

# H-Net Reviews

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Mark R. Peattie, Edward J. Drea, Hans J. van de Ven, eds. *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. Illustrations, maps. 664 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6206-9.

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The Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 was immense both in its scale and consequences. Nevertheless, Western military histories of World War II have focused overwhelmingly on the campaigns of the European and Pacific theaters, and those specialized studies of the conflict that do exist deal primarily with such matters as diplomacy; politics; mass mobilization; and, in more recent years, Japanese atrocities and public memory. Indeed, as the editors of the volume under review attest, “a general history of the military operations during the war based on Japanese, Chinese, and Western sources does not exist in English” (p. xix). In 2004, Japanese, Chinese, and Western scholars gathered to remedy this situation and in the belief that such a close study of the operations and strategy of the Sino-Japanese War would “illustrate that, in this period, warfare drove much of what happened in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres in China and Japan.” They further recognized that because “much of the best scholarship on WWII in East Asia is naturally produced in China and Japan,” there was a need to “bring the fruits of Chinese and Japanese work to the attention of a wider public” (p. xx). Granting that the resulting volume is not exhaustive, the editors seek to bridge the inevitable gaps with “a general overview of the military campaigns, an accompanying chronology, and introductions to the several sections into which the chapters are grouped” (p. xxi). With that caveat behind them, coeditors Mark R. Peattie, Edward J. Drea, and Hans J. van de Ven declare that the contributors have provided “an authoritative introduction to the military course of one of the greatest conflicts of the twentieth century” (p. xx). Their confidence is not misplaced, for *The Battle for China* beautifully fulfills the objectives they have laid out for

it and will be gratefully utilized by readers interested in the history of the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, and modern warfare in general.

The contributors’ essays are grouped into six parts, the first of which includes the chronology mentioned above and overview of the war, as well as the book’s fourteen maps. Drea and van de Ven open this section with solid general coverage of the major campaigns between 1937 and 1945. Peattie then discusses the origins of the war, placing particular emphasis on the role played by Japanese field officers and other “contending interest groups” in perpetuating a dysfunctional strategy in China, and on the “structural and political weaknesses within Japan that confused the development of a clear-cut policy” toward that country (p. 52). Moreover, while also dealing with the chaotic domestic conditions in China, he astutely points to Japan’s failure to learn that its “formula for a dominant position in China—a united China submissive to Japanese dictates—was impossibly self-contradictory” (p. 60).

The essays in part 2 examine the Chinese Nationalist Army and the Imperial Japanese Army on the eve of the war. Chang Jui-Te demonstrates that the Chinese army, while making “real progress in many areas,” continued to be plagued seriously both by internal political and military divisions and by unevenness in leadership and training (p. 85). In contrast, Drea’s survey of the Japanese army’s tactical and doctrinal proficiency reveals an organization that was tough, confident, well trained, and well armed, albeit preparing to fight the Soviet Union, rather than China. As part of these preparations, the Japanese army updated its infantry tactics

in 1937 to incorporate greater use of firepower and maneuver in assaulting fixed positions. Consequently, as Drea points out, when war came with China instead, Japanese units, contrary to popular imagination, did not rely solely on frontal assaults and the spirit of the bayonet, but “brought to bear superior firepower and modern equipment in combined arms warfare, relying on regimental heavy weapons and artillery to soften enemy positions before infantry assaults” (p. 115). Nevertheless, while “the ability of Japanese forces to react quickly, maneuver rapidly, and fight skillfully, just as they had been trained, equipped, and indoctrinated to do, proved initially advantageous,” Chinese resilience and the failure to develop a long-range strategy made it all “ultimately futile” (p. 134).

Part 3 contains detailed coverage of specific battles and campaigns during the first year of the conflict. Yang Tianshi assesses the role of Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek in the battles of Shanghai and Nanjing in the final months of 1937, stressing the generalissimo’s initiative in using these campaigns to expand the war in order to relieve pressure on the North and demonstrate to the world Chinese resolve to resist Japanese aggression. Hattori Satoshi and Drea collaborate in covering these same operations from the perspective of Japanese army units, providing readers a stark infantryman’s view of the bitter, bloody fighting that took place in the drive from Shanghai to Nanjing. While the infantry engaged in close combat, higher headquarters on both sides struggled to exercise command and control over insubordinate officers. Ultimately, the Chinese would have greater success in this vital area than the Japanese. Although losing many of their best divisions and control over the capital, the Chinese side “slowly, painfully, and often brutally ... fashioned a political-military strategy to stave off Japanese victory” (p. 140). Indeed, Japan’s failure to achieve a rapid victory ensured that the war became, contrary to Japanese expectations and to Chinese advantage, a war of attrition. Paying particular attention to the defense of Wuhan in the summer of 1938, Stephen MacKinnon explains how determination to resist the Japanese assault facilitated improvement in cooperation among high-level Chinese commanders, the implementation of a strategy of attrition, and the growth of self-confidence within the Chinese rank and file. Such unity was missing on the Japanese side. Carrying the story forward from 1938 to 1941, Tobe Ryoichi examines the role of the Eleventh Army, Japan’s primary fighting force in central China, demonstrating how a unified military strategy continued to elude Japanese leaders in the field and

in Tokyo as the prospect of rapid military victory evaporated.

The essays of part 4 begin with Hagiwara Mitsuru declaring that the Sino-Japanese War was “the first major conflict in which air power played a significant role from the beginning of hostilities” and which “saw the initiation of long-range over-water strategic bombardment by one side against major urban centers of its enemy” (p. 237). Addressing the paucity of writing on this topic in Western-language accounts, Hagiwara details the Imperial Japanese Navy’s leadership of a campaign that, despite penetrating deeply into the country and achieving local air superiority, failed to achieve its strategic objective of destroying Chinese air power.[1] Edna Tow follows Hagiwara with a look at what it was like to live and persevere in the provisional capital of Chongqing, the primary target of Japanese navy bombers and one of the first of the world’s cities to suffer under the sustained terror bombing of civilians. Tow concludes that the aerial assault, which peaked between 1939 and 1941, “was insufficient by itself to effect the desired military outcome” and “serves as a valuable case study for illuminating the range of challenges, tensions, and dilemmas regarding total war and the limits of mass aerial bombardment to achieve total victory” (p. 282). It was not, however, an example that was then fully appreciated in the West.

Zhang Baijia evaluates the military aid provided to China by Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States from the mid-1930s until the end of the war, characterizing Nazi assistance as disinterested, pragmatic, and effective, and Soviet support as clearly driven by strategic self-interest but otherwise largely beyond reproach. He judges American aid efforts as riven with misunderstanding and largely ineffective and, moreover, asserts that “the United States provided little material aid to China” before 1945, when aid quadrupled (pp. 299, 303). Although the Sino-Japanese War saw Mao Zedong’s forces pioneer the concept of “People’s War,” Yang Kuisong revises the picture of guerrilla warfare as the sole preserve of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by focusing on the less well-known unconventional operations of the Nationalist government (KMT). More in line with standard understanding of the KMT is Yang’s conclusion that, despite concerted efforts in this area, Nationalist forces never adapted well to the fundamentals of guerrilla warfare, but instead alienated local populations by seizing large quantities of supplies and often “continued to fight in large units” and attempted “to defend large territorial positions” (pp. 308-309).

In the final essay of part 4, Kawano Hitoshi puts a human face on Japanese infantrymen and reveals their many similarities with soldiers everywhere (including a rate of psychiatric casualties that, while on the low side, was roughly in line with that of other armies). However, while they shared, for instance, the close personal bonds, powerful sense of mutual responsibility, and fatalism common to combat units everywhere, Kawano argues that further motivation—or perhaps pressure—arose from a powerful concern with preserving familial and hometown honor. As for the supposedly supreme motivation of fighting and dying for the emperor, one veteran dismissed it as follows: “Hell, no. The emperor? I didn’t give a damn” (p. 343). While perhaps extreme, such reflections are important in tempering likewise extreme and persistent stereotypes regarding the motivations of Japanese soldiers and sailors. Kawano also touches on, but might have pursued further, given its relevance to campaigning and pacification, the needless brutality exemplified in such criminal practices as “bloodying” new soldiers by having them bayonet Chinese prisoners of war.[2]

Asano Toyomi opens part 5 with an examination of how Japanese forces shifted from the offensive to the defensive in Yunnan and northern Burma following the Fifteenth Army’s disastrous Imphal operation (March to July 1944) by utilizing their knowledge of the terrain and well-constructed fortifications to blunt Chinese drives into the region and, later, to mount limited counter-attacks in support of the Ichigo operation (April 1944 to February 1945). Zhang Yunhu looks—albeit briefly in five pages—at the campaign from the perspective of the American-trained and American-supplied Y-Force, which, despite initial setbacks and leadership shake-ups, eventually succeeded in isolating Japan’s Thirty-third Army and mostly reopening the Ledo Road. Hara Takeshi assesses the Ichigo operation as successful but strategically pointless because of developments in the Pacific; moreover, he concludes, the poor performance and losses of the Nationalists undermined American faith in the KMT, while the removal of both Nationalist and Japanese forces from north China left a vacuum to be filled by the CCP, whom he identifies as the ultimate winner. Looking at the battles of Henan and Hunan, Wang Qisheng finds evidence for Nationalist failings in this period from the pen of Chiang, who wrote that “1944 is the worst year for China in its protracted war against Japan.... I’m fifty-eight years old this year. Of all the humiliations I have suffered in my life, this is the greatest” (p. 403). Wang bolsters his case for KMT failures in

“strategy and tactics, officers and soldiers, training, logistics, and mobilization of civilians” with further observations from Chiang, who lamented that the local population “attacked our own forces and seized their arms, just as happened with the czar’s army in imperial Russia during World War I. Such an army cannot win! Our military trucks and horses smuggled goods, not ammunition.... During the retreat, some troops lost discipline, looting and raping women” (p. 417). “Our biggest humiliation in the battles of Henan and of Hunan,” Chiang concluded, “was that the Japanese used Chinese people as plain-clothes personnel, while we were not able to do so. With the exception of one general, no Nationalist army unit was able to mobilize our own people in our service” (p. 418).

Part 6 concludes the volume with three perspectives on the larger historical significance of the war. Despite the collaborative spirit behind their project, the editors acknowledge that the continued sensitivity of the topic resulted in occasional flashes of irritation among the Chinese; Japanese; and—more surprisingly—American participants. Perhaps no issue is more contentious than that of assessing China’s role in determining the outcome of World War II. For instance, many in the West have been influenced by Barbara Tuchman’s biographical channeling of General Joseph Stilwell’s dislike for Chiang and disparagement of the Nationalist war effort. Meanwhile, for millions of Chinese the war was one of tremendous bloodshed and destruction and, naturally enough, an unavoidably Sino-centric affair. The influence of political ideology has often been apparent in evaluating the war’s significance, too, even from the first days of the conflict. Shortly after the Marco Polo Bridge incident of July 7, 1937, the Japanese left-wing journalist, China hand, and Comintern spy Ozaki Hotsumi wrote that the war in China “can hardly fail to develop on such a scale as to prove of utmost significance in world history” and, in the years leading up to his 1944 execution for espionage, insisted that China, rather than the Pacific or Europe, was the key theater of the war (p. xix). Subsequently, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has promoted the idea that, as the editors put it, “the China theater was not merely important, it was *the* critical theater in World War II” (p. 422, emphasis in the original).[3]

Tohmatsu Haruo tackles this issue head-on by examining the interrelationship between the Chinese and Pacific theaters of the war, demonstrating that while developments in the Pacific often affected the war in China, the opposite was seldom the case. Likewise, the continued stationing of large numbers of Japanese troops on

the continent in the final stages of the war reflected not their requirement to combat Chinese armies but the reality that most of Japan's transport vessels lay on the bottom of the Pacific. The fact that they rested there primarily because of American submarine warfare further illustrates the military significance of the Pacific campaign. And it was Allied success in seizing island bases and taking control of the sea and air that brought physical destruction to the Japanese armed forces and, ultimately, to the homeland, thereby bringing about Japan's military defeat.

Assessing China's contribution to victory, van de Ven takes issue with the Western consensus that the Nationalists "were a politically debilitated 'husk' who had wasted the United States' 'supreme' try in China" (p. 449). He counters—in accord with other essays in this volume—that the Nationalists were in fact quite determined to resist Japan and further argues that "the slighting of the Nationalists as militarist, backward, feudal, and incompetent derived in part from a Western-centric interpretation of the war and, more generally, from an understanding of warfare that judged societies by their ability to generate modern industrialized offensive warfare" (p. 464). In support of his argument, van de Ven contends that the Nationalists' "accommodation with local warlords, the exploitation of historically shaped methods of military mobilization, and the use of the frontier regions" did not constitute "evidence of feudal backwardness" but rather demonstrated "sensible ways of pursuing a difficult war against an overwhelmingly superior enemy in a largely rural society with limited industrial resources and a weak state" (p. 465). In short, the KMT's strategic objective was to outlast Japan's assault and this was pursued within the constraints and realities of Chinese society at the time.

In the book's final essay, Ronald Spector surveys the contributors' efforts and judiciously concludes that despite the fact that the Sino-Japanese War's "sheer scale, length, and destructiveness" placed it "in a class by itself," China's contribution to Allied victory in World War II was "at best, secondary" (pp. 467, 478). Among the reasons for this were the herculean logistical challenges facing Allied support efforts; the Allied strategic priority of defeating Germany first; the naval character of the primary counterattack against Japan; and, thanks to the success of the Pacific island-hopping campaign and the development of the B-29 heavy bomber, the declining need to use China as an avenue for attacking the Japanese homeland. At the same time, Spector cogently points out that "if the strategic impact of the war in China on the

United States' war against Japan was small, this outcome was not true of the political and psychological contribution that China made to the Allied cause simply by staying in the war. The Japanese claim to be fighting a war to liberate all Asians from the Western imperialists could never be given full credence as long as Asia's most populous and largest nation was ranged on the side of the Allies." Moreover, "millions of Chinese did not endure the hardships and losses of seven long years of war to ensure an Allied victory but to liberate their country from the Japanese" and the achievement of that goal was "the vindication of their sacrifices and the ultimate victory of their cause" (p. 479).

Despite its length, this review has only scratched the surface of the wealth of information and interpretation provided by this collection of essays. While the contributors and editors get the credit for that content, Stanford University Press should be commended for producing an attractive volume of this length and one that, in addition to the aforementioned chronology, maps, and photographs, even includes an annotated bibliography. Perhaps the most unfortunate and noteworthy editorial flaw in this otherwise solid publication is the excessive number of mistakes in the transliteration of Japanese terms, particularly in the book's character list; one hopes these will be addressed should the opportunity present itself.

In sum, *The Battle for China* is a very welcome contribution to the military history of the second Sino-Japanese War and World War II, as well as to the general historiography of modern China and Japan. I highly recommend it.

#### Notes

[1]. A notable exception, as Hagiwara points out, is Mark R. Peattie, *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, 1909-1941* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001).

[2]. The editors address the matter of war crimes as follows: "Although Japan's record of war crimes is a topic of great current interest, Japanese atrocities are mentioned only if pertinent to a particular campaign or strategy. Thus, no paper specifically addresses war crimes, in part because the topic is a subject unto itself that has been dealt with in a range of books, monographs, and journals. The recently published National Archives and Records Administration report to Congress on the subject is a good place to start for those interested in Japanese war crimes" (p. xxi).

[3]. While the editors do not mention it, the view

of Ozaki and the PRC also gained considerable traction among left-wing Japanese scholars in the decades following the war. Historian Ienaga Saburo, for instance, wrote in 1968 that the “invasion of China and the subsequent military operations there were the core of the Pacific War, in my view. China remained the main war theater even after the hostilities with America and England began. The principal opponent in China was not the Nationalist government’s armies but the Communist units. Because of the Communists’ tenacious resistance, Japanese forces became bogged down in China.” Ienaga further credited “the democratic power of the Red armies” with overcoming Japanese superiority in weapons and concluded du-

biously that while “America’s material superiority may have struck the decisive blow,... Japan had already been defeated by Chinese democracy.” Ienaga Saburo, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95-96. In an appended commentary to a recent reprint of Ienaga’s book, historian Yoshida Yutaka identified this perspective as one of Ienaga’s key contributions and one that delivered a shocking and “powerful message” to him as a young college student enamored of U.S. military strength. Yoshida Yutaka, commentary in *Taiheiyo senso*, by Iengaga Saburo(Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2002), 459, 462-463.

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