



## *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942*

by Richard B. Frank.

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The Asia-Pacific War lasted over eight years and covered an expanse of thousands of miles from the Aleutian Islands to the Indian sub-continent. Japan initiated the war two years before Adolf Hitler invaded Poland and it continued for several months after the Nazi regime surrendered. Some 25 million people died in the Chinese portion of the conflict alone. The war also destroyed Europe's empires in Asia and triggered a flood of nationalism all across that continent. Nevertheless, most studies of this subject have focused on the Japanese-American struggle across the Pacific that started in December 1941 rather than the Asia-Pacific War as a whole. To remedy this disparity, noted historian Richard Frank has written the first installment of a projected three-volume study whose purview will extend to both the Pacific and the Asian theaters of the war. *Tower of Skulls* covers the outbreak of the conflict war between Japan and China in July 1937, proceeds through its expansion with the entry of the United States, Britain, and other nations in 1941, and concludes with the Japanese expansion at its zenith in May 1942.

Frank has already written two well received works on the Pacific War,<sup>1</sup> one on the seven-month fight over Guadalcanal, the first major US offensive against Japan; the other on the planning for an invasion of Japan and the decision to drop the atomic bomb in August 1945 that ended the war. Some reviewers have compared Frank's enterprise to Rick Atkinson's trilogy on the Allies' liberation of western Europe in World War II.<sup>2</sup> But Frank's goal is much more ambitious. Atkinson confines himself specifically to the combat operations of the Allies and, mostly in passing, of their adversaries, omitting the Eastern Front altogether. Frank, by contrast, aims to address the whole panorama of an eight-year conflict, giving due attention to all the major actors—Japan, China, the United States, Great Britain and its Dominions—as well as minor ones like the Netherlands. Furthermore, rather than dealing only with combat operations, Frank treats complex matters of international relations among the belligerent countries and the role of domestic politics as well. Readers learn precisely why the war's participants made the strategic and tactical decisions they did.

The author covers, mostly chronologically, a multitude of campaigns on the various fronts. Thus, the first third of *Tower of Skulls* clarifies the series of misunderstandings at the Marco Polo Bridge (July 1937) that metastasized into a full-fledged war between China and Japan; both parties welcomed the conflict, the Chinese even in the face of the terrible losses they suffered, and the Japanese even as they became bogged down in a quagmire. Frank's storytelling is at its best here, integrating the military, political, and geopolitical motives that underlay the conflict. His account

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1. *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (NY: Penguin, 1990) and *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (NY: Random House, 1999).

2. *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa 1942–1943*; *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943–1944*; *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944–1945* (NY: Henry Holt, 2002/2007/2013).

is a most welcome corrective to Gen. Joseph Stillwell's US-centered analysis<sup>3</sup> of the Chinese Theater.

The second third of the *Tower of Skulls* deals with the international and domestic political run-up to the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Europe's Asian possessions. Frank expertly weaves these stories together, with due attention to the Japanese point of view. He also explains the Americans' failure to grasp the nature of the Japanese threat. He does all this in a balanced manner, unafraid to assign blame where it is due, yet rejecting conspiratorial theories. The one issue he hedges on is Gen. Douglas MacArthur's responsibility for the destruction of air assets in the Philippines after it was known that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

The book's last third concerns the period from Pearl Harbor to the brink of the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 1942). Japan was then at its zenith of expansion, Frank observes, thanks to the proficiency of its infantrymen in small-unit tactics and the excellent tactical leadership of its senior officers. To this, the author rightly juxtaposes the Allies' poor generalship during the fall not only of the Philippines (early 1942), but of Singapore, as well as the Japanese occupation of the Dutch colonies.

Frank relies heavily and adeptly on secondary sources. This is certainly understandable given the scope of his project and the need to control several foreign languages to conduct original archival research. But it does mean that readers should expect little in the way of information or insights drawn from non-English-language archives. Another drawback of the book is Frank's handling of the Japanese military's mistreatment of non-combatants and POWs. While he does explicitly address the Nanking and Bataan atrocities, among others, he does not try to explain the underlying causes for such inhuman behavior. Perhaps they will emerge in volumes 2 or 3.

These cavils aside, Richard Frank has done a major service by broadening our understanding of the Asia-Pacific War to include subjects often neglected by American military historians. I look forward eagerly to reading the remaining two volumes of his magnum opus.

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3. Popularized by Barbara Tuchman's *Stillwell and the American Experience in China: 1941-1945* (1971; rpt. NY: Random House, 2017).