

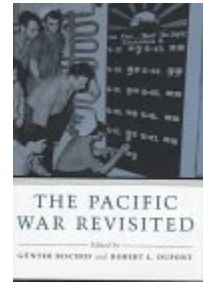
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gunter Bischof, Robert L. Dupont, eds. *The Pacific War Revisited*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. xiii + 220 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2156-6.

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## With Skill and a Lot of Luck: Another Look at the American Crusade in the Pacific

The Second World War is a popular subject again in the United States. A sign of this widespread interest is the appearance of a number of films about the war, such as *When Trumpets Fade*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Thin Red Line*, which will reach theaters in December. The fiftieth anniversary of the war helped boost its popularity. These observations also resulted in a number of academic conferences about the war. The Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans sponsored one of these gatherings to examine the conflict in the Pacific. Although a number of well established scholars in the field met in New Orleans, *The Pacific War Revisited* is an uneven book. Despite the varying quality of the contributions—which is almost inevitable in a book with multiple authors—the essays share an American focus. None of the authors use Australian, New Zealand, or Japanese documents, and only one chapter briefly examines the Japanese side of an issue. There is nothing wrong with studies that focus solely on the experience of just one belligerent and such works fill a niche, but a more appropriate title for the work under review would have been *The American War in the Pacific Revisited*.

The book is divided into three sections that focus on large scale issues, the experiences of groups in the front lines, and issues associated with the termination of the conflict. An introduction by D. Clayton James, professor emeritus at the Virginia Military Institute and author of a three volume biography of Douglas MacArthur, proceeds these three sections, and is a solid summary of the articles. The chapters in the first section entitled “Politics,

Strategy, and Logistics” account for roughly half the text in this work. Michael Schaller of the University of Arizona contributed an essay on General MacArthur in which he argues that MacArthur used his image and political popularity in the United States to good advantage, forcing the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Franklin D. Roosevelt to accept his strategy of returning to the Philippines. Schaller’s presentation is concise and convincing, but it is a condensed version of his previous study of the general.[1] The contribution of Ronald Spector, a history professor at George Washington University, is a chapter on the “fourth dimension” of strategy, namely social and cultural factors. Applying the work of Sir Michael Howard[2] on social dimensions of combat to the Pacific theater, he argues “that American attitudes and expectations, moods, fears, and hopes about the war and about themselves all had an important impact on how America fought the war with Japan, especially during the final months of the conflict” (p. 42). Spector suggests that concern about life in the post-war era, hatred of the Japanese, and limited public patience caused the U.S. to pursue an opportunistic and high risk strategy designed to end the war as quickly as possible. The battles of Midway and Guadalcanal, and the army’s insistence on invading Japan, are examples of this course of action. This thesis is fresh and unique, and one hopes that Spector will expand on this argument in future works. The short length of this chapter prevents the full development of this idea.

Two articles that specialists on this war will find use-

ful concern the operations of the U. S. Navy. Logistics is a critical matter in times of war, but it often lacks the drama and compelling nature of combat operations and strategic planning. Daniel Blewett, a librarian at Loyola University of Chicago, argues that American naval officers took this blase attitude, but found themselves facing fuel shortages in 1942 that hampered their operational options. Using a variety of sources and a perspective that keeps his account from getting bogged down in the details of a highly technical subject, Blewett shows that the vast distances of the Pacific required huge amounts of oil and put large demands on the logistical infrastructure of the U.S. Navy, which was simply unprepared to meet these needs. The attack on Pearl Harbor was in many ways a blessing in disguise. The base lacked sufficient oil storage facilities, and the navy would have had to return to California had the Japanese destroyed the holding tank farms. Instead, the incapacitated battleships freed up fuel for aircraft carrier operations. The shortage of oil tankers, ships that carried fuel for the battle fleet, was the “most crucial factor for the U.S. Navy in 1942” (p. 64). One of the commanders most bedeviled with fuel supply problems was Admiral Frank Fletcher. Blewett shows that the admiral, often criticized as overly cautious, had well-founded concerns about fuel shortages. The slow speed of tankers was another problem the navy faced. Fleets and battle groups could travel no faster than these ships in order to protect them from enemy submarines.

Japanese submariners remained focused on sinking ships of war, the larger the better, and ignored the tankers, which were their enemies’ weak spot. During the first two years of the war, their American counterparts shared this obsession, according to Kenneth J. Hagan. A professor emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy and the author of several books on U.S. naval history, Hagan draws upon his vast experience and argues that “American submarine warfare against Japanese cargo vessels and oil tankers during World War II constitutes history’s outstanding example of successful ‘guerre de course,’ or commerce raiding” (p. 81). In a short summary of American naval history prior to the 1890s, he shows that commerce raiding was the orthodox strategy of the U.S. Navy. During the Civil War, the Confederate Navy modified this approach, introducing the simple destruction of ships as a military objective since the South lacked the international recognition required to sell captured ships as prizes of war in neutral ports. The U.S. Navy moved away from commerce raiding after Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890). In the first half of the twentieth century, Americans built

large fleets of battleships and believed that a decisive, single battle would give them control of the seas as Mahan had written. In the inter-war period, American naval planners turned a blind eye towards German success in using submarines as instruments of “guerre de course.” When the U.S. entered World War II, poor torpedoes that often failed to detonate and an emphasis on sinking capital warships limited the effectiveness of the submarine. It was only after two year of wartime experimentation that the U.S. Navy got torpedoes that worked and rediscovered “guerre de course.” American submariners began attacking Japanese cargo ships, oil tankers in particular. In 1944, U.S. submarines sank more ships than the previous two years combined and destroyed over half of the Japanese merchant fleet. Hagan concludes that the submarine proved that commerce raiding was still a viable military strategy in the twentieth century.

The second section of this compilation examines the experiences of groups directly involved in the fighting. Gregory J.W. Urwin of the University of Central Arkansas contributes an essay on the prisoner of war experience of the Marines that defended Wake Island, but a longer version of this article appeared in *Prologue* in 1991. At the time of the conference, Urwin was working on book-length study of that engagement, and has since had that work published.[3] This is a well researched essay, and it includes a number of oral histories he conducted with the remaining survivors, but looking at the records of the jailers could have added significant dimensions to this account. Kathleen Warnes of Marquette University contributes a chapter on the wartime experiences of nurses in the Pacific. This chapter is a collection of well-written episodes about individual nurses and seems to lack a unifying analytical theme or thesis.

The editors of this book wanted to avoid “well-worn issues,” but the final section examines the one of the most exhausted topics in World War II historiography, the termination of the war in the Pacific. Fortunately, the authors of the two chapters that comprise this portion of the compilation cover new aspects of this contentious subject. Both contributions are essays that specialist should read. Herman S. Wolk, a historian for the U.S. Air Force, examines General Henry H. Arnold, commanding officer of the U.S. Army Air Forces, and his role in trying to force the surrender of Japan without a costly invasion. A true believer in the strategic bombing concept of Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell, Arnold’s efforts focused almost exclusively on a conventional air assault. The development of a long range bomber was a key requirement for this type of warfare. Arnold pushed hard

for the development of the B-29 bomber, even when other officers working on the project questioned the feasibility of the endeavor. He insisted, hoping a successful strategic bombing campaign would convince Congress to establish the air force as a separate branch, equal in standing to the army and navy. Using material in Arnold's papers at the Library of Congress, Wolk shows that general saw the atomic bomb as a threat to that plan. As a result, he was the only high-ranking American military official to question the use of the bomb before its use. This position challenges the work of Barton Bernstein on military attitudes about use of the weapon.[4] Wolk concludes with a quote from Arnold in which the general ruefully admits that the atomic bomb stole the spotlight from the conventional bombings, which had played a greater role in defeating the Japanese. The impressive essay makes it clear that the important differences that existed in the American military, existed even within the air force bombing community, about the best way to bring the war to an end.

Brian Villa of the University of Ottawa and Stephen Ambrose, professor emeritus at the University of New Orleans and founder of the Eisenhower Center, combine to offer an explanation of the rapid rapprochement between the Americans and the Japanese after the war. A similar reconciliation took place between the Americans and the Germans but took much longer to develop. Villa and Ambrose believe the atomic bomb helped induce, rather than hinder, the development of this new friendship. The use of the bomb served a psychological need in each country. In the United States, it satisfied an American desire for revenge. In Japan, the bomb allowed the empire to surrender with honor to a superior force. The concept of "gaiatsu," meaning to bend to foreign pressure, provides a basis in Japanese culture for such interpretation. According to these authors, "These immediate results of the atomic bombs are seldom brought into the debate over the decision to use the bomb" (p. 182). The two then spend use the rest of their essay challenging and dismissing the arguments of Gar Alperovitz on the use of the atomic bomb.[4] While this critique is reasonable, it is out of place. The bomb might have helped bring about a speedy reconciliation, but Ambrose and Villa never argue that it was a factor in the decision to use the weapon. Nevertheless, their argument is, as James states in the introduction, "provocative," has merit and is probably even right, but the essay would have been stronger had the

authors used some Japanese sources.

While American and Japanese specialists doing research on the Second World War will find only parts of this *The Pacific War Revisited* useful, it is important to remember that professional academics are not the only individuals interested in history. A good deal of the general public in the United States gets their understanding of the past from documentaries on cable television or from motion pictures. Parts of the public do read, though, and it seems that the editors at the LSU Press hope to market and sell copies to a general audience. As such, it is a good tool to make people stop and think about this conflict more than they would if they are watching television. Collectively, the chapters in this compilation cover a wide range of issues about the American experience in the Pacific and run counter to popular and widely held views. These essays are solid, adequate pieces of scholarship, and the fact that many of them are recycled or condensed versions of larger projects does not make the ideas and issues presented in them any less valid than those found in those other venues. For these reasons, we who teach courses that cover the conflict in some manner should consider assigning this book to our students.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[2]. Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimension of Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 57 (Summer 1979), 975-986.

[3]. Gregory J.W. Urwin, *Facing Fearful Odds: The Siege of Wake Island* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

[4]. Barton J. Bernstein, "Ike and Hiroshima: Did He Oppose It?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 10, no. 3. (1987).

[5]. Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* Revised edition. (New York: Penguin, 1985).

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