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Battle for Burma

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Vietnam must be classed as a peninsular war, and a war of land power vs. seapower. The author had no further to look than to his own British history of the Napoleonic wars, particularly in Iberia, to see that the seapower is forced to put infantry on the ground and to deny sanctuary to its enemies. This is a standard course of action, yet it is decried in *Sideshow* because Cambodia's "neutrality" was violated.

Nor does the barker inform his customers what else was going on concurrently in the circus. Shawcross seriously shortchanges the important argument that Nixon and Kissinger were able to close out U.S. participation in the Indochina war by maneuvering at the tripolar, call it "three-ring," superpower level. It is well and good to say that Cambodia suffered and that Washington should have placed a higher premium on Cambodian interests than on Chinese, Soviet or U.S. interests. But if this also meant protracted U.S. involvement rather than withdrawal, what would have been the advantage? Cambodia was not a U.S. pawn in superpower politics, it was a Chinese pawn. Peking used it as long as possible to counter Moscow's use of Hanoi to further the encirclement of China. As we now know, by 1970 the Indochinese war had become an intramural Communist battle, not a "war of national liberation." Nixon and Kissinger saw and seized the opportunity offered by China's search for aid (ping-pong diplomacy) in her burgeoning struggle with Moscow. Who would contain Hanoi? Not the United States, but China. It is fascinating and ironic that this book, so critical of U.S. superpower politics, was published at a moment when China was waging war on Vietnam directly rather than by proxy.

When a good history of the Indochinese war is written, 30, 50, or 80 years from now, it is likely to tell us that American participation in Vietnam, 1954-1975, and in Cambodia,

1969-1975, was only an episode, a sideshow, in a protracted and passionate struggle of Asian realignment.

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Smith, E.D. *Battle for Burma*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979. 190pp.

Burma has been so little in the American public or diplomatic eye in recent years that it is easily forgotten that in World War II Burma was the center of conflicting strategies of Britain, China, Japan and the United States. Brigadier Smith, who served with the Gurkhas in Southeast Asia during the war, started out to write about the battles of the Burma campaign but found that the actual engagements were "dictated by national aims and strategic aims of the combatants" to such an extent that his history had to be fitted into a larger frame.

Brigadier Smith discovered a tangled trail of political aims. Churchill had an obsession with the prestige of a speedy recapture of Singapore, and Burma was only a means to that end; but, he wanted to know from the Imperial General Staff, why had Americans liberated the first town in "British Burma"? The United States saw Burma only as a means of getting supplies to Nationalist China; once the successful two-pronged drive across the Pacific had ensured that no campaign on the China mainland would be necessary, the United States gave Burma a very low priority and even withdrew many air units in 1944. For his part, Chiang Kai-shek was suspicious of the British (a suspicion that was returned when Chiang tried to meddle in British-Indian affairs) and only agreeable to taking even a minimal part in what he saw as an imperialist campaign when the United States offered him additional arms or money. The Japanese, once their thrust toward India had been stopped, went on the defensive in a

"pointless and futile gesture," outnumbered and with no air force. The author concludes by asking "if the British or Japanese, for that matter, did much good by remaining locked in such a lengthy struggle?"

But before he reaches this Peterkin conclusion, Brigadier Smith tells a good story of the 1942-45 battles, from the initial disheartening defeats (the Japanese conquered Burma with two divisions) to the bittersweet capture of an abandoned Rangoon in May 1945. The British and the Americans had to learn modern jungle warfare practically from scratch. Brigadier Smith thinks that the British learned then the lessons that were so successful later in Malaya and Borneo against the Communists and the Indonesians. There were never very many men actually fighting in the Burma campaign, but because of terrain, weather and logistic problems it became very much a soldier's war. More Victoria Crosses were won in Burma than in Italy or Normandy.

The author is always fair in his judgments (even to Stilwell), but one wonders if his greatest admiration isn't reserved for the Japanese fighting man, just as his strongest strictures are saved for the Japanese high command whose "inflexible tactics, ill-conceived arrangements for administration, and unquestioning optimism became a dangerous mixture."

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Steiner, Zara S. *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. 305pp.

Zara Steiner has written a worthy addition to the fine British series, *Making of the 20th Century*, edited by Christopher Thorne. The book fulfills the series' promise to examine the major events of this century through readable, general studies benefiting from the latest scholarly interpretation, sources

and bibliography. In this work, the critical event is British involvement in the international politics leading to World War I.

The reader will find here no sharply revisionist interpretation of the British prewar role. Steiner contends that British foreign policy was relatively consistent and uncomplicated—the product of enduring and generally accepted objectives, the almost unchallenged personal direction of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and the escalating external threat posed by the German Empire. That policy is implicitly contrasted with the aggressive and erratic conduct of concurrent German foreign affairs—generated by internal social, political and economic turbulence, and disruptive personal rivalries and ambitions. (German policy is well analyzed in the companion volume of this series, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* by Otto Berghahn.)

The text clearly identifies the paramount trends in 20th-century British foreign policy. The objectives are described as essentially defensive: retreat from overextended diplomatic commitments, consolidation of vital imperial holdings, and protection and preservation of an enviable trade preeminence. Such goals were well established and in large part implemented by Conservative Governments at the turn of the century; they prompted attempts at either rapprochement, entente or alliance with Japan, the United States, Germany, France, and Russia. These policies were continued with considerable fidelity by the prewar Liberal Ministries in which Grey directed diplomacy.

Grey's preeminence in the control of British foreign affairs, 1905-1914, is also thoroughly described. He is shown as master of his own elitist ministry, autonomous in thought and action despite the growing Germanophobia of his subordinates. Nor did representatives of the military succeed in altering the course of policy charted by the Foreign