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The Great Pacific War: A History of the American Japanese Campaign of 1931-1933

Hector C. Bywater

Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925

Reprinted St. Martin's Press, 1991

Reviewed by David Lee

“... For the moment, however, the Pacific horizon is fairly free from clouds.”

--Bywater's assessment of US-Japan relations, p. v.

There are those who have praised British-born, American journalist, author and spy Hector Bywater's book, *The Great Pacific War*, as “prophetic”, that he “accurately predicted” Imperial Japan's December 1941 attack on American Naval Base Pearl Harbor. Others have gone over the edge and claimed that the Imperial Japanese Navy fully embraced Bywater's book as their *Mein Kampf*, adopting it in their future war of aggression against the US.

Bywater specialized in reporting on naval affairs. Bywater extended a chapter from one of his previous books on Imperial Japan-US naval strategy in the Pacific into *The Great Pacific War*, a third-person narrative of a hypothetical three-year naval war between Japan and the US based on his knowledge of naval technology before 1925 and based on his understanding of contemporary geopolitics. He died in 1940, before he could witness the unfolding of the real Japan-US Pacific War.

To hear fanatics, Bywater's book is a magical fountainhead of naval strategy. Bywater fanatics have claimed that *The Great Pacific War* was utilized by Japan as a blueprint for war against America. However, there are others, knowledgeable in pre-World War II Japanese naval planning and operations, who have stated that there is absolutely no evidence to support such a notion. Indeed, believing that Japanese flag officers relied entirely on an English-language work of fiction to direct naval tactics and strategy shamelessly robs the Japanese of agency--perhaps this is their underlying motive.¹ The claim Bywater's book served as a blueprint also gives the odious impression that Japanese naval officers were absolutely inept at warfighting. Back in the 1920s, Bywater's impression of the Japanese was that the “Japanese are imitative ...” and “not mechanical by

¹ Evans, DC & Peattie, MR. (1997). *Kaigun*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.

temperament.” It looks like nothing has changed since Bywater’s book regarding Western estimation of the Japanese.

Bywater boosters have also imply that US military planners were lacking in resourcefulness, in that they based War Plan Orange, the potential US strategy to counter an aggressive Japan, entirely on *The Great Pacific War*.²

Under the hosannas Bywater fans lazily strew, there are a number of “predictions” that Bywater missed, such as the eclipse of capital ships by aircraft carriers as the primary naval vessel, the essential role of US submarines to cripple Japanese merchant shipping, and American breaking and reading of Japanese military, diplomatic and merchant marine codes. Bywater missed dramatic changes in aviation, such as the development long-range, heavy bombers of the 1940’s, which had a crucial part in cracking Japanese social cohesion as well as decimating the Japanese military and industrial output.³

The Great Pacific War is filled with series of spectacular battles between the Japanese and American navy, and leaves little room for technological breakthroughs such as code breaking and the American edge in naval technology such as communication and radar. Bywater throws in equally spectacular one-off Japanese submarine and carrier-based airplane (flying “machines”) attacks on the US Pacific coast and an alleged Japanese attack of Panama Canal by a commercial Japanese steamer, which closed the Canal to sea traffic for several months. Inexplicably, despite colonial possessions in Asia under Japanese threat, Europe stays out of Bywater’s war altogether.⁴ Whether the sea battles and Japanese air attacks on San Francisco are reality-based are things experts can address. The end of Bywater’s war is highly unrealistic, even given the early 1930’s setting, but this is left to experts to explore as well.

Rather than a magic blueprint, Bywater’s techno-thriller of a Japan-US war merely reflects his times and his own personal bias and shallow, Western-centric knowledge.

There are, though, at least two aspects of Bywater’s fictional war that deserve attention. The first is his fabricated reason behind Japan’s war against the US. The second is the book’s treatment of the Japanese Americans in Hawaii—Bywater foresees Japanese rioting against America.

Bywater’s description of pre-war Japan is cringingly comic book in nature but it serves its purpose, as it reflects 1920’s and modern thinking concerning pre-war Japan. In Bywater’s

² Miller, ES. (1991). *War Plan Orange*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.

³The United States Strategic Bombing Survey. (1947). *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japanese Morale*. <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/NHC/NewPDFs/USAAF/United%20States%20Strategic%20Bombing%20Survey/USSBS%20Effects%20of%20Strategic%20Bombing%20Japanese%20Morale.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2014/december/americas-undersea-war-shipping>

Japan, “military chiefs” “reign supreme”. Given the times and the fact that Japan is poor in natural resources, it was inevitable that Japan turned to overseas colonialism to feed her people and to feed her industrial machine. Bywater’s pre-war Japan shamelessly grabs large swaths of land all over China, well beyond strategically critical Manchuria, for entirely selfish purposes. Readers are told that the Japanese start a war, in part, to protect their interests from American encroachment. At the same time America is portrayed by Bywater as a benevolent guardian of China, unsullied by base economic or political considerations. Bywater assumes that readers have forgotten that the US as well as European colonialists and Communist Russia had substantial economic and political interests throughout China. Indeed, mainstream historians studiously gloss over the fact that the grandfather of the US’s “greatest president,” Franklin Delano Roosevelt, built the family fortune as an opium dealer in China.⁵

The key reason Bywater’s Japan goes to war is that the government sought to unify the nation to prevent a Communist revolution by Japanese “workers”. Bywater’s Japan is inexplicably filled with Communist agitators. Somehow, an alien ideology fundamentally incompatible with Japanese culture, which demands the overthrow of the Imperial line, infected the thinking of “large sections of the people”. Nonetheless, “organized labour” demands the release of arrested Communists and riots ensue when the government rejects their demands.

Laughably, “organized labour” declare a general strike “on January 2, 1931...” In fact, the first three days of the new year are usually holidays in Japan. “Organized labour” should have waited until Monday the 5th.

In any event, riots break out throughout the capital and army troops (some units balked at shooting at civilians and even mutinied!) are called in to suppress them, resulting in numerous martyrs for the revolution. A few days later an assassination attempt on “Prime Minister Prince Kawamura” in the lobby of the Diet fails. That evening, the Cabinet devises a secret plan to divert the peoples’ attention from “grave domestic troubles” and to unite “the nation” via a “strong foreign policy” -- a policy that includes war against the US, as well as to protect existing Japanese interests in China from the US. Readers are also told that “unified” and militarized China, financed and armed by the US, is now a grave threat to Japanese interest.⁶

There is nothing really outlandish in the suggestion that governments will resort to “wag the dog” tactics, to use war as a distraction from domestic policy disasters. The “greatest

⁵ Bradley, J. (2009). *The Imperial Cruise*. NY, NY: Little, Brown and Co.

⁶ In fact, the Nationalist Chinese army were nothing more than bandits (“locust troops”) armed by the government and remained so despite US funding—if any of it was left after skimming from high ranking officers for foot soldiers. Bradley, J. (2015). *The China Mirage*. NY, NY: Little, Brown and Co. Wedemeyer, AC. (1958). *Wedemeyer Reports!* NY, NY: Holt.

president” Roosevelt is still regarded as a master class example of this kind of leadership slight-of-hand.⁷ For the Japanese in real-life, one can say that something opposite of a secret, nefarious conspiracy directed their foreign policy—the Japanese leadership shambled into an eventually ruinous Pacific war with the US and an unsustainable land war in China.

What Bywater’s attitudes were toward non-white, particularly Japanese, immigration to white countries is not clear but one can make a close approximation. Given an active anti-Asian exclusion movement in the West Coast of Canada and the US, the anti-Asian riots in 1907 in the US and the subsequent Gentlemen’s Agreement and the Immigration Act of 1924, Bywater likely reflected the feelings of most whites, uneasiness at best, racial hysteria at worst.

In Bywater’s Oahu, readers are expected to believe that those of Japanese ancestry, about 40% of the population, will take up arms against the US military. Bywater insinuates that the insurrection was started by a blend of local Japanese agitators and agents of the Imperial Japanese government. The relevance of this paranoid depiction of Japanese treason within the context of Bywater’s hypothetical war is not at all clear. The uprising was snuffed out in a few days by US armor units but there was no follow up Japanese invasion of the Hawaiian Islands. Even if Bywater’s Japanese military captured Hawaii, the Islands are so far from Japan that re-supply—Hawaii is entirely dependent on imported fuel and food—would have been impossible and ultimately a huge Japanese tactical mistake. Bywater’s real reason to show Japanese people running amok is to throw out suggestions on what to do with the Japanese in America (he does not distinguish between US citizens and non-citizens) just in case, including shipping them “en bloc” to the US or putting them in a “concentration camp in the island of Niihau [sic]”. The final option Bywater mentions, favored by the “local officials” is to leave the Japanese alone. In fact, this was the real-life option and no Japanese-led armed uprising occurred in Hawaii before or during World War II. The Franklin Roosevelt Administration in 1942, however, did not need a techno-thriller to tell it to set up the War Relocation Authority and forcibly remove all Japanese from the US West Coast.

⁷ “The United States and the Road to War in Europe”, Tansill, C.C., in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*. Ed., Barnes, H.E. 1953. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers. FDR’s New Deal policies, in some cases, worsened the depression-sacked US economy. Flynn, J.T. (1948). *The Roosevelt Myth*. Devin-Adair Co.: NY, NY.