmly on Japan over the period from 1921 through mid-1942. Two further books in the same series carry the story through to the end of the Pacific War.[1] Their perspective mixes military history with some diplomatic history and touches on the political, economic, and social histories of Japan.[2]

Tohmatsu and Willmott open with an extended introduction, in which they muse at length on the extent and nature of the Asia-Pacific war, or complex of wars. This is a subject which has exercised many (including Willmott in earlier books), but I wonder whether it is worth devoting 7.5 percent of the book to it. Willmott closes this with a brief section, which he specifically claims as his own, in which he reflects on alternative views and historical indeterminacy.

The first chapter is provocatively titled "Japan the Taliban," but proceeds with a succinct and straightforward account of the World War I background and the development of the Washington treaty system as the United States's answer to the problems of stability in Asia and the Pacific, with focus on the Five-Power naval treaty and a little on its sequelae. The Taliban is used to represent

what the authors argue was a sweeping return to older values and views (p. 11). They describe the regressions they see without much attempt to link or explain them. The Taliban does not come up again and I did not find the analogy to be helpful in illuminating either Japan or the Taliban.

Tohmatsu and Willmott wisely avoid the common trap of glossing over the story of Japan's deepening involvement in the interminable and unwinnable conflict in China, and instead devote nearly half of the book to it. Their treatment is weighted toward accounts of the military campaigns. They offer some insightful comments on the political issues in China and Japan, but no extended narrative and little analysis. Some tantalizing suggestions are offered, such as the statement that between 1932 and 1937, "the Kuomintang could have opened up divisions within the Japanese political and military establishments had it sought direct negotiations with Tokyo" (p. 34); but these are not followed up. Two campaign maps show the routes of Japanese advances and the dates at which various places were taken, but these are highly schematic and show no other features beyond the outline of the coast. Some of the places, regions, and geographic features discussed in the text are not to be found on the maps, potentially leaving the reader disoriented. The treatment of the Japanese strategic bombing effort against China is particularly good (pp. 75-80).

Also welcome is the importance Tohmatsu and Willmott attach to economic developments. Although they

begin by asserting “the impact of the Great Depression on Japan is difficult to understate” (p. 15), it is clear from context that they actually mean to imply that the Depression’s significance was great rather than slight. They also stress factors of international trade. The book continues on into the initial six months of the Pacific War itself, which occupy the final third of the text. The approach will be familiar to those who have read any of the several books by Willmott covering this period, but there are new facts and interpretations. Three maps cover various phases of the initial campaigns, but do not show many of the places mentioned in the text. Here, as elsewhere throughout the book, there is a tacit assumption that the reader is already familiar with events and is looking principally for commentary.

In their focus on Japan, the authors largely neglect the effects of events in Europe. This is surely a questionable decision which obscures important perspectives on the real origins of the conflict.

Every chapter except the last closes with a “postscript,” generally of two or three pages. Some provide further detail on some specific aspect of the subject of the chapter, some display relevant statistical information, and some are explorations of fairly recondite tangents, such as the influence of Nichiren Buddhism on plans for Asia or the thought of the syncretic theological philosopher Yamamoto Shichihei.

Tohmatsu and Willmott present many interesting and provocative comments and interpretations. Unfortunately, the book is marred by problems of several types: ponderous and often obscure writing and arguments; factual inaccuracies; confident assertion of questionable interpretations; and inadequate citations. I will briefly address each in turn.

For me, much of the book was hard going. Its sentences average more than thirty words each and a quarter of them are in the passive voice. Sometimes the authors take up several paragraphs with anticipatory qualifications before letting the reader know what the subject really is. There are only 64,850 words, notes included, but it seemed longer.

These measures were generated by a purely grammatical analysis and are certainly not the last word on readability, which also has a great deal to do with content, structure, and mode of argument. This paragraph seems to me to provide a good sample of the style both of argument and writing:

“Such are the matters placed before the reader. The text does not actually explain developments: it merely notes them, and in certain cases dates them, but it is not able to provide comprehensive explanations. The latter are probably elusive if only because war, defeat, and recovery meant that social analysis—and particularly any attempt to turn back the clock to determine and understand attitudes and changes—was impossible. Most certainly, it could not be attempted today, for reasons that need no elaboration. For our purposes in seeking to trace Japan’s journey from Washington to Pearl Harbor, suffice it to note three matters: first, that Japan demonstrated considerable forbearance at Washington and thereafter and in the 1920s generally prospered, although this latter point must not be overstated; second, the Great Depression was disastrous for Japan in terms of the discrediting of political and economic liberalism; and, third, ideas that embraced aggression, conquest, and economic autarky were probably in place sometime in the first half of the 1930s” (p. 17).

In style of exposition if not language, much of the book seems like history as a play by Harold Pinter; discrete events without organic connection. Another aspect of obscurity is the book’s frequent use of non-standard spellings—most notably “Manchoutikuo” and at other points “Manchoukuo,” in place of the more usual “Manchukuo.”

Especially with regard to Japan the authors offer many types of details that lend substance and color. Unfortunately, some are wrong. For instance, they date the Japanese Army’s changeover from a sword of European pattern to one resembling an early-modern samurai’s weapon at 1936, rather than the correct 1933 (p. 16).[3] Another example is the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy, which Tohmatsu and Willmott state was signed in September 1940 and also on January 19, 1942 (pp. 90, 149 respectively). (In fact, the latter date is that of staff talks in Berlin.)

In their eagerness not to understate the influence of the Depression, Tohmatsu and Willmott seem to go well beyond the evidence, claiming, for instance, that “the gains of the 1920s were wiped out almost overnight.” In fact, the best estimates of Japan’s real GDP per capita show it falling by less than 10 percent from its 1928–29 peak to the 1931 trough—even with the level at 1924 rather than 1920—and then rebounding fully by 1933.[4] Even the narrower measure of per capita private consumption tells much the same story.[5] While there certainly was hardship, particularly in agriculture, this does

not begin to compare with the U.S. experience of a depression more than three times as deep, lasting nearly three times as long, and thus begs the question of why its effects should have been so much more dire in Japan.[6] Japan's experience was more one of dislocations resulting from rapid deflation rather than reductions in real output. The accomplishments of Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo in stimulating recovery followed by strong growth receive no mention. Given all this, the assertion that the Depression greatly affected Japan's course requires deeper treatment than the book offers. There is a very strong case to be made that the world economic crisis of 1928-31 and the concurrent economic slump destabilized the international political order in a variety of important ways.[7] Moreover, it seems clear that the halting and very uneven economic progress of Japan through the 1920s, as well as the further reverses of 1929-31, was a factor in eroding support for liberal democracy. But it is misleading to suggest, as this book does, that the Depression in itself had a major effect on the course of events in Japan.

Nor is this the sole questionable and weakly supported judgment. For instance, the change in 1926 from designating military equipment by reign year to the (Japanese) calendar year is made to have dramatic national significance (p. 18). The Taisho reign of course had been so brief as to produce duplication of designations had the reign-year system been continued into Shtwa, but this alternative explanation is not considered.

In the next paragraph, Tohmatsu and Willmott go so far as to call forth the ghost of the "Tanaka Memorial." They eventually acknowledge that it "never existed" (not mentioning that it was in fact Chinese black propaganda) but immediately advance the claim that "the Darien conference of [1927] adopted resolutions that reflected these ideas." This is surely mystifying; the Eastern Conference of 1927 was held in Tokyo and was far from satisfactory to the hard-liners, while the subsequent Darien conference dealt with much more limited concerns and was not attended by Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi.[8] There are many more instances in this vein, so that their whole treatment of Japan's turn toward expansion via widespread aggression must be viewed with caution, despite the soundness of many other portions.

In dealing with the policies and actions of the United States and Britain, Tohmatsu and Willmott advance some interpretations which, while not wholly wrong, are so pat and sweeping as to significantly distort the facts. For instance, they assert flatly that President Franklin D. Roo-

sevelt's "first two terms were characterized by a deliberate recourse to isolationism and a refusal to entertain any thought of undertaking action designed to secure international peace" (p. 39).

Tohmatsu and Willmott declare that with respect to urging war, "the representation of the Imperial Navy, and certain of its individuals such as Yamamoto, as reluctant and unwilling accomplices is wholly erroneous and willfully misleading.... Moreover, Yamamoto invariably was to be found at the cutting edge of these navy demands" (p. 97). I feel called upon to comment specifically inasmuch as they cite a post I made to H-War in support of this.[9] Their basic point is that the Japanese Navy was by no means so innocent as its apologists tried to portray it; this is surely correct and was pointed out clearly at least three decades ago.[10] That much I said also in my post, but I went on to observe that, "Yamamoto did speak out somewhat in his role as vice navy minister, but fell silent once at Combined Fleet. The only other major figure whom I know to have aired concerns was ADM Inoue Shigeyoshi.... Yamamoto was threatened with assassination while Inoue, who did not go public, was shunted aside." That is to say that I regard the characterization of Yamamoto given by Tohmatsu and Willmott to be substantially harsher than the facts warrant. There were senior Navy officers (and also at least one senior Army officer) who opposed the war, on grounds not of moral rejection but of hard-headed calculation of Japan's interests. They fell silent when the decision to make war was handed down, in the fashion of military men (and government officials) in many places. (If post-war testimony is to be given any credence, there were many more who had reservations but felt it not their place to speak them aloud, in a manner also familiar elsewhere.)

The book's bibliography covers more than eighty items, divided between English- and Japanese-language sources. There are other works which might have been included with profit, but generally it is appropriate for a book of its length.

When it comes to citations to support specific assertions, however, there are a great many gaps. For example, one of the innovations in the account of the early stages of the Pacific War is a somewhat tangential denunciation of the prominent Japanese air officer Fuchida Mitsuo for having claimed, in his post-war account, that when the Japanese carriers were struck by American dive-bombers at Midway they were no more than five minutes from getting off their own strike, when in fact they were nowhere near so ready to launch (p. 98). No source is given for

the key assertion that Fuchida's account is factually inaccurate. (It is likely drawn from a commentary by the authors of a forthcoming book on Midway.[11])

This book has many good parts, but it is frustrating to see that it could readily have been made significantly better. Many readers may be better served by various alternative accounts; none entirely duplicates the work of Tohmatsu and Willmott, but there is great overlap.[12]

#### Notes

[1]. Two further books in the same series carry the story through to the end of the Pacific War. H. P. Willmott, *The War with Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942-October 1943* (Lanham: SR Books, 2002); and Thomas W. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (Lanham: SR Books, 2004).

[2]. The parent of the publisher provides downloadable copies of the front matter and first chapter at <http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com/ISBN/0842051511>, giving the prospective purchaser a good opportunity to sample the book.

[3]. Private communication from Mr. Clive Sinclair, a collector of Japanese militaria. Officers who already possessed swords of the older pattern were not required to replace them, and many did not.

[4]. Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003), p. 182; and Toshiyuki Mizoguchi and Mataji Umemura, eds., *Basic Economic Statistics of Former Japanese Colonies, 1895-1938: Estimates and Findings* (Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Shinposha, 1988), pp. 230-231.

[5]. Mizoguchi and Umemura.

[6]. Maddison, p. 88.

[7]. Robert Boyce, "World Depression, World War:

Some Economic Origins of the Second World War," in *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World War*, ed. Robert Boyce and Esmonde M. Robertson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). While Boyce outruns his evidence in certain cases, he makes many good points. See also Robert Boyce, "Economics," in *The Origins of World War Two: The Debate Continues*, ed. Robert Boyce and Joseph A. Maiolo (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), but be wary of his information regarding Japan, which is not well based.

[8]. Akira Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East, 1921-1931* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 176.

[9]. William D. O'Neil, H-War, July 17, 2003.

[10]. Stephen E. Pelz, *The Race to Pearl Harbor: The Failure of the Second London Naval Conference and the Onset of World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974). More recently, see David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997), pp. 447-486. Both are cited in the bibliography.

[11]. Jonathan B. Parshall, David D. Dickson and Anthony P. Tully, "Doctrine Matters: Why the Japanese Lost at Midway," *Naval War College Review*, 54, no. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 139-151.

[12]. Other accounts of the origins of the Pacific War include Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Longman, 1987); and Margaret Lamb and Nicholas Tarling, *From Versailles to Pearl Harbor: The Origins of the Second World War in Europe and Asia* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001). For Japan's fatal involvement in China see Edward L. Dreyer, *China at War, 1901-1949* (London: Longman, 1995). The opening stages of the Pacific War are well treated in Willmott's *Second World War in the East* (London: Cassell, 1999), which has much better maps.

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