



Hirohito's War: The Pacific War, 1941–1945 by Francis Pike.

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Historian and journalist Francis Pike's ambitious *Hirohito's War* aims to be a comprehensive survey of World War II in the Pacific. Its overarching thesis is that Emperor Hirohito was to blame for that war. Pike, a specialist in economic history,¹ argues that Gen. Douglas MacArthur was wrong not to put the emperor on trial, though he does not explain how this might have affected the occupation of Japan. He also seeks to debunk the myth of MacArthur's genius in general. The work is based principally on English-language secondary sources.

Hirohito's War is structured like a textbook with numbered sections with headings like "Development of Japan, Shintoism, and the Imperial System, 660 BC–1868." Pike proceeds along topical lines within a roughly, but not invariably, chronological narrative. He begins with an overview of Japanese history up to the mid-twentieth century before turning to the war itself. He discusses both Hirohito's role in making Japan's wartime policies and MacArthur's pardoning of the emperor in chapter 3, well before describing the attack on Pearl Harbor (111–21).

Pike maintains that Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita's victory over British imperial forces in Malaya in winter 1941–42, makes him one of the great generals of the twentieth century. He then moves to a discussion of Japan's offensive against the America-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) command. In discussing the US Navy's role in this conflict, he contends that the United States passed the Two-Ocean Navy Act (19 July 1940) in fear of Japanese expansion and not, as conventional wisdom would have it, because of the fall of France. He stresses the attrition of Allied forces in the ABDA area of operations and the impact of Japanese air superiority. He observes that, despite its initial defeat of the Allies in this area, Japan failed to extract all the oil it wanted from Southeast Asia.

Pike argues that the US Navy was not the underdog going into the Battle of Midway: American naval and marine aircraft strength in numbers was similar to the assets borne by the four Japanese fleet carriers. But this ignores the overwhelming Japanese advantage in surface ships.

The author highlights the Australian victory on the Kokoda trail, noting it is often overlooked by American historians. He praises the Australians and repeatedly faults MacArthur for not giving them due credit for their contributions. Three whole chapters are devoted to the Battle of Guadalcanal; he gives more space, in general, to MacArthur's Southwest Pacific theater than the Navy's Central Pacific offensive. He argues that the famous Marine defense of Guadalcanal overshadowed the actions of US Army and Australian troops in securing the rest of the Solomon Islands. Pike believes Adm. William Halsey, the top commander in the South Pacific, was the best leader of men in the Pacific War. He stresses MacArthur's repeated efforts to shirk responsibility for failures in the New Guinea campaign and his vanity and reluctance to remain at the front.

In Pike's view, the Battle of the Bismarck Sea marked the end of the initial air superiority enjoyed by the Japanese and ruled out any further advances on their part. He ranks the battle with the Battle of

1. He is the author of *Empires at War: A Short History of Modern Asia since World War II* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

Britain as one of the most significant air actions of the war (593). Indeed, the decisive role of air power is a central theme of the book.

Several chapters on the Burma campaign focus on the successes of Gen. William Slim and his Fourteenth Army, which, in battles at Arakan, Imphal, and Kohima (1944), inflicted “the most stunning military defeat in its [Japan’s] history” (701). To say this requires downgrading the battles of Midway Island and Leyte Gulf.

In discussing the campaigns in China, Pike recounts the conflict among Gen. Joseph Stillwell, the Chinese Nationalists, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt over strategies to defeat the Japanese in east Asia. He underscores the limitations placed on Chinese Nationalist armies by China’s economic collapse in 1941. His earlier work on Chinese history informs his sure-footed treatment here of the domestic Chinese context of Nationalist decision-making. The book’s final chapters concern the bombing campaign against Japan and seek to justify the fire bombings and then atomic attacks on its home islands. The work ends abruptly with Hirohito’s surrender broadcast.

On the level of editorial and stylistic choices, *Hirohito’s War* is full of distractions, infelicities, and needless repetitions.² President Franklin Roosevelt, for example, is “an enigma—detached, enigmatic, and ruthless” (93). The overuse of italics verges on the fetishistic.³

More serious is the high incidence of factual errors. Henry Stimson was Secretary of War, not Defense in 1940 (129). In December 1941, Adm. Chester Nimitz, not Adm. Ernest King, was Chief of the Bureau of Navigation (338). The “US Air Force” (345) did not exist as a service separate from the Army till after World War II. Rear Adm. Victor Crutchley was not “the last British admiral to serve in the Australian Navy” (453)—the Royal Navy provided the First Naval Member (senior naval officer) of the Royal Australian Navy through 1948. Few naval historians would call Gen. Billy Mitchell “the noted pioneer of naval aviation” (571). Pike wrongly states that aviators wore khaki and black-shoe officers wore whites (814). Japan lost four aircraft carriers at Midway, not three (794), and the British Pacific Fleet comprised four carriers, not ten (1003). I could go on.

Pike correctly observes that an updated, comprehensive survey of World War II in the Pacific is much needed, but Ronald Spector’s *Eagle against the Sun*⁴ remains the standard work on the subject. *Hirohito’s War* is too long to serve as a textbook and its many editorial oddities and outright errors of fact will disappoint specialists and mislead general readers.

2. E.g., readers are told that “RAF” abbreviates Royal Air Force no less than ten times (219, 221, 224, 264–65, 267, 271, 276).

3. The following passage is typical: “the lagoon of *Truk*, sometimes described as Japan’s *Pearl Harbor*, had been sequestered by Japan from the German Empire during *World War I* The Imperial Japanese Navy saw Rabaul as a southern defensive garrison for *Truk* and a jumping off point for the extension of their defensive perimeter to New Guinea in the southwest, the southern *Solomon Islands* in the south and the *New Hebrides (Vanuatu)*, the *New Caledonian Islands*, *Fiji*, *Tonga*, and *American Samoa* in the southeast” (437). For no apparent reason, the words “cruiser” and “carrier” are bolded on 360.

4. NY: Free Pr, 1985. Pike takes Spector to task for not addressing operations in Burma, which lie outside the scope of a work subtitled *The American War against Japan*.