



2013-089

Peter Harmsen, *Shanghai 1937: Stalingrad on the Yangtze*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 310. ISBN 978-1-61200-167-8.

Review by Morgan Deane, Brigham Young University – Idaho (morgan.deane@yahoo.com).

In the voluminous literature on World War II, few books treat the Sino-Japanese War, and few of those are accessible to non-specialists. Thankfully, seasoned East Asian correspondent Peter Harmsen has written an engrossing study that goes far to fill the gap in the historiography of a neglected theater of operations and the first large-scale urban battle of the war. Historians of this battle do have certain advantages. Since Shanghai was a cosmopolitan city with a large contingent of foreign residents that stayed for the duration, scholars possess an additional source of primary documents and valuable eyewitness accounts. Harmsen takes full advantage of these.

Each of the book's chapters starts with a poignant personal story that puts in relief some element of the larger narrative. For example, in describing a pivotal part of the battle to flank the Chinese forces in Shanghai, Harmsen writes that

Ogishima Shizuo, the 27-year-old reservist of the 101st Japanese Division who had crossed Wusong Creek early on, was convinced he would not survive the battle for Shanghai, and he started making preparations for his own death. The rotting bodies everywhere on the south bank of the creek told him what needed to be done. If he were killed, it was far from certain that anyone would have the time to have him cremated and send his ashes back to his mother. Instead, he packed a few belongings that he did not need at the front and arranged to have them shipped back home. That way, at least, his family would have some concrete objects to comfort them in their memory of him.

After the first confusing days following the crossing, the frontline had stabilized somewhat. The two enemy armies stared at each other across 150 yards of no-man's-land. Every now and then, the Japanese officers would order charges against the Chinese lines. The attacks invariably ended the same way. Rows of soldiers were cut down by the enemy's heavy machine guns, and the survivors hastily retreated to their own lines. (144-45)

Chapter 1, "Three Corpses," starts with the story of a criminal case and the simmering tensions between Chinese and Japanese forces in the city, then widens focus to the geopolitical circumstances that climaxed in open conflict. Chapter 2, "Black Saturday," recounts the early battles and sporadic air attacks on civilians in the international settlement. Chapter 3, "Flesh against Steel," describes Chiang Kai-shek's deployment of the troops of the German-trained 88th division and the costly tactics they employed. Chapter 4, "Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!" concerns the two Japanese amphibious invasions and the ensuing seesaw battle to establish a beachhead. Chapters 5, "Rivers of Blood," and 6, "Verdun of the East," describe the ultimate envelopment of Chinese forces by Japanese flanking attacks north of the city. Fatal missteps here by Chinese leaders were the sudden withdrawal of forces at crucial moments in the battle and a failure to distribute antitank and antiaircraft weapons to forward units. Chapter 7, "The 'Lost Battalion,'" discusses the withdrawal of Chinese units from Shanghai and the story of the famous battalion left behind to show the flag during a critical international conference. Chapter 8, "Collapse," treats the Japanese amphibious invasion south of Shanghai and the breakdown of Chinese forces on both the north and south, and within the city itself. In chapter 9, "Aftermath," Harmsen ties up the various threads of his narrative and presents final thoughts on the larger geopolitical picture, the impact of war crimes, and the fate of the German advisers.¹

1. These men were a particularly interesting group. They advised many, even low-level, units and gave frank, often brutal assessments of Chinese performance. Consider, too, that they were advising the Chinese against a future ally of Germany; many were, in fact, at odds with the Nazi party back home.

Shanghai 1937 also covers, among other topics, Japanese war crimes, tactical decisions by generals, the medical care available to combatants, and the geopolitical repercussions of the battle. Unfortunately, the author gives much less attention to such subjects as espionage in Shanghai and the Chinese air force.

In his last chapter, Harmsen shifts abruptly from his account of the full-scale retreat of the Chinese under intense Japanese pressure on both their flanks to a general summary of the book's conclusions. Since the Japanese had long sought to conduct a war of maneuver rather than a First World War-style conflict of position, it is frustrating to have the narrative break off just when they finally achieved it, without any discussion of its consequences. Additionally, the promise in the book's subtitle of a careful comparison of the plight of Chinese forces in Shanghai with that of the Wehrmacht's Sixth Army in Stalingrad does not really materialize.

Harmsen also says little about the effect the battle for Shanghai had on the Sino-Japanese War as a whole. He does (barely) touch on the degraded effectiveness of the German-trained 87th and 88th divisions, but not on the effect of this on the Chinese, particularly Nationalist, desire to enter battle, or their tactics once engaged. This is regrettable in light of recent scholarship that quashes the persistent myth that the Nationalists avoided battle.²

In sum, *Shanghai 1937* is a compelling, quite detailed, if somewhat uneven, narrative history of an understudied war. Though Sinologists will miss an engagement in historiographical debates in the book, general readers and undergraduates will find it gives easy entry³ into the secondary literature on the Sino-Japanese War.

2. See, e.g., Mark Peattie et al., eds., *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2010).

3. The book is enhanced by a helpful Order of Battle at the end, basic but effective maps at the beginning of most chapters, and some fifty pages of well-placed illustrations, sadly, however, none of the cabaret girls turned nurses (207).