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Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age

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concept of an operational level of war, that effectively support the tactics-and-strategy dialectic, in turn serving to manage the complexities of modern warfare.

Unfortunately, Friedman's argument paints a picture of the concepts underpinning military theory and doctrine as being static and unchanging. Yet military theory is not static, and doctrine changes under the pressures of experience and critical thinking to provide pragmatic utility. No theory or doctrine should be dogmatic, especially in the conduct of war, and this truism applies to the concept of the operational level of war as well. Even though it was wrongly adopted into doctrine, the concept of an operational level of war has evolved beyond its original formulation. In the absence of addressing directly the interrelationships among levels, related objectives, and operational art itself, his argument is left weaker than it could have been. As long as there is utility to be found in applying any concept to create and execute military plans effectively, that concept has a purpose in military thinking and should be retained.

On Operations outlines a way to understand and manage war. The work is ambitious and covers significant territory in roughly two hundred pages. This work will generate controversy among practitioners of operational planning—who, in fact, should be challenged to justify the value and existence of the operational-level-of-war concept. Friedman's work adds to the body of military thinking about operational art and the operational level of war. It should appeal to military staffs, and planners in particular, who desire to widen their professional knowledge about operational art and the theory and doctrine that support it.

EDMUND B. HERNANDEZ



Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age, by Stephen R. Platt. New York: Knopf, 2018. 592 pages. \$17.

In modern Chinese history, few subjects are discussed as widely and misunderstood as broadly as the so-called Century of Humiliation, which ostensibly commenced with China's defeat in the First Opium War (1839–42). Most academic analyses of the Century of Humiliation's genesis emphasize economic and technological disparities, inevitable clashes of contrasting civilizations, or, broadly, the tide of European imperialism. Historian Stephen Platt, however, has sought to examine the prelude to the Opium War comprehensively through the eyes of the individuals who drove early Anglo-Chinese relations.

Imperial Twilight is concerned not with the Opium War itself but with how it came to occur. Platt posits two essential questions along which he aligns his work. The first examines how Britain came to fight a war with China for the sake of merchants who were trafficking illegal drugs, despite visceral domestic opposition. The second seeks to determine how China declined from its peerless geopolitical position in the eighteenth century and, in turn, how Britain came to take advantage of that decline. Within this framework, Platt examines the early history of Anglo-Chinese trade and diplomatic relations, beginning with the establishment of the canton system in 1759 and ending in the aftermath of the Opium War. At the same time, Platt relates the various internal crises faced by the Qing Empire, from the White Lotus Rebellion to rampant piracy in China's southern littoral.

Notably, however, Platt's discussion of the evolution of the relationship between Britain and China is driven by the actions of individuals of both nations from 1759 to 1842. Platt asserts that the Opium War in no way resulted from an inevitable clash of cultures, much less a premeditated imperialist plot; rather, the war represents a tragic culmination of mounting domestic crises taxing the resources of the Qing Empire coupled with the successful lobbying of the British Parliament by private merchants to protect their illicit businesses, despite many Westerners' genuinely felt, albeit misinformed, admiration of Chinese civilization.

Platt's work is eminently readable, using concise language and driven by the engaging individual personalities of those involved in Britain's burgeoning trade with China. His inclusion of both British and Chinese perspectives, in relatively equal allotments, grounds the work's approach to understanding how a mutual relationship between the states was established and evolved. The author relies extensively on both English- and Chinese-language primary sources, lending credibility to his accounts and interpretations. At the same time, Platt's emphasis on the role that individuals played in the Anglo-Chinese relationship reminds readers that the greatest events in history often are triggered by happenstance and subject to unintended consequences rather than resulting from methodical plans.

Perhaps the most notable contribution of Platt's work is the comprehensive debunking of any association between premeditated grand imperialist plans for China and the Opium War. Early in *Imperial Twilight*, Platt presents the reader with a discussion of the amazing admiration that the West felt for

China prior to the war. In recounting many writings from major Western Enlightenment figures, such as Adam Smith, George Washington, and Voltaire, Platt demonstrates to readers that China—rightfully so—was revered as the world's largest, most prosperous, and best-governed state during the eighteenth century. This fact was the foundation for Britain's efforts to engage China diplomatically and economically. Nonetheless, many of the key individuals driving closer relations between Britain and China, such as George T. Staunton, did so primarily out of their own personal interests, not at the behest of London. Regarding the eventual war itself, Platt relates the intense opposition from members of the British public and Parliament, firmly rooted on moral grounds, that persisted throughout the short conflict. Ultimately, Platt argues convincingly that the decision to go to war, which succeeded by only five votes in the House of Commons, was rooted in the moneyed interests of private opium merchants responding to a renewed clampdown on their trade. In doing so, Platt undercuts proponents of the narrative portraying the Opium War as a plot to initiate China's subjugation and, in turn, the Century of Humiliation.

The primary shortcoming of *Imperial Twilight* is its apparent lack of a distinct conclusion. The work begins by posing its two questions, and centers on them; however, after the historical narrative culminates in the final chapter, the work fails to revisit these ordering questions explicitly. While Platt's emphasis on the role of individuals and their intergenerational relations is refreshing among modern histories that tend to overemphasize trends and forces, the book's limited consideration of structural factors undermines its ability to marshal

the panoply of evidence provided to establish definitive answers to the original questions. Furthermore, Platt's brief treatment of the consequences of the war itself may not convince the reader that the conflict truly marked the turning point of China's last golden age, as the book's subtitle suggests.

However, Platt is successful in reminding modern readers of the many unknowns that remain regarding the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century worlds; the capricious nature of the process by which interstate relationships emerge; and the dangers that arise when wealth bleeds into politics to entice governments to take action, however contrary to public opinion those actions may be—a lesson modern readers would do well to heed.

BENJAMIN E. MAINARDI



Admiral Gorshkov: The Man Who Challenged the U.S. Navy, by Norman Polmar, Thomas A. Brooks, and George E. Fedoroff. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019. 304 pages. \$38.95.

This book is long overdue. Few individuals have put their personal stamp on an aspect of world affairs as conclusively as Sergey G. Gorshkov, who almost single-handedly developed the Soviet navy from a gaggle of vessels and competing strategies into one of the most formidable forces in maritime history. For nearly three decades, the Soviet navy was his navy and Soviet naval strategy was his strategy. No other figure in maritime history can quite compare in how completely he created a military service.

For U.S. naval officers serving during the latter half of the Cold War, Gorshkov's navy was the only real threat. It was not a question of whether the Soviet and U.S.

fleets would clash, but only of when. At sea, U.S. tactical action officers served as living computers, memorizing the entire Soviet naval and air orders of battle—from the peculiarities of ship and aircraft types to weapons systems to electronic sensors—to enable them to deal with a bewildering complexity of threats in as rapid and effective a manner as possible. The U.S. Navy's initial role in the predicted war for Europe would have been to move ten Army divisions and their equipment across the Atlantic in ten days while running a gauntlet of Soviet submarines, fleets of Badger and Backfire bombers, and cruise-missile-firing surface ships. It is fitting that former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman wrote the foreword to *Admiral Gorshkov*, as it was Lehman's six-hundred-ship Navy that was going to have to match and defeat Gorshkov's fleet. Under Lehman, the U.S. Navy embraced a much more offensive-minded way of thinking and prepared not only to get the Army across the Atlantic but to harry the Soviet flanks while destroying the USSR's maritime forces wherever they were.

The authors have delivered a riveting account of the growth of the Soviet fleet. They chronicle how Stalin's desire for major warships gave way to a more defensive, coastal, and submarine-based strategy, only to return to a big, blue-water idea. Gorshkov's forces were designed and built neither for maritime supremacy nor for sea control, but these would come as the fruits of victory if the Soviet navy could achieve its mission: destroying the U.S. Navy, primarily by sinking its aircraft carriers. Whether it could have done so remains a matter of conjecture; that the Soviets would have failed in the effort remains a matter of faith among most Cold War–vintage U.S. naval officers.