



Peter Schrijvers. *The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II.* New York: New York University Press, 2002. xiii + 320 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9816-4.

Reviewed by Xavier Guillaume (Department of Political Science, University of Geneva)

Published on H-US-Japan (July, 2003)

A Heterology of American GIs during World War II

An Heterology of American GIs during World War II

Based on diaries, letters, and memoirs of U.S. troops as well as on a wide range of secondary sources, Peter Schrijvers offers the reader a vivid yet sober account of these soldiers' "own private war with the opponent, the environment, and [themselves]" (p. ix).[1] This book actually follows a previous work by Schrijvers dealing with the American combat soldiers in Europe during World War II.[2] What is fascinating in the earlier work (*The Crash of Ruins*) and *The GI War against Japan* is their important description of U.S. "mental maps" (p. 14) of Europe and Asia, thus depicting almost coherent "patterns of perception, experience, and behavior" (p. ix) among the soldiery of the New World.[3] These patterns are unfolded in three parts—Frontier, Frustration, Fury—delineating a growing sense of alienation whether from the opponent, the environment, or oneself. It is difficult to review Schrijvers's book in its detailed account of individual soldiers' perception of the regions, societies, and people they came across during World War II, as each account adds to the vivid description of several "mental maps" or attitudes towards these elements with which the soldiers were confronted. As such, my review will concentrate on several elements that struck me, while giving the reader an account of this book that will give him/her a general idea of its structure.

In the first part, "Frontier," Schrijvers circumscribes four mental maps that structured the GIs' narratives throughout the war, each of which are related either to

the U.S. image of the American West, that Richard Slotkin "has called 'one of the primary organizing principles' of American historical memory" (p. 14), or to the exotic image, commonly shared in Western culture, of Asia and the Pacific. The mythical figures of the pioneers, romantics, missionaries, and other imperialists are reproduced and even mimicked by the young soldiery, who had to rely, consciously or not, on these figures in order to make sense of a New World. Among those four figures which GIs tended to adopt in their narratives about the region, the figures of the missionaries and the imperialists are probably the most obvious in regards to the historical setting of World War II. These two figures are closely linked to each other by their common perception of the region and its people as backward and primitive (in the sense of savagism), representing, in the minds of the GIs, a clear instance of a world stagnating for the past hundred years. This world, and those inhabiting it, need the moral, religious, political, and economical guidance of the redemptive and civilizing forces of the United States.

Civilization and redemption came at a cost for the natives, who were often considered "part of the rich raw material of the region" (p. 89), as they were being separated, detained, segregated, and relocated at will by the U.S. forces. Whether through the eyes of the missionary or the imperialist, the natives were mere objects lacking a consciousness of their own selves or of their own capabilities and potentials (especially in regard to the richness of the regions in which they lived). Even more interesting within Schrijvers's narrative are the two remaining

figures which allow a better comprehension of the continued alienation in which these young GIs were almost constrained. All of them shared a common understanding that they were new frontiersmen. Furthermore, by their origins as migrants, it made them somehow aware that their transfer to the Asia/Pacific front was a form of passage to the unknown. For instance, the symbolic maritime passage across the equator was often the occasion to enact forms of initiation rites celebrating the crossing of “the line.” “Although most Americans had already assumed a radically new identity by donning a uniform, it was Neptune’s ritual on the open seas which seemed to make them shed their past entirely” (p. 9). They were heading from peace to war and from the known to the unknown, thus allowing them to identify themselves with the pioneers of the American West, the frontier.

Schrijvers is thus correct to underline that what was designated geographically as the “Far West” of the United States bears the “potential process of continuity in U.S. history. The Pacific and Asian ‘far west’ was at the same time a ‘new west’” (p. 15). It is interesting, then, to note the continuous flashbacks in U.S. soldiers’ wartime narratives to either the Indian wars or to the American Indians themselves, when they are trying to give meaning to the fights they are involved in or to make sense of the people they are confronted with, enemies or allies alike. This pattern was far from being new as it was present during the Philippines war during which the Filipino rebellion was often depicted in “Indian” terms. The imagination of the GIs, nurtured by their education, the mass media, and mass entertainment, is also a key factor in understanding the last figure pinpointed by Schrijvers, namely the romantics. The Pacific islands, such as Hawaii for instance, were often places that were expected to match “prefabricated illusions” (p. 28), which soldiers had been lulled into by films featuring Dorothy Lamour in the 1930s and 1940s. Even the U.S. armed forces guides, aimed at introducing these soldiers to foreign lands and cultures, used “colourful vignettes and facile generalization, leaving many blank spaces for the reader to fill in” (p. 29).

Schrijvers sums up very nicely a fundamental issue regarding the fantasies and “prefabricated illusions” of the American and Western imagination concerning Asia and the Pacific, which is that of their confrontation with the reality of the countries, societies, and cultures the GIs will be confronted with:

“Having learned much of what they knew about this distant region from literary and cinematic sources, GIs

sailed into the Pacific with visions so romantic that not even the thought of war could chase them from their minds entirely. The images that the American soldiers carried with them were rooted in long-standing traditions. And they were romantic not only because they were fantasies that had no basis in fact, but also because they were idealizations that gave rise to dangerously high expectations.” (p. 33)

The high expectations often resulted in the frustrations that Schrijvers depicts in the second part of his book, frustrations that will lead to the fury discussed in part 3. In part 1, it is interesting that Asian countries and the Pacific islands were seen by U.S. soldiers as what Michel Foucault would call a “heterotopia,” a real location setting in space a myth reflecting “a form of mythical and real contestation of the space in which we are living.”[4] They represented idealized and picturesque sites, “prefabricated illusions,” the myth of the hedonic, naive, pure, adolescent nature of the East and its infant people. On the one hand, the U.S. soldiery chose to act in a civilizing and redemptive manner, since it was required to bring modernity to these remote places. On the other hand, contemplative and participative stances were deemed more suited “to allow oneself to become dissolved in wilderness, primitive existence, the simple life, [and thus] to participate in the regeneration not only of primal and virtuous society but of original and unspoiled man” (p. 47). The first part of Schrijvers’s book is, thus, an interesting exercise in drawing a heterology of the American soldiery and, by extension, of the American society. In other words, Peter Schrijvers offers us mental maps and a selection of coherent narratives, from very diverse individuals, which enable the reader to construct an intelligibility of this soldiery’s self-understanding and representation as “American,” an intelligibility of their selves constituted in relationship to the other.[5]

This relationship, however, became increasingly estranged and alienated. Illustrating this point is the GIs perception of nature itself, perhaps, according to their narratives, the worst foe the American troops had to face during the war. These narratives on nature often reiterated feelings, emotions, or opinions that paralleled what they observed in regards to the masses and the mentality which they confronted. For instance, the following words from a sailor, referring to the ocean as the “implacable opponent,” perfectly illustrate this point: “It is pitiless, relentless, never-ceasing, unconquerable, and restless. Yes, and even treacherous” (p. 103). Nature—whether the tangled mass of tropical vegetation, the heat, the insects, the mud, the dust, the illnesses—came to be

treated “as an enemy of its own right” (p. 123) by the U.S. military. Furthermore, the sense of estrangement and vulnerability felt when facing this exotic environment parallels the ways American soldiers felt isolated and alienated with regards to the people they encountered. The following anecdote set in Papua New Guinea delineates starkly this ongoing alienation with either the autochthones or the environment: “By refusing to help set up camp amidst kunai grass ... indigenous bearers on Goodenough Island escaped the havoc that scrub typhus brought down on Americans. The bearers had insisted that evil spirits dwelt in the grass. GIs had laughed it away as superstition” (p. 134).

As mentioned, the American soldiers quickly adopted an analogical mode of reasoning linking the masses of the East and their environment, as the latter’s overwhelming and aggressive presence promptly brought “deeply rooted fears of Yellow Peril to the surface” (p. 135). The analogy between Asians (not only the Japanese) and insects is striking in that matter. Asians’ “tireless, unquestioning industriousness” rendered, to the eyes of many GIs, “the uncanny resemblance to ants and bees in particular” (p. 137). The rate of procreation witnessed by these soldiers among the Asian masses reminded them of what they witnessed in the animal/insect realm, along with a disdain for individuals.[6] This uniformity, despite all the signs of diversity among the population they encountered, created a practical problem for the GIs, namely, to paraphrase an extensive information campaign launched by the U.S. military, “How to spot a Jap.” Physical/racial resemblances between Asians even prompted the suspicion among the GIs of a “Pan-Asian reflex of collusion in response to interference by outsiders.” This phantasmagoric threat increased the sense of isolation of the American male soldiers who, in this peculiar environment, started to long for white women (echoing their feeling of the understrength of the white presence). As it is noted by Schrijvers:

“Cultural and especially racial boundaries made serious relationships, let alone marriages, between American soldiers and native women highly unlikely. But they could not stop young men from having sexual contacts, mostly with women whose favors demanded payment in some form or other. Rates of venereal disease are one way of tracing the desperate sexual odyssey of American troops. Their fluctuations reflect the opportunities for fraternization, the population’s health, and the efficiency of control imposed by civil governments and the US military.” (p. 153)

The venereal diseases of Asia were a particular fear among the U.S. soldiers and inspired wild rumors such as that “licentious Japanese soldiers had made VD even more widespread in the region” (p. 155). It reached a point where VD was seen as a weapon used by Asians in a racial war or by the Japanese as a form of biological warfare. The following rumor noted by a hospital technician in Burma illustrates this point: “there were 500 Japanese women prisoners in this area. All of them were infected with a venereal disease. They were in the area for the specific purpose of infecting our boys” (p. 155).

The physical estrangement was doubled by a mental estrangement as the Asian mind seemed to represent a black box that could not be opened or, even worse, understood. What were perceived as Asian patterns of behaviors and of (non)emotions often appeared incoherent to the American soldiers and thus were accepted as genuine only with difficulty. The stereotypical vision of Asians as expressionless and enigmatic was further reinforced by the U.S. military authorities, as is illustrated in a section on the Philippines in the *Guide to the Western Pacific*. “‘Americans ... will always feel like a tourist in the islands because no white man can ever get close to or completely understand the workings of the Malay minds.’ What would always prevent whites from penetrating and deciphering that mind, the booklet asserted, was the fact that the Filipino lived in ‘a queer dream world of his own,’ made up of ‘child-like superstitions and legends’” (p. 160). Further, the Asians seemed to escape the torments of time or hunger, as they always seemed to be young and to be resistant to the need of eating, making it seem as if the Asians could have been almost bodiless, or “so it often seemed to American soldiers as they moved among Asians who could be as shadowy in daylight as they were ethereal at night” (p. 162). The Japanese soldiers soon acquired the reputation of ghostly warriors as, for instance, illustrated by this marine in Okinawa who wrote on his feelings and those of his comrades: after fighting an enemy that always seemed to escape them, they “got an eerie feeling—as though we were fighting a phantom enemy” (p. 163). The Japanese acquired these skills in camouflage or night warfare through intensive training, yet the GIs “were convinced that night skills came natural to an enemy of such chimerical quality” (p. 163).

Not surprisingly, this led to a dehumanization of the Japanese troops by the American soldiers. Such dehumanization is a natural phenomenon in war, yet it reached overwhelming proportions as compared to its parallel articulation in the European front in the case

of the Italians or Germans.[7] The humanization of the Japanese soldiers came as a shock to some, as a “horrified” marine realized when he discovered naive and brightly-colored paintings in a blown-out cave on Iwo Jima: “The Japanese soldiers had *children* ... who loved them and sent their art work to them” (p. 165). The continuous meeting with Japanese POWs could create the same feelings as the example of Ernie Pyle, the famous war correspondent, shows. After seeing his first Japanese prisoners in 1945 he “confessed, ‘they gave me the creeps, and I wanted a mental bath after looking at them.’ Yet some months later, Pyle reported on an encounter with Japanese POWs on Okinawa: ‘The Jap corporal had a metal photo holder like a cigarette case in which were photos that we took to be of three Japanese movie stars. They were pretty, and everybody had to have a look’ ” (p. 165). American soldiers often discovered to their surprise that many Japanese shared elements of their own popular culture (music, baseball, English), yet they strove to not “allow killing to feel like murder. Hence it was paramount to deny proof of shared culture or, better still, to pretend to belong to an utterly different species” (p. 167).

The Japanese were further considered savages when GIs witnessed or heard of the acts of cannibalism perpetrated by famished Japanese troops, or their cruelty towards the civilians or their fellow comrades. What is interesting, however, is that “many soldiers never saw Japanese atrocities with their own eyes. Remarkably, only 13 percent of frontline infantrymen in the Pacific said they had personally witnessed ‘dirty or inhuman’ acts committed by the enemy, a proportion that was identical among GIs fighting in Europe. When asked, however, if they had *heard* stories from others, 45 percent of the soldiers in the Pacific—nearly twice the number of those in Europe—answered affirmatively. Army surveyors asked themselves whether this larger proportion in the Pacific could not in part be ascribed to the ‘predisposition to believe evil of the initially more hated enemy’ ” (p. 176). The attitude displayed by Japanese troops and even civilians towards their own lives added to the idea of an enemy totally alien to rationality and common sense. They seemed to participate in what one GI described as “a terrible, self-destroying orgasm” (p. 179). What was considered madness was also, at times, considered as bland stupidity or, more mechanistically, this self-destructive behavior was related to the Japanese excess of population. Overall, the GIs’ perception of the Asian and, more particularly, the Japanese mind could be summarized by either its sadism, masochism, or irrationality. Thus:

“The more the far western frontier frustrated American soldiers’ control, the more it fuelled their fury. The more Asia and the Pacific’s nature and people demonstrated a capacity to absorb violence, the more GIs abandoned themselves to destroying their environment before it would succeed in destroying them.” (p. 207)

Schrijvers delineates three forms of “fury”: human rage, industrial violence, and technological destruction. The first form of fury is most often linked to the hatred American troops felt towards the Japanese. The following words from a lieutenant of the 11th Airborne Division to his mother illustrate vividly this point: “Nothing can describe the hate we feel for the Nips—the destruction, the torture, burning & death of countless civilians, the savage fight without purpose—to us they are dogs and rats—we love to kill them—to me and all of us killing Nips is the greatest sport known—it causes no sensation of killing a human being but we really get a kick out of hearing the bastards scream” (p. 207). This hatred heightened the dehumanization of the Japanese soldiers whether alive or already dead. Most dead Japanese were desecrated and mutilated. “American soldiers on Okinawa were seen urinating into the gaping mouth of the slain. They were ‘rebutchered.’ ‘As the bodies jerked and quivered,’ a marine on Guadalcanal wrote of the repeated shooting of corpses, ‘we would laugh gleefully and hysterically’ ” (p. 209). As the GIs closed in on the Japanese archipelago, the more the difference between combatants and non-combatants became fuzzy and almost pointless to them.

For instance, rape—which is considered a way to sharpen aggressiveness of soldiers, steeling male bonding among warriors, and, moreover, “reflects a burning need to establish total dominance of the other” (p. 211)—was a general practice against Japanese women. “The estimate of one Okinawan historian for the entire three-month period of the campaign exceeds 10,000. A figure that does not seem unlikely when one realizes that during the first 10 days of the occupation of Japan there were 1,336 reported cases of rape of Japanese women by American soldiers in Kanagawa prefecture alone” (p. 212). Furthermore, confronted by kamikaze assaults on their lines, GIs began to see only one solution to the fanaticism of the Japanese soldiers: mass destruction. Reasoning was more and more perceived as hopeless vis-a-vis the Japanese as a whole. War correspondent Robert Sherrod summarizes a general opinion about the Japanese shared by many GIs: “killing them was easier than teaching them” (p. 222).

Nature and the Japanese proved to be two almost un-

conquerable opponents against which superior technology and overwhelming force were required. Beyond the traditional means used in warfare, a specific machine reflects perfectly a modern form of destruction: the bulldozer. Robert Sherrod bumped into one during the landing on Betio Island and noted that: "This ... was the American way to fight a war—to try to get a bulldozer ashore, even before many men had preceded it" (pp. 229-230). A bulldozer was "a fine weapon" for Sherrod as it could demolish bunkers as well as seal caves and holes to either prevent their reoccupation by the Japanese or more likely to bury the enemy alive. Sherrod was correct to metaphorically describe the bulldozer as the American way of warfare: it was a massive and decisive mechanical device which could not only destroy but also build, a machine that was reflecting "America's material and technological might" which gave the GIs a sense of pride and superiority (pp. 237-238). The following remarks made by General Hale reflect the general sense of contempt Americans had towards the Japanese, and Asians in general, in regards to their industrial or technological advancements: "the Japs can't build like we can. They haven't got anything that can touch the bulldozer" (p. 239). The flamethrower and napalm represented, perhaps, the second symbol of American military/technological might as "tools of fire were exactly what American troops preferred to use against all that was threatening and incomprehensible in the alien environment of Asia and the Pacific. For fire was much more than a weapon of destruction. It was also a means of purification" (p. 249).

Overall, Schrijvers's book is fascinating, well researched, and well written, providing a detailed account of personal narratives that describe American cognitive structures (Frontier); ways to deal with the inevitable reality check following discovery (Frustration); and, finally, ways by which American troops dealt with an environment and people towards which they felt more and more estranged and/or alienated the more the war unfolded (Fury). Another point of interest in this book is how a certain "fog of war" (in the sense of the failure to consider a situation, a country, or even a people according to the extraordinary circumstances of wartime) was present among American troops whether in Asia or in Europe.[8] Instances of bad hygiene or cannibalism among the Japanese were looked upon as signs of primitivism. An airplane mechanic in the Philippines noted that "[t]here was evidence of filth and neglect wherever they lived.... The Japs are evidently the filthiest race of so called civilized people in existence" (p. 173). Stereotypes or "prefabricated illusions" created

many occurrences of self-fulfilling prophecies often articulated in an inversion mode; whereas the American civilization/people were humanist, clean, developed, and so on, the Japanese/Asian civilization/people were inhuman, filthy, underdeveloped, and so on. The difficulty of such a book naturally lies in the relation between the micro level of individual narratives and the macro level of cognitive structures, stereotypes, or attitudes towards otherness. Peter Schrijvers has produced a sound articulation of both levels which makes him interesting to both historians and social scientists.

However, at times, one might regret an apparent repetitiveness of the arguments in the book as, despite its apparent thematic organization, it nonetheless follows a chronological articulation which restrains the strength of the book as a heterology. Finally, having read both *The Crash of Ruin* and *The GI War against Japan*, I am hoping (and believe necessary) that a comparative book between the two fronts will be written. As I mentioned, Schrijvers offers a heterology of American GIs during World War II and it would be worthwhile to offer a work showing the commonalities and the differences in the American soldiers' perceptions of the two fronts and their related elements (nature and people). It would be worthwhile to discuss how enmity is understood and expressed, how allies are perceived, how racial and cultural considerations are shaping the way warfare has been dealt with in different conditions but by seemingly the same men. Peter Schrijvers shows the necessary sensibility and scholarly skill to provide such a book, which naturally would situate itself on the borderline between history and social science.

Notes

[1]. Schrijvers's account does not include the story of African-American troops as he acknowledges that he "deemed it too different and important not to deserve special treatment in a separate case study" (p. ix). So the reader should be aware that when "American troops" or "GIs" are mentioned, it usually refers to white Americans. If the reader is interested in an account of the African-American perception and reception of Asia during the first half of the twentieth century, see Marc S. Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2]. Peter Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin: American Combat Soldiers in Europe during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

- [3]. See Alan K. Henrikson, "Mental Maps," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, eds. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 177-192.
- [4]. Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres," in *Michel Foucault. Dits et Ecrits II, 1976-1988*, eds. Daniel Defert and Francois Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 1,571-1,581. An interesting use of the notion of heterotopia is to be found in Charles Burdett, "Journeys to the Other Spaces of Fascist Italy," *Modern Italy* 5:1 (2000), pp. 7-23.
- [5]. See Michel De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 9.
- [6]. See also John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), esp. pp. 77-180.
- [7]. Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin*, pp. 50-99.
- [8]. Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Xavier Guillaume. Review of Schrijvers, Peter, *The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7814>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.