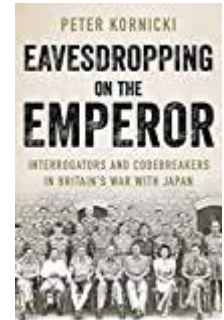




Peter Kornicki. *Eavesdropping on the Emperor: Interrogators and Codebreakers in Britain's War with Japan.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Illustrations. 376 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-760280-5.



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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (May, 2022)

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As Peter Kornicki points out in *Eavesdropping on the Emperor*, existing literature on the Second World War is predominantly concerned with military campaigns, tactics, weapons, aircraft, and ships. These books are usually fighting focused, featuring soldiers, sailors, pilots, and their commanding officers. Though there is nothing essentially wrong with this focus, it is lamentable that other wartime personnel tend to remain buried in the outer margins of history as a result. Included in this category are support personnel tasked with the many different jobs that kept the military services functioning effectively, such as cooks, intelligence officers, and linguists. Kornicki is concerned with the last group. His book aims to recover the history of a specific group: Britain's linguists and their roles in the war against Japan. The book explores how Britain trained Japanese translators for war work, highlighting the difficulties they faced in learning the Japanese language at great speed, most of them having no previous experience with it. After short courses of no more than eighteen months, the linguists were tasked with

accurately translating captured Japanese documents and decrypted communications, and they were involved with the interrogations of prisoners of war and the interception of Japanese radio transmissions. They did all of this with the knowledge that lives depended on their work. Serving in locations around the world, from Bletchley Park to humid jungles, active-duty warships at sea, Royal Air Force stations in India, and Pacific islands, their work, as Kornicki notes, was "devoid of glamour or heroism and necessarily kept secret, but it was indispensable nonetheless" (p. xxviii). It is their story that he aims to tell. He does so across twelve chapters, moving chronologically from an examination of Britain's prewar relationship with Japan to a postwar reflection on the work of the linguists throughout the conflict and immediately after it ended.

Chapter 1 helps the reader to understand how Britain ended up fighting Japan in the first place, though it could be more clearly implied, in the title of the book even, that Britain was not alone in this fight, and in fact the Commonwealth and Brit-

ish colonies were also very much a part of it. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on specific procedures for the selection and recruitment of potential linguists and the training courses they undertook. The story of Captain Oswald Tuck and the Bedford Japanese School is particularly interesting. Tuck was a retired Royal Navy officer who had lived in Japan and taught Japanese, and he was pulled out of retirement with a month's notice to create and run Japanese-language courses intended to supply a stream of linguists for war work. Kornicki's extensive knowledge of the Japanese language, coupled with his knowledge and research on the wartime language courses, makes for a detailed and interesting account of the challenges that Tuck and the linguists faced, against both the odds and the clock. Chapters 4 through 9 take the reader on a tour of the locations around the world in which the linguists trained and served, including Bletchley Park (the home of the Government Code and Cypher School and British wartime codebreaking), Mauritius, Burma, the United States, and Australia. Kornicki reveals and examines the work of the linguists behind various actions in the Pacific War, connecting their story with real-world events. The chapters on the United States and Australia—present in the book because some British naval officers were sent to the former to learn Japanese at the US Navy Japanese Language School and to the latter to serve alongside American and Australian linguists in the Allied fight against the Japanese—place the British fight in the Pacific in a wider geographic context and emphasize the critical operational point in the linguists' work. Chapter 10 details the roles of the Japanese linguists in the tail end of the war in the Pacific, and chapter 11 reveals their work in screening Japanese military personnel, many of whom were being held following their surrender. This work included assisting in interviews and interrogations and identifying war crimes suspects. Chapter 12 offers reflection on the entire story and looks at the postwar work of the linguists.

Kornicki does not simply tell the story of the linguists; rather, he argues that their work was directly relevant and significant to Britain's war effort in the Far East by connecting it to military events in the region. The book is convincing and is littered with different kinds of historical sources, including official archival records from around the world and interviews with the last surviving subjects of the book. Kornicki does lament the fact that so many of them are no longer here and that he had not come to this work sooner, but it would be a mistake to think that there is not enough surviving source material to effectively tell this story. As is common with research on intelligence and secret work, there will always be gaps in the sources, but the survivors whom Kornicki was able to speak with provided him with personal memories, correspondence, and photographs, as did the relatives of some who have passed away in the years since the war. There is sufficient documentary evidence in this book to ensure that it provides an impressive and relatively full picture of Britain's recruitment, training, and deployment of Japanese linguists in the Second World War. It makes a much-needed contribution to the existing historiography of the war by highlighting a crucial, but often hidden, link in the intelligence chain—the linguists who made sense of information that, without their work, would not have been operationally usable. Kornicki's unique and specialist focus on language adds weight to his argument and further demonstrates the impressive capabilities and accomplishments of the remarkable linguists he writes about. A valuable and important book to both the general reader seeking to make sense of the Pacific element of the Second World War and to the specialist researcher, *Eavesdropping on the Emperor* is also an overdue acknowledgment of the contributions of the men and women linguists within its pages, who were never honored for their work due to conditions of extreme secrecy. A vital part of the Allied fight, they should not be forgotten, and as Kornicki states, "if this book sets the record straight, it will

have served its purpose” (p. xxx). It sets the record straight indeed.

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Citation: Sarah-Louise Miller. Review of Kornicki, Peter. *Eavesdropping on the Emperor: Interrogators and Codebreakers in Britain's War with Japan*. H-Sci-Med-Tech, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

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