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Bryan Perrett, *Why the Japanese Lost: The Red Sun's Setting*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2014. Pp. 234. ISBN 978-1-78159-198-7.

Review by Teddy J. Uldricks, The University of North Carolina at Asheville (uldrickst@yahoo.com).

Bryan Perrett, an independent military historian and author of twenty books,¹ has given his latest offering a completely misleading title. He neither analyzes why Imperial Japan lost the Second World War (ineffective strategic decisions? disastrous mistakes at crucial turning points? tragic ill-fortune?) nor argues that the war was never winnable, given the overwhelming strength of the island nation's adversaries. Instead, he limits himself to producing a textbook-level narrative. He spends more than a quarter of the volume chronicling Japanese history from the "opening" of Japan in 1853 up to 1918, with an emphasis on military and especially naval developments rather than important political and socioeconomic changes. The remainder of the book rehashes well known highlights of the Pacific War.

We get no hint here of the lively and informative recent scholarly discussion of the reasons for Axis defeat and Allied victory in World War II. Perhaps the most common explanation is the inequality of the two sides in population, industrial production, and natural resources. John Ellis has argued forcefully that the Japanese "could not have hoped even remotely to match the massive industrial output of the enemy [the United States] ... and [since] the Americans were not to be bounced out of the ring or psychologically cowed at the first enemy onrush, the Pacific War became a no-contest."² Other historians, like Richard Overy, find this argument too deterministic—"There was nothing preordained about allied success."³ Factories and oil wells do not win wars by themselves. Much depends on sound leadership and strong popular commitment: "The Allies won the Second World War because they turned their economic strength into effective fighting power, and turned the moral energies of their people into an effective will to win."⁴

Readers seeking a more probing examination of why Japan lost the war and how the conflict might have ended differently will be better served by the work of, for example, James Wood, who contends that "the Japanese had many chances to create the conditions that any kind of victory would depend on and at the very least to have laid the groundwork to fight a much more effective and extended war resulting in a *status quo ante* outcome acceptable to both sides."⁵

Though Perrett does not make them explicit, readers can extrapolate from his narration a number of causes for Japan's defeat. First, the "victory disease," that is, the widespread belief, based on Axis triumphs in Europe and North Africa, that the Allied cause was already irretrievably lost. Second, wildly optimistic projections of victory based on the pervasive faith of Japan's military and civil elites that the supposed ethnic and cultural superiority of the Yamato race (that is, the "spirit" and fighting qualities of the Japanese warrior) would overcome the enemy's advantages in numbers and weaponry. Third, the military culture in both the Imperial Army and Navy that valued heroics and sacrifice over strategic effectiveness. This manifested itself, for example, in a strong preference for hunting and destroying Allied battleships and carriers rather than troop transports and supply convoys. Fourth, a precipitous decline in the potency of Japanese

1. Including *Why the Germans Lost—The Rise and Fall of the Black Eagle* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2013) and *British Military History for Dummies* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley, 2007).

2. *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (NY: Viking, 1990) 477. Cf. R.A.C. Parker, *Struggle for Survival: The History of the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989) 86: "The allies must win if they stayed together."

3. *Why the Allies Won* (NY: Norton, 1995) 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 325.

5. *Japanese Military Strategy in the Pacific War: Was Defeat Inevitable?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) 121. See also Harold Deutsch and Dennis Showalter, eds., *What If? Strategic Alternatives of World War II* (Chicago: Emperor's Pr, 1997) and Peter G. Tsouras, ed., *Rising Sun Victorious: An Alternative History of the Pacific War* (NY: Random House, 2007). Tsouras and his team of military and intelligence experts stress the "interplay between chance and opportunity."

air power. In 1941, Japan enjoyed a marked superiority in aircraft—the Zero fighter vs. the American “flying coffin,” the Brewster F2A Buffalo—and in thoroughly trained, combat-seasoned pilots. However, the fearful attrition of veteran flyers beginning in 1942 reduced the Japanese flying corps to a trickle of inadequately trained novices. Perrett quotes Zero fighter ace and training instructor Sakai Saburai on this point: “We were told to rush the men through, to forget the fine points, just teach them to fly and shoot.... It was a hopeless task” (181). This at a time when the United States was surpassing the Japanese in developing more powerful weaponry.

Experienced Allied airmen had noticed a decline in the performance of their opponents.... [W]hile the Japanese continued to use the aircraft with which they had started the war, namely the Val dive-bomber, the Kate torpedo bomber and the now outclassed Zero fighter, the Allies had introduced a new generation of aircraft. The Americans were now employing Hellcats, Avengers, Lightnings and Corsairs that were faster, better armed and capable of absorbing more punishment. In Burma the arrival of the legendary Spitfire had quickly cleared the sky of [Nakajima Ki-43] Oscars. (180)

Perrett largely ignores other key factors in Japan’s defeat. The Japanese had entered their war against the democracies confident of Axis victory in Europe. In spring 1942, some officers even foresaw Japanese forces sweeping across the Indian Ocean and linking up with the Wehrmacht roaring through the Middle East. Britain would be, they imagined, knocked out of the war and the United States forced to accept an unfavorable peace. The debacle at Stalingrad destroyed any remnants of such pipe dreams.

The author also disregards the fatal consequences of Japan’s plans to expand its defensive perimeter in spring 1942. The resultant fighting in New Guinea, Guadalcanal, the Coral Sea, and at Midway drew Tokyo into a war of attrition it could not win. Nor does Perrett make much mention of Japan’s barbarous treatment of the Asian peoples they “liberated” from Western imperial domination. Instead of forging a powerful national liberation movement throughout east Asia, Imperial Japan cruelly alienated the Chinese and others, even driving some anticolonial revolutionaries into cooperation with the Allies. Indeed, the critical significance of the China theater in general is also overlooked, admittedly a common failing of many histories of the Second World War.

Perrett does succeed in doing one thing unusually well—tell gripping stories, especially of the derring-do of cruiser captains and submarine commanders. His accounts, too, of the major Japanese victories—Pearl Harbor, Malaya, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies—are vivid and accurate.⁶ But some of the author’s statements are problematic: to claim, for example, that “Within Japan, it was the generals, with the support of Emperor Hirohito and the *kempetai* (political police), who enjoyed unchallenged power” (78) greatly oversimplifies an extraordinarily complex political geography. Similarly, naval commanders were *divided*, not united, on the question of expanding the empire’s defense perimeter in 1942.

Why the Japanese Lost is not, then, a work of serious scholarship. (It lacks annotations, any discussion of source materials, and an adequate bibliography.)⁷ I cannot recommend it to students, specialists, or any other category of reader, especially when several much superior treatments of its subject are readily available.⁸

6. The book is, however, marred by typographical errors, inconsistent spellings of names, and occasional factual errors. E.g., at Pearl Harbor, the B-17s flown in from California were not altogether destroyed on the ground (two-thirds survived the attack) and the defenders of Bataan surrendered in April, not March 1942.

7. E.g., Perrett lists Graeme Kent’s outdated “illustrated history” *Guadalcanal: Island Ordeal* (NY: Ballantine, 1971), but not Richard B. Frank’s indispensable *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (NY: Random House, 1990).

8. See note 5 above and, e.g., Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (NY: Free Press, 1985), Alan J. Levine, *The Pacific War: Japan versus the Allies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), or Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (NY: HarperCollins, 2000), part III: “His Majesty’s Wars, 1931–1945.”