



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.

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Americans Not in Paradise

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The focus of *The GI War against Japan* differs from Peter Schrijvers's earlier *The Crash of Ruin* (New York University Press, 1998), which examines the American ground combatants' experiences in Europe in World War II. In *The GI War against Japan*, Schrijvers casts a wider net, drawing on the personal experiences of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen from both combat and service support units, as well as selected civilians, such as correspondents. The combat experience in the Pacific is only tangentially addressed. Instead Schrijvers examines how uniformed Americans in the Pacific and the China-Burma-India theaters perceived the peoples and the cultures they encountered, friendly or enemy.

The GI War against Japan is divided into three parts entitled "Frontier," "Frustration," and "Fury." In part 1, "Frontier," Schrijvers explains that Americans "could not help thinking of the lands across the Pacific as a continuation of their own continental Far West—triggering in GIs the reflexes of pioneers, romantics, missionaries, and imperialists" (p. ix). He devotes a chapter to each of these four reflexes, noting how popular literature and film shaped American perceptions even before they arrived in the theater. In crossing America and embarking on a long voyage across the Pacific Ocean to arrive in strange, undeveloped lands, GIs felt like pioneers. Some held romantic notions of island paradises and lovely native girls in grass skirts. Conversely, many soldiers found

the local cultures alien and the indigenous peoples primitive, generating a missionary reflex. Chaplains attempted to introduce Christianity, GIs strove to improve sanitary conditions, and doctors provided medical care. Finally, some Americans reacted to their new environment with an imperialist reflex. Hawaii and the Philippines were literally U.S. territory, and soldiers found themselves administering other regions as well. Some saw the need for a long-term American presence in the Pacific for national security reasons while others saw the potential in Asian markets and natural resources.

These four reflexes, or themes, are common to U.S. foreign relations history and perhaps reflect Schrijvers's teaching of that subject at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. The extent to which the average soldier or sailor actually thought in these terms is debatable, but Schrijvers provides a fresh way of considering the perceptions of uniformed Americans serving in Asia and the Pacific. In part 2, "Frustration," Schrijvers examines the Pacific's "tenacious resistance to control," which generated "American frustrations flowing from the region's oppressive wilderness, threatening demographics, and impenetrable mentality" (p. ix). Be they of a missionary or imperialist mind, GIs discovered they could not tame the Pacific or Asia the way their forefathers had tamed the American West. A harsh physical environment and vast distances generated anxiety and feelings of insignificance. The tedium and boredom could be oppressive. Native populations

were alien, even dangerous, and language barriers inhibited understanding. Conditions could be so harsh that, even without the added stresses of combat, GIs “went Asiatic.” Schrijvers provides a useful discussion of neuropsychiatric casualties, which were higher in the Southwest Pacific Theater than anywhere else in World War II. He also provides a good analysis of GI attitudes toward the Japanese, an enemy seen as brutal, unfathomable, and animalistic. Racism played an important part in forming these attitudes, but so too did Japanese combat methods, a subject touched upon but not addressed in detail.

In part 3, “Fury,” Schrijvers “charts the ever-escalating fury to which American troops abandoned themselves in response to the region’s stubborn refusal to submit” (p. ix). This fury was unleashed on the enemy and in some ways on the region itself. Hatred of the Japanese led to a “no-prisoners” mentality. Schrijvers provides a good rundown of the reasons why this hatred grew so strong. Logistics constraints early in the war initially limited the Americans’ ability to tame the land (construct bases and airfields) and destroy the enemy, but the growing quantity and quality of American military hardware increasingly made an impact not only on the enemy but also on the countryside and civilians unfortunate enough to be in the way. The Japanese reacted to growing American firepower by adopting defen-

sive tactics, fortifications, and increased use of their own heavy weapons. These tactics caused heavy American casualties and a growing foreboding that the war would drag on and be very costly in American lives. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bringing an end to the war, thus generated a sense of relief.

Schrijvers ends rather abruptly with those bombings, in a book not otherwise organized chronologically. A summarizing conclusion would have been useful. The author makes good use of secondary and published primary sources. He also taps into the veterans’ surveys at the US Army Military History Institute at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He also uses, quite successfully, the War and Navy Department “Pocket Guides” for the various Pacific and Asian regions issued to troops during the war. These guides provide insights into contemporary attitudes toward indigenous peoples and cultures.

Schrijvers’s book is a valuable addition to the literature on the war in the Pacific. The extent to which soldiers and sailors actually reacted to their surroundings with pioneer, romantic, missionary, and imperial reflexes is arguable, but the chronicling of American “frustrations” with their surroundings and the growing “fury” with which they prosecuted the war is on target. Students of the Pacific war and of soldier experiences should read *The GI War against Japan*.

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