

## Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942

James R. Holmes  
*The U.S. Naval War College*

Richard B. Frank

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Holmes, James R. and Frank, Richard B. () "Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

The chapters are conveniently broken up with subheadings that help the reader keep track of the many threads Dudley weaves throughout the book. However, with so much detail to relate, and given the complexity of the logistical challenges and administrative burdens the reader must understand, the author often employs flashbacks and jumps through the chronology of the war. For those who are not familiar with the general narrative of the conflict or the time line of events, this can induce confusion, whereas those who already have a clearer understanding of the conflict will benefit from Dudley's ability to focus on a specific challenge before jumping to another topic. A reader who is new to the naval war of 1812 should pair this book with another (such as George Daughan's *1812: The Navy's War*, or Andrew Lambert's *The Challenge: Britain against America in the Naval War of 1812* for a British viewpoint) to help alleviate any chronological confusion.

B. J. ARMSTRONG



*Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937–May 1942*, by Richard B. Frank. New York: W. W. Norton, 2020. 751 pages. \$40.

Historian and Vietnam veteran Richard Frank (*Downfall, Guadalcanal*) is on a mission. In *Tower of Skulls* he sets out to rebrand the Pacific theater of World War II as a grand “Asia-Pacific War” spanning from 1937 to 1945, from imperial Japan's invasion of China until Japan capitulated to Allied arms. His approach runs counter to the standard understanding of World War II as ranging from 1939 to 1945 (the dates

demarcating the European war against the Axis) or 1941 to 1945 (covering when America had joined the fight in Europe and the Pacific). Frank wants to give the war in China its due, showing that it was an integral part of a prolonged global maelstrom. In this he succeeds.

*Tower of Skulls* is the first in a trilogy that aspires to tell the full story of the world conflict. Yet if Frank's goal is to fold the Sino-Japanese War into a single Asia-Pacific War, why not turn back the clock all the way back to 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria and reduced it to a vassal state? The author rejects (p. 32) “the beguiling interpretation styled ‘The Fifteen Years’ War,’ which argues that Japan followed a seamless path from Manchuria in 1931 to the USS *Missouri* in 1945.” Why? Because prominent backers of the Manchurian adventure in 1931 came to oppose fresh entanglements in China by 1937. Accordingly Tokyo, rather than initiating the new enterprise in an orderly manner, took “staggering, stumbling steps” into war in China.

This haphazardness, maintains the author, demonstrates that “contingency rather than inevitability produced the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945.” But indecision and acrimony commonly plague debates about whether to open a new theater—witness the caustic debate over invading Iraq in 2003. But a decision is a decision, no matter how decision makers arrive at it. Few would allege that the Iraq War stood apart from the global war on terror because of America's far-from-seamless path to Baghdad. In other words, Frank's premise is reasonable but far from incontestable.

But I quibble. Widening our memory of World War II to encompass what happened in China is a worthwhile enterprise, no matter whether you regard

1931 or 1937 as the war's inception. That small controversy aside, *Tower of Skulls* is a fount of facts and insights. It also is compulsively readable, despite being a doorstop of a book. Several insights in particular resonated with me. To name one, the author draws out the world-historical significance of the Sino-Japanese War. He lays great weight on the Marco Polo Bridge incident (1937), contending (pp. 6–7) that the fracas “immediately initiated a train of events ending with the dissolution of the Asian empires of Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and France.” Other results included a divided Korea, the Communist takeover of China, enmity across the Taiwan Strait, and long-lasting American military hegemony in the Pacific.

In short, the Asia-Pacific War upended the Asian system the way World War I upended the European system—and helped give rise to the world we know today. Frank's verdict is reminiscent of Pankaj Mishra's conclusion (in *From the Ruins of Empire*) that the Battle of Tsushima (1905) delivered an elegy for Western imperialism by showing that Asians could defeat Europeans in triumphant fashion. Tsushima, says Mishra, roused dispossessed peoples, setting nationalist and liberationist movements aflame across the globe. Such bracing findings stay with readers.

Frank admirably demonstrates how the Japanese war in China precipitated U.S. involvement in the Asia-Pacific War. The “Japanese occupation of vast Chinese territories since 1937 was the great divide” between the island empire and America. By 1941, the author adds, “China not only served as a critical ally for the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands in the Asian-Pacific region” but “it figured

functionally as an indispensable ally of the Soviet Union.” Throughout the period of mounting tensions, accordingly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt “remained highly alert to the fate of China” (pp. 224–26) and involved himself intimately in negotiations with Tokyo meant to restrain Japanese adventurism.

To me, though, the most striking revelation in *Tower of Skulls* is just how deep Japanese civil-military dysfunction ran. Military influence over politics, sometimes to the extent of outright insubordination, was a recurring theme throughout the Asia-Pacific conflict. After the fall of France in 1940, for instance, Imperial Japanese Army chieftains cast covetous eyes on French Indochina. After French and Japanese diplomats reached a satisfactory accommodation, officers on the Army General Staff in Tokyo and the Twenty-Second Army and 5th Division in China “launched Japanese troops in an armed onslaught” into Indochina that September. Army officers evinced a “flagrant refusal to obey lawful orders” (pp. 146–47), and thereby shaped the conflict to Japan's eventual detriment. Such is the fallout when the military, which should be a tool of policy, subverts policy for its own perceived ends.

Read the whole thing. Strongly recommended.

JAMES R. HOLMES



*The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived*, by William H. McRaven. New York: Grand Central, 2021. 157 pages. \$22.

Admiral McRaven (USN, Ret.), author of the *New York Times* best seller *Make Your Bed*, has produced another