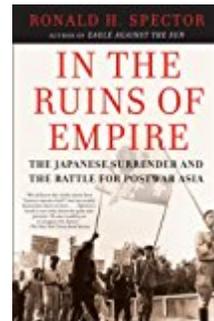




Ronald H. Spector. *In the Ruins of Empire: The Japanese Surrender and the Battle for Postwar Asia*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008. Plates. xiii + 358 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8129-6732-6.



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Postwar Asia: Chaos and War

Beginning in the fall of 2002, George W. Bush administration officials linking the tragedy of September 11, 2001, to Saddam Hussein asserted that an American-led war against Iraq would result in a benevolent occupation putting Iraq on the road to democracy, just like the occupations of Germany and Japan after World War Two. National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, among others, apparently forgot the zones of occupation, the Berlin Airlift Crisis, the Berlin Wall, the Stasi of East Germany, and other consequences of the occupation of Germany associated with the Cold War, which did not end until 1989. And, despite the generally successful American occupation of Japan, John W. Dower reminded everyone that Japan at the end of World War Two was not in any significant way comparable to Iraq in the early twenty-first century.[1]

In his recent book, *In the Ruins of Empire* (2007), military historian Ronald H. Spector examines the immediate aftermath of World War Two in Japanese-held areas of Manchuria, China, Korea, Malaya, Indonesia, and Vietnam. In each of these areas a chaotic combination of anticolonialism, nationalism, and personal score settling

quickly emerged and quickly overwhelmed attempts at control by the United States and its allies in the region. Within five years from the end of World War Two, China, Korea, Malaya, Indonesia, and Vietnam were in the midst of, or had just concluded, devastating civil wars and anticolonial wars.

Why did the end of the Pacific War in 1945 soon regenerate into a series of civil wars and anticolonial wars? The fundamental objectives of the Americans for postwar Asia did not anticipate significant political problems nor their intensity, with the possible exception of China. The first objective, to receive formal surrenders from Japanese military forces and transport six and a half million Japanese soldiers and civilians back to Japan, was accomplished with some delays but without major problems. And the second major objective, to locate, aid, and release Allied prisoners, both military and civilian, was also accomplished without major problems in most areas. The British, Nationalist Chinese, French, and eventually the Dutch assisted in accomplishing these objectives, but other problems immediately emerged in all areas. The French wanted Vietnam returned as their colony. The

Dutch wanted their control over much of the Indonesian archipelago returned. The same with the British and Malaya. Nationalists of various and conflicting ideologies in these regions rejected the reappearance of their former colonial masters, resulting in wars in Indonesia, Malaya, and Vietnam. Koreans wanted their unqualified independence after several decades as a browbeaten colony of Japan, but infighting among Korean Communists, non-Communists, and former collaborators with the Japanese government quickly led to a division not only of nationhood but also of territory at the 38th parallel.

At the conclusion of the war in Asia, the United States was most concerned about China and sent General George Marshall to sort out the conflict between Chiang Kai Shek and the Guomindang, Mao Zedong and the Communists, and the Soviets in Manchuria. General Marshall hoped to get the Guomindang and the Communists to agree to a coalition government, with the acquiescence of the Soviets. It soon became clear there was no chance for any lasting agreement between Chiang, whom everyone knew was backed by the Americans, and Mao, whose support from the Soviets was less substantial and more problematic than many realized at the time. The civil war between the Guomindang and the Communists, postponed by the start of the Sino-Japan War in 1937, soon reignited despite General Marshall's mediation and the presence of several thousand U.S. Marines.

Spector presents a reasonably detailed description of these events, especially of the first couple years after the end of the Pacific War. While the book's perspective is often from the American military's vantage point, Spector utilizes archives from Australia, Britain, France, Japan, Singapore, and the United States. His analysis demonstrates that American troops, officers, and mediators were often lacking in knowledge of local political situations, lacking in language skills, and lacking in numbers of troops. In addition, troops and officers fighting in Asia before Japan's August 15, 1945, surrender announcement wanted to go home. They did not want to remain in Asia and attempt to sort out the myriad of political, economic, and social problems in the region. Even when the United States made a significant effort to broker a peaceful settlement in China, the situation erupted into civil war because of political conditions existing prior to the Sino-Japan War of the late 1930s, which merged into World War Two.

Furthermore, the Shen rape case in Beijing, in which two U.S. Marines were court-martialed for their attack

on a Chinese university student and subsequently released when the verdict was overturned in July 1947, inflamed Chinese opinion against the Americans. Whatever friendship some Chinese still had for the Americans quickly vanished. At almost the same time in Korea, bad weather and the resulting scarcity and rising cost of rice led to widespread strikes and overly aggressive reactions by Korean police, supposedly managed by the American military. The "Autumn Harvest riots marked the dead end of American occupation policy in Korea," writes Spector (p. 271). Such unexpected events, combined with the growing geopolitics of the Cold War, infighting among nationalists, and the beginnings of post-war reconstruction led to chaotic conditions in most or all of the war-ravaged areas of the Pacific War and were beyond the power of American and Allied forces to control.

In one way, *In the Ruins of Empire* can be read as a sequel to Spector's *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (1985). Like his earlier work, *In the Ruins of Empire* is primarily a military history that includes a more than adequate analysis of conflicting political and sometimes social motivations of many protagonists. Also like his earlier work, he quotes excessively from documents when instead he could have written the same information and cited the document. More problematic than writing style is the lack of discussion about Taiwan, the Philippines, the South Pacific, and especially Japan during the immediate postwar era. While it would be asking too much to equally cover all of Japan's former colonial and wartime territories, which were also chaotic in the immediate postwar era, a brief discussion of Japan under the American-led occupation would have been useful as a comparison to former Japanese colonies and wartime territories examined in this book.[2]

Lest any reader of this book, ostensibly about the battle for post-World War Two Asia, not understand its connection to recent events, Spector concludes by citing a U.S. Army study prepared before the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which, among other prescient observations, warned that "the possibility of the United States winning the war and losing the peace in Iraq is real and serious" (p. 273).[3] Spector then tells us what we already know: the Bush Administration and the Defense Department ignored the study. For anyone who believes that World War Two ended in Asia on September 2, 1945, *In the Ruins of Empire* should not be ignored.

Notes

[1]. John W. Dower, "Lessons from Japan about War's

Aftermath," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2002. See also his more extensive discussion of the same subject in "A Warning from History: Don't Expect Democracy in Iraq," *Boston Review*, February/March 2003.

[2]. Strangely, John W. Dower's *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War Two* (New York: W. W.

Norton, 1999) is not even cited in the bibliography of *In the Ruins of Empire*.

[3]. The reference is to C. Crane and W. Andrew Terrill, *Reconstructing Iraq: Challenges and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003).

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