

Peter Schrijvers, *The GI War Against Japan: American soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II*,

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The paperback edition of Peter Schrijvers' *The GI War Against Japan: American soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II* introduces to Australian audiences an important contribution to the growing historical revisions regarding the history of the war against Japan. Complimentary to the historical revisions on issues of race within the Pacific War by John Dower, Akira Iriye, and Christopher Thorne, Schrijvers' study documents the views and attitudes of American men and women on overseas service in the war in the Pacific. Moving seamlessly from location to location throughout the entire region – from the Southwest Pacific to India, Australia to Japan – Schrijvers' narrative is a thoroughly compelling analysis of the confronting environs, peoples and cultures encountered by GIs in their mission against Japanese militarism. What makes Schrijvers analysis compelling in this regard is that his history of American military forces in the Asia-Pacific region is not so much about the experience of frontline warfare and combat, but more the legacy of American history on the experience of travel, cultural and imperial domination during America's first major twentieth-century Asian conflict. Split into three parts entitled 'Frontier', 'Frustration' and 'Fury', *The GI War Against Japan* maps the reactions of American personnel at war in Asia and the Pacific, from the romantic imaginings of American servicemen and women en route and upon arrival on the new frontiers, to the frustrations emanating from the realities of inhabiting and waging war in the various environments, to the unleashing of such frustrations in the bitter, racially-fuelled violence and carnage that was a hallmark of the Pacific War.

The first part of Schrijvers' analysis, entitled 'Frontier', draws on the rich historical mythology of the American frontier, viewing the Pacific War as an extension of manifest destiny, as an episode in an almost natural continuation

of the history of American westward expansion. As an extension of frontier history, *The GI War Against Japan* retells the story of American servicemen and women across the vast wilds and exotics of the Asian Pacific sphere as a kind of giant Lewis & Clark expedition of exploration into the unknown. It documents the conscious legacy of American frontier mythology upon servicemen and women heading westward in the early stages of the war, as well the sense of romance abounding in the forthcoming adventure into the 'mystical orient' and leisurely South Seas. Especially fascinating is Schrijvers' application of Orientalist discourse to detail the imperialistic attitudes carried forth by American personnel; of the religious, social and cultural intervention in indigenous societies undertaken within the region by American personnel in order to 'civilize' the masses. Equally fascinating is the conscious awareness by many American servicemen and women, and emphasized within a series of specially-produced GI guidebooks, of the rich raw materials the region had to offer and the alertness of the troops toward potential post-war markets and business opportunities for American consumer products. Most alarming, however, is Schrijvers' discussion on the use and reliance by Allied forces upon native labour during the war in the Pacific. Famous within Australian narratives as New Guinea's 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels', *The GI War Against Japan* brings into focus issues regarding appalling rates of pay, and forced dislocation from ancestral lands.

The second part of Schrijvers' discussion, entitled 'Frustration', focuses on the dissatisfaction that emanated from GIs when the romantic illusions of the region proved false and the dark realities of the situation became much clearer to the American combat machine. Months spent in intimidating environments on isolated Pacific island-atolls, or in the remotes of Burma or China, as well as the ill effects of nature upon American fighting abilities and modern military equipment, became the source of growing frustration among American military forces. Of further concern was the region's insusceptibility to Western medicines and medical practices, which seemed to confirm long-standing doubts that European races could survive long in the tropics. Schrijvers notes that 'GIs were made to feel even more vulnerable by the fact that Pacific islanders and Asians seemed to avoid the wrath of nature more

easily' (pp. 133-134) by documenting a scene in which GIs setting up camp on Goodenough Island laughed off as superstition indigenous warnings about evil spirits within the kunai grass, only to be later perplexed as to why the indigenes did not suffer from the debilitations of scrub typhus. Equally enervating was the general revulsion toward the region and its people felt by many American personnel, which easily reinforced ingrained stereotypes and rekindled deep rooted fears of the 'Yellow Peril'.

Unable to tame the environs, such frustrations were released with rage upon a hated enemy. This forms the discussion of the third part of *The GI War Against Japan*, entitled 'Fury'. The introduction and influence of statistical control as well as developments of industrial technology that increased the methods of impersonal killing, 'too crude to distinguish between innocence and guilt' (p. 225), would drown out any moral outcry as the war increasingly became a campaign of enemy annihilation which eventually subjected Japanese civilians to American ferocity. The landscape itself also became a target of American frustration, as bulldozers, flamethrowers and eventually chemical defoliants engaged in a separate war aimed at controlling the environment. However, in documenting violence by GIs, including the rape of Japanese civilians by American soldiers, Schrijvers does not overlook the well-documented atrocities toward Allied forces or brutal occupations by the Japanese, concluding that the brutal violence of the Pacific conflict, culminating in the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was a continuation of the mass destruction, hatred and fear demonstrated by both sides.

The strength of the work is the depth of the analysis, which draws upon a vast range of contemporary material: including letters, diaries, GI guidebooks and pamphlets, official histories, popular literature, military surveys and psychological assessments. These combine to shed light on both unknown and well-known aspects of American involvement and attitudes toward the region in the bitter struggle against Japan. A slight criticism, however, would be the lack of contribution to the narrative from prisoners of war, who, without power and prestige, encountered Asians as few white people had up until that

period. Also, at certain points themes are repeated, albeit re-canvassed by drawing upon fresh voices, which often distracts from the development and progress of the issue being discussed. Nonetheless, Schrijvers' contribution to the history of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific is an important work, casting light on American attitudes toward the outside world both past and present, as well as its attitudes towards its own industrial might and consumerism. In revealing such issues within America's war in Asia Pacific in the 1940s, Schrijvers' conclusions hint at the origins of many the criticisms associated with America's eventual defeat in Asia thirty years later in Vietnam.

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