



*A War of Empires: Japan, India, Burma and Britain 1941–1945* by Robert Lyman.

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The past decade has witnessed a plethora of books on World War II India and Burma.<sup>1</sup> Many of them seek to redress an imbalance; specifically, a lack of both scholarly and popular attention to the Indian, African, and other British imperial soldiers as well as Chinese and American troops who fought to drive the Japanese Army out of South Asia. Among the best of these is prolific historian Robert Lyman's new history of the "China-Burma-India" theater. In a time when military historians lament the dearth of new operationally focused writing, *A War of Empires* stands out as a careful examination of the military details of the campaign on both sides. Nor does it neglect matters of leadership, from small-unit to theater commanders.

Lyman covers the war in Southeast Asia from 1942 right up to the Japanese capitulation in 1945 in four parts, each containing eight to twelve chapters. Key subjects are (a) the humiliating early defeats of British imperial forces in Malaya, Singapore and Burma, (b) the retreat over the Chindwin River, (c) the stabilization of the front and rebuilding of the Indian Army and other British forces, (d) the 1944 Japanese offensive into India, (e) the defense of Imphal and Kohima, and (f) the Commonwealth 14th Army counteroffensive and rout of the Japanese in 1945. Each section contains (meager) maps showing the principal positions and movement of forces. These will give readers their bearings in a vast and complex theater of conflict.

The book's operational narrative makes seamless transitions between small-unit combat and actions at the brigade, division, and theater levels. The author also carefully outlines the wartime evolution of the relevant armies. Especially good is his discussion of the training and equipping of Commonwealth forces, with coverage of the development of special operations forces and the revolutionary use of air-power in the theater. Like all good operational military historians, Lyman captures the horrors of face-to-face combat, in this case in the jungles of Manipur and Arakan. He takes care to demonstrate how these fights fit into the larger operational and strategic framework. The following is excerpted from Lyman's account of the ruthless fighting during the Imphal and Kohima battles (8 March–18 July 1944).

That night continuous waves of Japanese Infantry fell against the well-dug forward defenses on Scraggy, held by 3/1 Gurkha, troops clambering over their dead comrades on the perimeter barbed wire in their desperation to capture the position. Sheer weight of numbers threatened to overwhelm the Gurkhas, so the Commanding Officer called down the divisional artillery on his own position. Fortunately, the well-drilled Gurkhas recognized the signal for such an event and crouched low in their slit trenches as the thunder of 24 guns firing repeated salvos fell among them, shredding the leading Japanese assault troops in a ground-shaking paroxysm of smoke and fire.... In the morning it was estimated that 800 Japanese corpses lay across the shell-shattered hillside. (371)

Lyman portrays with clarity and nuance the intricacies of managing this theater with the powers on the Allied side. The tensions between national leaders and interests are discussed in detail. Lyman also

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1. Lyman lists many of these books and credits them as valuable sources for his own work (510).

details the military-political infighting and conflicts within the Japanese command and their ill effects on decision making and battlefield leadership.

The author describes the puppet Indian National Army (INA) or, as they were derisively termed by the Indian Army, “Japanese Indian Forces” or “jifs.” These troops were used as propaganda tools and cannon fodder by their overlords. Never adequately armed, equipped, or fed, many of them desperately attempted to desert and surrender in order to escape their plight (366–67).

Lyman has one overarching thesis that echoes the conclusions of many other recent works on this part of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> He argues that the story of the war in South Asia is fundamentally that of the Indian Army. In the process of fighting and winning this campaign, India and its army changed from the relatively small military forces and government of the British Raj into the post-independence nations we know today. Lyman stresses that the current Indian independence narrative lionizing the Congress and *satyagraha* (passive political resistance), the “Quit India” campaign, and the Japanese puppet INA is untrue to history. He emphasizes this point by highlighting the extraordinary efforts made across Indian society to (a) raise an all-volunteer, truly national army of some 2.5 million soldiers, (b) develop the industries to produce armaments and other logistical needs, and (3) create out of whole cloth the infrastructure needed to sustain these massive forces through nearly four years of grinding combat. Lyman contends that this process was the work of (willing) Indians. In their resistance to the barbaric militarism of the Japanese Empire, they staked their future on the promise of postwar democratic independence within the framework of their existing social and governmental institutions—an *Indian Raj* (485–90).

The author claims the transformation of the Indian Army was enabled by a cross-section of leaders, not just those associated with the theater, like Auchinleck, Mountbatten, or the indomitable Slim. Many of the leaders responsible for the transformation and victory of the Indian Army were wartime temporary commissioned officers, Indian and British, with little stake in the survival of the Raj or the larger British imperial enterprise. These men saw the fight against Japanese militarism as a path to a new India that had merited its independence on an equal footing with the other Allied powers. The wartime Indian Army was therefore a crucial factor not only in achieving independence, but in shaping modern South Asia.

Lyman underscores this idea in his last chapter, where, a bit redundantly, he outlines the nature of the new Indian military leadership and its effects on postwar India and Pakistan. In a forceful passage, he quotes historian Roger Beaumont to debunk the conventional wisdom that the Indian Army was a mere mercenary tool of the British: “it is most interesting to weigh the charges that the Raj built its army in India as an oppressive instrument against what one sees in how lovingly and energetically the Indians have retained the model” (501). One could add all the countries once composing the Raj to this statement. I myself have talked with officers of the Pakistan Army’s Corps of Guides, who proudly, if privately, insist their regiment might more correctly be named “Queen Victoria’s Own Corps of Guides.”

Robert Lyman has written an excellent operational history of a central campaign of the Second World War. More importantly, he has clarified just how that campaign helped usher modern South Asia into independence. Students of the war, of South Asian history, and especially of the Indian Army should read and carefully reflect on *A War of Empires*.

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2. See, esp., Srinath Raghavan, *India’s War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (NY: Basic Books, 2016).