



## **Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945**

*Rana Mitter*

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For decades, a major piece of World War II history has gone virtually unwritten. China was the fourth great ally, partner to the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, yet its drama of invasion, resistance, slaughter, and political intrigue remains little known in the West.

In this emotionally gripping book, made possible through access to newly unsealed Chinese archives, Rana Mitter unfurls the story of China's World War II as never before and rewrites the larger history of the war in the process. He focuses his narrative on three towering leaders — Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong, and the lesser-known collaborator Wang Jingwei — and extends the timeline of the war back to 1937, when Japanese and Chinese troops began to clash, fully two years before Hitler invaded Poland.

Unparalleled in its research and scope, *Forgotten Ally* is a sweeping, character-driven history that will be essential reading not only for anyone with an interest in World War II, but also for those seeking to understand today's China, where, as Mitter reveals, the echoes of the war still reverberate.

## **Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945 Details**

Date : Published September 10th 2013 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN :

Author : Rana Mitter

Format : Kindle Edition 464 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, China, Nonfiction, War, World War II, Japan, Asia, Military, Military History, World History, Military Fiction



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## From Reader Review Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945 for online ebook

### Jarvo says

If you were brought up in the 1970's you thought you knew about the second world war, it was on the telly every sunday afternoon if not more frequently. You knew someone who had a relative who fought in it. It was about the Battle of Britain, D-Day, Dunkirk and desert rats. If you watched American films you probably found out that there was a war in the Pacific, which was fought by the US navy and by marines. You got a bit older and you found out something about the holocaust.

You didn't yet know that the most important and decisive battles were fought in Russia and in Eastern Europe, and that more Russians died than people of any other nationality. You certainly didn't know that the war actually began in 1937, and that between 14 and 20 million Chinese people died as a direct or indirect consequence of a war with Japan that lasted 8 years.

This is an exceptional work of narrative history, which will put you right on these and many other points. It gives a clear account of the circumstances through which the war arose, the conduct of the war itself, and its consequences which are still with us. It is particularly interesting on the role of Chiang Kai Shek, and the Nationalist government, who have generally been synonymous with corruption and repression. Mitter gives more credit to Chiang than that, arguing that he was badly served by his western allies and was fighting a lone hand against difficult odds for much of this period. Ultimately Chiang won the war simply by enduring, but it was Mao and the communists, who had kept their powder dry for much of the war, who were to take the spoils of victory.

In retrospect it is clear that the war in China is a turning point in modern history, and that in a sense the modern Chinese nation was formed in this brutal furnace. China emerged from the war a sovereign power, after long period of colonial dominance, a crucial staging post on its road to becoming a more important power than most of those it fought or sought to engage with during the war.

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### Mikey B. says

This book gives a history of China covering mainly events from 1937 when Japan invaded China. The Japanese were in Manchukuo (Manchuria) prior, but this was seen as being peripheral to China proper. We are given the Chinese viewpoint on how western powers (mainly England and the U.S.), and then the Japanese, constantly treated China as a "territory" to be exploited. Chinese sovereignty was hardly recognized by any outside power.

There are three main characters focused on: Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of nationalist China, Mao Zedong, the leader of China's Communist Party, and the rather enigmatic Wang Jingwei, who was initially a Chinese nationalist revolutionary (and follower of Sun Yat-sen the father of modern Chinese nationalism), but then in 1938 collaborated with the Japanese to try to establish peace in China and I also feel to assume the reins of power.

Chiang was recognized by the outside world and the Japanese as being the "ruler" of unoccupied China. The author is overly lenient in his treatment of Chiang. His leadership of the military and the Chinese people was inept. Corruption was rampant. Chiang must be held responsible for this – but the author hardly dwells on the implications of Chiang's nefarious years of power. He defends Chiang by arguing that China was already

a backward and exploited country which is true. However in all his years at the helm the situation never got better, in fact there was constant deterioration. Chinese troops were paid little, if at all, and they were poorly fed; some of their officers became rich and exploited the millions of poor peasants in the countryside.

Fighting the Japanese occupiers was sometimes just not a priority in Chiang's armies. The communists by contrast were far better organized and at least had programs in place to alleviate the peasants.

The author does well to point out that each group – Chiang, Mao and Wang Jingwei all had their own vicious police states. None were interested in establishing a liberal democracy (Wang Jingwei had little effective say in this, as he was a puppet of the Japanese). Also Chiang faced much more of the Japanese army than Mao did. Mao, in later years, tended to over-emphasize the impact the communists had in combating the Japanese.

The book provides us with the various stages of China's years of cruel occupation by Japan. Western aid (mostly from the U.S.) was insufficient (and from other books, like *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China* a lot of money went into the coffers of corrupt Chinese officials).

The author points out how Chiang Kai-shek was the only non-European leader, if somewhat overlooked, in the Allied coalition that was to become the U.N. We are also shown how the Japanese tried – and partially succeeded – in convincing the Chinese to enter and collaborate into their vision of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere”. But to this day this is hardly discussed in China.

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### **Chin Joo says**

This book is published in two different titles: 1) *China's War with Japan 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival*, and 2) *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II 1937-1945*. This review is made with reference to the latter.

The use of the first title conjures an impression of a chronicle, recording the events that took place in China between 1937 and 1945. In this, the author has exceeded the promise of the title. In fact, to his credit, Dr Mitter even went way back to the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) albeit briefly, an era commonly ignored by most scholars. This reminder is important for two reasons. First of all, it was then that the Japanese began to station troops on the Asian mainland (in Korea). Second, it became a base from which Japan fought the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) which really represented when the Japanese infringed upon China's territory.

The focus of the book however starts from 1937, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which started off as 'just another skirmish' but took an unexpected turn when Chiang Kai-shek decided that he would make a stand and opened another front in Shanghai. From there the author took us through all the major events ending eventually with Japan's surrender. In between he culled documents and sources including diaries, official party documents, and reports from journalists to provide vivid details of the Nationalists' feeble attempts to govern 'Free China', their efforts to undermine the Communists, to draw any country into the war to help them, and to manage the aftermath of the defection of important party members, while fighting and initially retreating from city to city. Equally vivid are the descriptions of how the civilians caught in the war suffered from poverty, starvation, rape, and official corruption.

But if the first title reads rather blandly, the second title 'Forgotten Ally' proposes a thesis which the author made very clear - China was the forgotten ally of the allied forces in the Second World War. This powerful position can only come into consideration after Pearl Harbor, when Japan in a span of two days made itself

the enemy of at least four other countries, the US, Britain, Australia and the Netherlands. The word Ally therefore was only relevant in the later part of the book. The main argument of the author is the Western powers are now at war with Japan, and China being also at war with Japan has become an ally to them and had even fought alongside them on at least one occasion (Burma). But even if that had not been the case, China has tied about half a million Japanese soldiers which might have been deployed against the Western powers, that would have qualified China as an ally. I do not feel qualified to dispute the thesis, rather I would like to offer my reflection on the significance of the worth Forgotten.

Dr Mitter was clear about who the forgotten party was and seen from the Nationalists' perspective, it would probably aptly describe their sense of indignation. They had been fighting the allies' enemy for six years before the Allies themselves entered the war. If China was by then "a battered nation on its knees, waiting for the Americans and British to save it from certain destruction at the hands of the Japanese", it could be partly attributed to, as the book made clear, the fact that they had been fighting the Japanese alone. Yet one can hardly blame the West for seeing it this way, for Japan, while surely on their radar even prior to December 1941, was secondary in relation to Germany then. Had Japan not made the blunder of attacking Pearl Harbor, their invasion of South East Asia would have at most threatened the European colonies, and not the European homeland, it would still have been of secondary importance.

Other reasons also made 'forgotten' inevitable. Firstly, the question of whether China really did contribute to the fighting (when they seem to lose on all fronts, not helped by the opinion of Stilwell) or whether it was just a corrupt regime always seeking more from the Allies (Chiang's request for a US\$1 billion loan certainly did not help) also left many questions of China's position and value as an ally in the minds of the US and Britain. Secondly, the cold war narrative also quickly distorted the history of that time, focusing people's attention on China's political ideology rather than their history in the Second World War. Finally, the outcome of the civil war in China meant that certain events must be emphasised, others diminished, and some invented.

Which brings me to this question I had as I read the book - who was forgotten really? If the answer is China, then who in China? The situation in China then reminded me of China during the warring states (between 481 BC and 403 BC) when at one stage China was divided into three kingdoms (????), only this time among the Nationalists, the Communists, and the Japanese (through Wang Jinwei's Reorganized National Government of China). And if the West can be accused of forgetting their Nationalists allies as the author implies, then whatever the Nationalists did right (among the many wrongs) was comprehensively eradicated by the Communists when they came to power (see pg 333-334). And to be fair, post-Second World War and even current Chinese discourse on that part of history hardly give enough credits to the West (used loosely here) too.

I cannot accuse the author of falling short in his effort to support his thesis, he might have felt that the two-thirds of the book before China became an 'ally' was necessary to provide the context but that leaves only the last third of the book to try and develop his argument. I also feel that too little was given on the Communists side of the story, perhaps because in the context of actually fighting the Japanese they haven't done much. One last question was whether Russia was as inconsequential to the events in China as it seemed, for very little was said about them throughout. Still, for anyone who wants a source of information on that period of history in China this book is indispensable. Dr Mitter, with his great scholarship, vivid descriptions, and dynamic style will take you on a thought-provoking ride through his riveting narrative.

(As you read Chapter 11, ask yourself what you would do if you were in Zhou Fohai's position.)

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## **Lynda says**

Rana Mitter's 'Forgotten Ally' is a page-turner, well-written, and well-organized. Of the three leading male figures cited by Rana\_Mao Zedong, Wang Jing Wei and Chiang Kai-Shek\_Chiang takes up the most real estate in the book; that is not surprising since it was Chiang who did most of the heavy lifting when it came to resisting and fighting the Japanese and Japanese imperialism during eight long years of battle from 1937-1945. The book gives credit to Chiang's efforts, albeit flawed, troubled, and controversial, in trying to save China, and perhaps rest of Asia, from Japanese imperialism. He succeeded but he did not win China as we all know. For those who are interested in the topic of collaboration between the Chinese and Japanese during WW2 and thus who might be familiar with the figure of Wang Jing Wei, it came as a bit of a surprise that the author took a somewhat sympathetic view towards Wang, who continues to this day to be considered the greatest traitor of China. Reading another book 'Wartime Shanghai', further contributes to one's understanding around the complexities of the problem of collaboration, and that Wang's stance was not entirely evil, but one of pragmatic concern, to try to buy time, appease the Japanese, and to try to save China from further destruction. Mao did not contribute heavily to the War of Resistance, instead leaving the Nationalists to lead the protracted battle on their own. Mao used his time wisely at his base in Yan'an, conserving his energy, writing up his political doctrine and thoughts, mobilizing his troops and rallying up peasant support by stirring up nationalism in the face of Japanese imperialism, and antagonism, in the face of corrupt and inept Nationalist policies contributing to society's ills, all of which helped contribute to his rise to power and victory over the Nationalists (Kuomintang) in 1949.

Chiang is indeed a controversial figure, often criticized, berated, misunderstood, and whose country was oftentimes not worthy of strategic consideration by the other 3 major Allies: Britain, United States and USSR. The Nationalists under Chiang's command continued their lonely and weary struggle to contain the Japanese incursion into China (US air force was based in China but was more symbolic and did not join in the fighting). The well-known 'toxic relationship' between Joseph Stilwell (Chiang's chief of staff) and Chiang Kai Shek, is vividly described. 'Vinegar Joe' really was a thorn on Chiang's side. It is difficult to appreciate what positive contributions were made by Stilwell whose blunders in Burma cost Chiang whose troops could have been deployed to fend off the Japanese from making further advances in central and southern China. However, there are other books written about Stilwell which cast a very positive light on him. Chiang was not perfect by any means, but he was persistent, hard-working and determined to fight to the end at all costs. The chapter on 'Hunger in Henan' can jolt any reader. It is one of many topics and episodes in the War of Resistance which behooves later generations to try to better understand what previous generations in China had to endure during WW2. The book is important reading for China watchers and to help us better understand the roots of Sino-Japan antagonism.

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## **Brian says**

*Forgotten Ally* recounts the history of China's role in World War II from both an external power perspective and the internal struggle between the nationalists and the communists. Covering the year of 1937-1945 (invasion of Manchuria until the peace treaty) the book looks at how China was the sole defender against Axis aggression before the war began. Mitter also makes the case that despite the desperate hour of Great Britain standing alone during the Blitz; China stood alone far longer and was forced to make due with less. Arguing against the corruption of Chiang Kai-shek and focusing on the contributions China made to bottling up the Japanese and assisting with the troubled area of Burma in the British Empire. Mitter does an excellent job of showing the geopolitics that shaped China's role and also looking at the internal struggles that worked

against China in making a strong defense against the Japanese. The struggle between Chiang and Mao Zedong (as well as Wang Jingwei) is covered in detail throughout the book and sets the stage for what would occur in China following the war. The brutal nature of Chinese politics is covered and done so with an expert eye to detail. Overall if you are looking for a book that will give sufficient detail and new insights into China's role in World War II you cannot go wrong with this one.

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### **Tim Pendry says**

This is a useful but flawed account of an important theatre of war in the struggle of liberal internationalism (Western imperialism) and socialism against the attempted imperialisms of rising powers.

The story has two contemporary sets of resonance - the obvious one is the tricky current state of Sino-Japanese relations that has Westerners rushing to books like this. The less obvious is the attempt by the West to answer the question, 'what to do with rising powers?'

On the surface it is traditional narrative history. It starts at the beginning (what led up to the Marco Polo Bridge incident, the 'Sarajevo' of eight years of slaughter) through to the surprise ending - the 'deus ex machina' of the Atom Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

With the usual unconscious racism of the Western armchair liberal, the debates on the use of the Bomb usually wonder about the dreadful morality of wiping out 100,000 persons in a few days in terms of saved men and materiel for the West.

A more open view would throw into the pot the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of Chinese and Japanese lives saved from not going down the Nazi route of a year or two of mayhem as Japan fought to the end despite its prospect of certain defeat.

Between 8 million and 20 million, variously estimated, died in those eight years with perhaps three to four million the victims of first the deliberate flooding of Henan and then its appalling famine (Mitter also notes the estimated 3m who died in a similar Indian wartime famine).

The whole business is another story of 'things getting out of control' with millions being disrupted, starved, conscripted, terrorised and murdered as a few 'big men' squabble for advantage and for 'values' that are often noble enough but equally as often hypocritical.

It is a story played out almost continuously even today - Africa being the current playground for 'big men' and psychopaths of all 'moral' persuasions. We should be pleased the rising thuggery of new empires was suppressed but it was not a simple tale of good and evil.

The flaws in the book, however, detract from its usefulness as analytical tool although the 'further reading' at the back is useful for anyone wanting to delve deeper.

Above all, the book often reads like an unjustifiable apologia for Chiang Kai-Shek, warlord leader of the Nationalist Chinese with most claim to legitimacy as ruler of China. It certainly spends more time on the squabble with General Stilwell than a straight narrative deserves.

What is going on here? The reality is that, legitimate though he was, Chiang Kai-Shek was soon run out of town (the core of China in the East) and was not much more than a superior warlord from an earlier era.

He could speak for China and for millions of men but he had proved an unimaginative and narcissistic leader before the Marco Polo Bridge incident and was not much better after it. Mitter justifiably contextualises his decisions but they were more often than not poor.

Most of the non-Communist warlords in the south marked time under his leadership but his control was limited, while the Communists under Mao cannily created a state within a state in North West China that treated the peasantry as if they mattered instead of as fodder.

By the time the Americans arrived (and the Communists are almost exclusively seen through American eyes by 1942/3 as Mittar swerves off into analyses of thinking in Washington), Chiang's China was virtually being re-colonised by the US by stealth without benefit to the people.

The blunders of Stilwell and the Americans can be charitably put down to them 'learning on the job' as they slowly displaced the British Empire as global arbiter. US foreign policy does not really settle down into full competence until after the McCarthy blood-letting.

Mitter's attempt to recover Chiang's reputation by pointing out the new status given to China in the 'UN' holds little water. Yes, this was a fact on the ground and it portended great things, a benefit that India failed to achieve, but China was always a tool under Chiang.

In essence, China held down some 600,000 Japanese troops and that was important for the Allied war effort but it presupposes that this was always in the interests of the Chinese who died in huge numbers holding together a ramshackle strategy of mere survival.

It is noticeable that in the struggle against the last Japanese offensive - like the last push of the Germans in 1918 - Nationalist troops were attacked by Henan peasants who had suffered deliberate flooding and then famine, fertile ground for communism later.

The second flaw is associated with the first. Mittel devotes about the right amount of space to the Communists in Yan'an but his coverage is still cursory and lacking in analysis. His great lack is any serious investigation of Japanese thinking and Japanese motives.

This is highly problematic. The book is about the Japanese war on China. That means it is about both main participants and the whole war zone yet we hear virtually nothing of East China other than Nanking and little of Japanese-collaborationist dealings.

He devotes a great deal of attention to the Petain of China - Wang Jingwei and his circle - but always in the light of them being implicitly honourable Nationalists who got it wrong.

This misses the point - they were naive and 'useful idiots' but there were important ideological and practical Japanese reasons for creating 'Vichy' regimes across Asia and for nationalists to choose what they thought might be the lesser evil. We get little sense of this.

Right or wrong, what was actually happening in the huge area of East China under Japanese rule needs to be explained in terms of Japanese conduct on the ground after the Rape of Nanking and of the motivations for Chinese collaborationism and resistance.

By the second half of the war, just as the National Socialists could put 'national' SS divisions into the field against the Soviets so there were substantial collaborationist Chinese troops fighting against the nationalists alongside the Japanese in the final offensive.

This has to be explained. It cannot be explained by giving excessive coverage to the superior warlord's dealings with Washington and almost completely neglecting the dynamic between Tokyo and Nanking except in terms of the factional struggles of a few failed politicians.

The net effect is that we have a book that does not take the detached and cold view of the struggle that we need to have in order to assist with the analysis of the twin issues noted at the beginning of this review - Sino-Japanese relations and the rise of new powers.

Instead, what we have is another easy read for liberal internationalists that seems intended to guide them through the group think politics of their own side rather than assist in understanding complexity and think about the unthinkable.

It is a morale-booster that seems to say that the 'real' China was only accidentally corrupt and incompetent and that if we (the West) had behaved in different ways and taken a flawed great man at face value, things would have been better. It is like a polemic for the past!

However, there is lot to learn from this book - about Mao's genius for making inaction look like action, about the cynicism of the Allies, about the delusions of the Japanese elite, about the resilience and humanity of the Chinese people and about the chaos of war.

One lesson is fascinating and well taught. Under conditions of war and threat, all three regimes in China turned to terror to try and hold power - Mao's reined in his intellectuals and mobilised the peasantry with the help of the Yezhov-trained Kang Sheng but he was not alone.

Chiang used the dedicated monster Dai Li (with the close co-operation of the Americans) to eliminate opposition to a regime that was really not much different from those targeted in Libya and Syria more recently. Chiang was not a democrat but an authoritarian militarist.

Wang Jingwei hired politicised gangsters to do much the same in Nanking from a class which, in Shanghai, had helped Chiang himself on his road to power. Even today, it is clear that, after seventy years of Communist 'totalitarianism', South China's gangster culture thrives.

Although the victor Mao adopted techniques later that taught Pol Pot and the extremists in North Korea their techniques of terror and power, thuggery arose on all sides out of warfare and whatever state might have emerged, none would have had much truck with 'human rights'.

This makes any attempt to make the 'less worse' seem good rather futile - Chiang murdered 800,000 Chinese in a somewhat poorly thought-out tactical attempt to slow down the Japanese by breaching the dams on the Yellow River. No wonder the Henanese peasants were obstructive!

At the end of the day, the whole debacle came down to an incident where a rising power thought that it had rights, demonstrated by its imperial enemies in the Opium Wars and subsequently, to use force to extract concessions on spurious grounds against a weak target.

That the target was weak was definitely not the fault of Chiang Kai-Shek. He was dealt an appalling set of

cards but, given the realities of the situation, his decisions tended to make things worse, starting with his initial 'Night of the Long Knives' against the Reds.

Still, the book remains a valuable narrative introduction to one of the nastiest wars in an era of nasty wars. It left this reader with an abiding sense of solidarity with the Chinese people if not their leaderships.

Above all, I have come to admire the achievement of China in not merely holding itself together but appearing to cohere into a Great Power that has managed, through the construction of its own creation myth, to bind together the East, the Party and the nationalist impulse into one.

The nervousness of the West - and the margin states of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan and perhaps Vietnam and the Philippines as well - is understandable but it may be that the US in particular is still not learning the lessons of the 1940s.

The book reminds us of the fragility of the Communist 'achievement'. The European Union is now seeing old interwar attitudes re-emerge in troubled economies - notably Spain and Eastern Europe - and there is no reason why something similar might not happen in China.

In its hour of greatest need, 'Free China' needed unconditional love like the battered child it was but instead it got used as a tool and was patronised by its equals - no wonder its successors are disinclined to trust anyone but their own instinct for tough love.

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### **Greg says**

This book was both an enlightening and a depressing experience to read: enlightening, because I learned much I did not know before of this phase of the World War II theatre, and depressing, because Mr. Mitter's narrative vividly portrays the continuously unfolding horrors visited upon the Chinese people during these years. While I have been aware since my graduate student days of the multiple millions of deaths suffered by the Russian people during World War II, I was stunned to learn that upwards of 20 million Chinese died as a consequence of Japanese attempts to subdue China.

Accordingly, I wish this book could be required reading in the United States, as it would significantly assist American citizens to understand the remarkable progress made by China in a very short time, as well as the ongoing dynamics of the tensions between China and Japan. I certainly better appreciate why Chinese leadership and the people of China are so quick to bristle at any evidence that Japan is moving towards once again emphasizing "national patriotism," while concurrently seeking to alter the pacifistic Constitution imposed upon Japan by the Americans following the end of W.W. II. I am also deeply alarmed at these developments!

Mr. Mitter also does a very good job illustrating the complexity of Chinese domestic politics during the long period following the sad denouement of Sun Yat-Sen's revolution, including the post World War II armed struggle in China between Mao Zedong's Communist forces and the conservative armies of the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek following the defeat of Japan. While it is clear that both men played a crucial role in defending China against the Japanese, I see how difficult it must be for the Chinese people, on the one hand, to balance acknowledging that the Nationalist troops valiantly fought against the Japanese invaders, while on the other to appropriately honoring the critical importance that Mao's vision and force of personality played in ultimately unifying China and creating the groundwork for the resurgent China of the 21st Century. (For in my own country, over 150 years since the outbreak of our own civil war in the mid-19th Century,

Americans continue to obsess in assessing, interpreting, and differing over the causes behind, and the meaning of, this pivotal period. As a consequence, passions still flare up occasionally between Northerners and Southerners, and the poison of centuries of discrimination against black people still distorts our civil discourse.)

This book could also provide the West with much needed perspective on the complicated history of Chinese-Western inter-relationships. China's ongoing suspicions of the West's intentions have their roots in an unsavory past in which the West regularly interfered with China, treating its ancient culture with insulting disrespect. If today's Chinese government occasionally strikes some in the West as being "overly assertive," this may be in part because we still subconsciously expect China to "remember its place," and to maintain its former deference to Western powers. While as an historian I was aware of the shameful way China had been repeatedly treated throughout the 19th century by Western powers, I did not realize before reading this book how poorly China was often treated even as an ally of the Western powers during World War II. The following passage from *Forgotten Ally* [pp. 243-44] provides but one example.

The problem was that the Chinese and the Westerners looked at China's role through almost entirely different lenses. To the Western Allies, China was a supplicant, a battered nation on its knees, waiting for the Americans and British to save it from certain destruction at the hands of the Japanese. In Chiang's view and that of many Chinese, their country was the first and most consistent foe of Axis aggression. Despite numerous opportunities to withdraw from the conflict, China had fought on when the prospects of outside assistance seemed hopeless, and it now deserved to be treated as an equal power.

The United States itself waxed warm and cool towards China in the '30s and '40s. On the one hand, President Roosevelt was personally sympathetic to the Chinese and, despite British concerns over implications that a strong China might have for its still extensive colonial holdings in Southeast Asia, he strongly supported a role for China as an equal. However, the figure sent by America to act as the principal liaison between the U.S. and China – General Joseph Stilwell – repeatedly clashed with Chiang Kai-shek, placing his own judgment as to the appropriate use of Chinese troops before those of the Chinese leader. He even came to despise Kai-shek, referring to him privately as "the Peanut." (In reading about Stilwell I often winced, for he seemed to embody one of the types of "ugly Americans" who have so often annoyed other cultures – an arrogant, self-righteous individual who was unaware that he was, in fact, not nearly as bright as he thought he was.)

Despite the difficulties Stilwell caused, the over-all American reaction to Mao initially ranged from neutral to positive. Of course, the fact that he was a Communist rattled many cages in Washington, but his clarity of purpose, demonstrated organizational skills, and obvious concern for the peasantry near his organizational headquarters in Yan'an made a very positive impression upon several American visitors, civilian and military alike. In contrast, while Chiang Kai-shek came across as forcefully anti-communist, his preference for hierarchical structures, and seeming relative unconcern for non-soldiers, left most American visitors with a less positive impression.

When the war ended more quickly than either Mao or Chiang thought likely, the United States tried to arbitrate some form of workable compromise between Chiang and Mao in order to avoid the continued disruption that a civil war would bring. However, their differences in vision for the future of China were so vast that this effort was doomed from the beginning. America's right wing seized upon Mao's subsequent triumph in 1949 as evidence of how the "liberals" in Washington had "lost" China (as if China belonged to anyone other than the Chinese people!). That charge was part and parcel of a right-wing resurgence in America, fueled both by the soon-to-emerge Korean conflict and the irresponsible charges of widespread communist infiltration throughout all levels of American government by Wisconsin's Senator McCarthy, whose witch-hunts dressed up as congressional hearings were telecast nation-wide. This ugly period within the United States helped further poison relations with China for decades.

In fact, it was only after the Republican President Nixon's remarkable decision to visit China in the '70s – and his gracious reception by the Chinese leadership on that occasion – that matters slowly began to turn back toward a more hopeful direction.

In these opening decades of the 21st Century, where China is clearly destined to be the equal of the United States in economic and military power, we must wonder: Are we doomed to continually replay the missteps of the past? Or are both sides capable of freeing themselves from the ideological shackles that distort what is possible while also masking new opportunities?

Right wing forces in the United States continue to argue that China "cannot be trusted," for they believe that is the nature of communistic and single party states to be a danger to "free" societies. In their opinion, the U.S. posture toward China should be similar to that adopted by this country towards Soviet Russia in the years following the Cold War in which we sought to encircle the Soviet Union with commercial and military alliances which would stay its possible aggression against its neighbors.

The errors behind such arguments are many. American leadership failed from the beginning to recognize that one of the primary reasons Stalin was trying to erect his own network of friendly states was in order to reduce the likelihood of yet another invasion of Russia from the West. He remembered, although it seems that many in the West did not, that it was Russia who had been invaded by the French in 1812 and by the Germans in 1941. Further, Stalin recalled the intervention by several Western powers in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 when the West sought to assist the "Whites" in their struggle against the "Red" armies as that revolution played out.

In many ways, China's current position is similar to the situation facing my own young country in the early 19th century: growing in both self-confidence and power, yet aware of the historically unfriendly – even hostile – posture of existing powers (Western and Asian), and seeking to demonstrate its earned right to be treated as an equal among nations. If only the United States would recognize this opportunity to create a true partnership with China – one obviously based first and foremost upon equal respect and working towards a relationship of mutual trust and inter-reliance – there is every likelihood that these two countries could work together to create, and maintain, the conditions for peace and stability in Asia and elsewhere.

The challenge is probably equally great for both countries. As the established superpower, I think it only proper that the United States be the first to offer a genuine hand of friendship. Suspicion and distrust will likely linger for some time, but the more Chinese-American communication and cooperation spreads at all levels – between governments and military, of course, but also between citizens – the more likely that genuine friendship based upon mutual respect will result.

The alternative, returning to the old days of power politics, has already shown in the past century how futile is that course. Do we have the courage to try a new way? For all the dead – Chinese, Russian, Asian, European and American – who have paid the price beyond measure – we had better try.

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## **Qmmayer says**

This book provides an overview of China's pivotal role in WWII, and to the extent that readers are unfamiliar with that history, it is a useful corrective.

But its true aims lie deeper: it is unapologetically a revisionist history, designed to rehabilitate the image of Chiang Kai-shek and emphasize the role of the Nationalists in resisting the Japanese invasion. In doing so, the author also makes clear the relatively small contributions of the Communist forces and goes to great lengths to critique the actions of Joseph Stilwell, the Allies' representative in China and a constant irritant to Chiang. In the latter respect, the book feels like a response to Barbara Tuchman's *Stillwell and the American Experience in China*, a generally well-regarded pro-Stilwell biography that did much to lock in the

unflattering image of Chiang for Western observers.

While I enjoyed the book as a condensed review of China's role in the Second World War, I felt that the author overreached in his goals. I will say I gained a greater appreciation of the sacrifices by the Nationalist forces. From this book, it would seem that the Communists spent most of their energies regrouping during the war and positioning themselves for the inevitable power struggle to come, a charge often aimed at the Nationalists. The book also offers insights into some of the thinking of the Chinese participants in the collaboration government with the Japanese.

However, I still harbor doubts about the quality of Chiang's leadership. While he may have been the only person able to hold together China's fragile coalition of warlords, emerging business class, and factional armed forces, his political instincts appear to be his primary strength. *Forgotten Ally* is still left to wrestle with his disastrous tactical decisions, most glaringly breaching a dike to slow the Japanese army, which resulted in the death of up to a half-million people (and likely only slightly delayed the army's march) and the intentional burning of the city Changsha by retreating Nationalists, although the Japanese wouldn't reach the city for years. The book also acknowledges the endemic corruption that plagued the government and the failure of the Nationalists to adequately address a devastating famine in one province that ultimately killed millions. In passing, the book acknowledges that during the civil war with the Communists, Chiang was unable to achieve any notable military victories and severely misjudged the strength of his opposition, a concession that seems to me to cast doubt on his abilities as a military leader. Indeed, the only Nationalist military victories against the Japanese proved fleeting. Chiang's greatest asset may simply have been his stubborn resolve.

Moreover, the extensive portions of the book focused on J. Stilwell struck me as unjustifiably harsh. The author lambastes Stilwell for "abandon[ing]" Chinese troops as part of a failed campaign in Burma despite -- according to Tuchman's book -- that he did so under direct orders. And the book ignores the fact that Stilwell remained in the area to ensure that retreating armies were supplied with rice and refused air transport in order to stay with 100+ military and civilian refugees on a perilous march to safety. Tuchman's book also provides needed context for Stilwell's defeat, in which he was frustrated by fickle British support and reluctant Chinese participation.

Tuchman unquestionably had an anti-Chiang bias. As one point, she notes that he had a "dictator's instinct for balconies." *Forgotten Ally* returns the favor for Stilwell: after the defeat in Burma, Stilwell told the press that they had taken a "hell of a beating." Yet the book leads in to that quote with the statement that Stilwell was "never one to miss the opportunity for good press," a peculiar jab given his unflattering candor. While I have not gone back to Tuchman's book to review all of the points raised against Stilwell, the description of the initial Burma defeat did much in my mind to cast doubt on *Forgotten Ally*'s objectivity.

Ultimately, I was not fully convinced by *Forgotten Ally*. While Tuchman's book needs more balance to fully credit the Nationalist's contributions, I don't think that *Forgotten Ally* should be read in isolation. Still, the Japanese aggression in Asia, the Allies' shabby treatment of China during the war, and the Nationalist's resistance are all critical for understanding China today, and it is good that this book provides additional information on each.

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### **R.M.F Brown says**

If you've never read a book about the Sino - Japanese war of 1937-45, then this is an excellent book for the

layman - clear, concise, easy to read, without ever being simplistic - no mean feat.

If you have read about this period, then this is still a good book, but Fenby in his autobiography about Chiang Kai-Shek covers the same ground in more detail.

That being said, the bibliography and source material the author drew upon is first rate (as you would expect from a historian of his standing) and add greatly to the text.

I would take issue with the author's view that this was the first chapter of the Second World War. In my view, brutal though the conflict was, it was a regional war between two rivals. Logically, you could say the same about the European theatre in 1939, but the difference there is that France and Britain had global empires (and in Britain's case drew heavily on troops from the dominions)

A minor quibble to be sure, but don't let that detract from what is an excellent text.

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### **Mark says**

The English-language bibliography of the Second World War is faced with an odd contradiction: while there is no shortage of books about the conflict, there are still not enough of them. This is because for all of the thousands of tomes weighing down the shelves of libraries and bookstores the majority of them are concentrated in a few key areas, namely the war in Europe (particularly in Western Europe) and in the Pacific. As a result, English-language readers have an often distorted view of the conflict, one that ironically ignores its global nature.

Among the fronts of the war that are under-addressed, none is more so than the war in China. To be fair there are good reasons for this, such as the language difficulties and the challenges of archival access for some of the major governments involved in it. The lack of attention is inexcusable nevertheless, especially since many historians have argued that the start of the war that consumed the world can be traced to China, with the outbreak of fighting between units of the Japanese and Nationalist Chinese armies near Beijing in 1937. Because of this, people are left with the duality of a lack of understanding about the origins of the most widely written about war in human history, along with an attending absence of awareness about the course of the fighting in that region and the impact on the postwar world.

It is for this reason why Rana Mitter's book is welcome. His study of the war waged in China begins to fill the gap in our understanding by providing a broad survey of events that fits them within the context of modern Chinese history. This allows him to fit the war both within the matrix of China's international relations and the dramatic political and military struggles within China that preceded the outbreak of the war with Japan. While he structures his narrative around the three major leaders of China during the war, his main focus is on Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China. This focus allows Mitter to challenge many Western (primarily American) conceptions of the war in eastern Asia, as he pushes back against the traditional narrative of a corrupt regime incompetently fighting the war by detailing the challenges Chiang faced and the strains of the war upon his country, noting that by the time Japanese bombs fell on the American ships in Pearl Harbor China had already been at war against Japan for four years and had already lost the most valuable regions of their country to the enemy. Yet despite this Mitter describes the efforts by China to continue their effort, often in the face of indifference from the Western Allies and the outright hostility of their representatives in the country.

Mitter's book is a powerful corrective to our skewed misunderstanding of a key front in the global conflict, one in which hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops were committed throughout the fighting. Yet in many respects it is only a first effort of what is needed. The book reflects Mitter's specialization in Chinese history, and while he addresses the other participants his analysis of American and British strategy is disappointingly narrow considering the enormous amount of material available to him. His coverage of Japan is even more problematic, as his discussion of their political and military decision-making is far more opaque than it needs to be, which creates an imbalanced picture of a nuanced examination of the multi-combatant Chinese and Allied war effort against a monolithic "Japanese" foe.

To be fair these criticisms must be set against the scale of Mitter's achievement. He has produced a book that is required reading for anyone who wishes to claim a comprehensive understanding of the Second World War. Yet his book also demonstrates how much work is left to be done in researching and analyzing the war there, which will undoubtedly lead at some point to the epic, nuanced account of the fighting that the war in China truly deserves. Until then, however, we have his illuminating study of a front in the war that remains too underappreciated in our understanding of the conflict as a whole.

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## Peter says

**This is an update of an earlier review, completed following a second reading of Rana Mitter's *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-45***

The literature on WWII and its preceding conflicts has largely focused on Hitler's rise and on increased militarism in Japan, all culminating in the invasion of France in 1940 and the arrival of the second "war to end all wars." The Sino-Japanese conflicts that preceded the full-scale Second Sino-Japanese War, and the history of that war, have received far less attention. Rana Mitter's *Forgotten Ally* redresses that imbalance and gives us a new view of figures like Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong. For the West this is a revisionist history, but perhaps Western history needs revising.

The First Sino-Japanese War began in 1894 with Japan's invasion of Korea, then a Chinese vassal state. This was a major test for China's 250-year old Qing Dynasty headed by Empress Dowager Cixi, and it revealed China's military and industrial backwardness, especially compared with the astounding modernization of Japan since the Meiji Restoration began in 1868. The result was an 1895 treaty that ceded to Japan territorial and other rights in Korea, and that set the foundation for Japan's later colonial conquests to gather natural resources and to bring Pan-Asianism (a unified Asia under Japan's domination) to the region: Japan's Pan-Asianism would, it was said, spread Japanese culture (and control) to Asia and serve the defeated nations by bringing them to enlightenment—sometimes you just have to destroy a nation to save it! Ultimately Japan hoped to conquer China and then turn its attention to the USSR.

The fragility of the Qings promoted rebellions in China's already fractured warlord-driven society. In 1911 the Emperor Pu-yi, Cixi's chosen successor in 1908, abdicated, and in 1912 the Republic of China was created under Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party (NP), called the *Kuomintang* (KMT). Sun would soon flee to (ironically) Japan in the political turmoil over NP leadership, and a contest for dominance in the NP would begin between two contending groups: General Chiang Kai-shek's right-wing faction and Wang Jingwei's left-wing faction. Chiang was strongly anti-communist and uncompromising in his vision of a united China with warlords contained and a central political and military power. Wang Jingwei was more of a compromiser who had a less clear vision; we will see that he became a Japanese puppet-figure.

A third group was the nascent and still inchoate Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Though Chiang detested communism, as leader of the KMT he agreed to form a United Front with the feeble and disorganized CCP as a bulwark against Wang Jingwei and the Japanese threat. However, the fragile United Front ended with the *Shanghai Massacre* in 1927, when Chiang's army arrived in Shanghai and murdered thousands of communists. This prompted the CCP to relocate to a remote interior region to regroup and organize.

**[Speculation:** One wonders whether the Shanghai Massacre was the event that would ultimately bring China to communism—during its long self-imposed exile the CCP found a leader, Mao Zedong, who would inspire it with his revolutionary fervor, organize it socially, economically, and militarily, and control it through coercive methods of “reform.” Mao would keep his powder dry and lie in wait to take revenge on Chiang. Had Chiang not so alienated the CCP and isolated them at an early stage, he might have destroyed the CCP simply by letting it die on the vine.]

After the Shanghai Massacre the NP formally split into two parts. Chiang led the right-wing and established a government in Nanjing ("Nanking"). Wang Jingwei, appalled by the Shanghai massacre and more sympathetic to Japan's ideal of Pan-Asianism, formed a left wing government in Wuhan ("Hangcow"). Chiang continued to harass the communists even in their remote area, and in 1934 they began their much-vaunted *Long March* to the city of Yun'an in the even more remote province of Shaanxi. They arrived sixteen months later with only 7,000 of the original 80,000 who started on the march. It was during the Long March that Mao rose to the leadership he commanded until his death, and it was the long and peaceful stay in Yun'an that allowed him to hone the tactics for controlling the Party.

In 1931 the Japanese Army staged the *Mukden Incident*, a bombing at a railroad station) on the China-Manchuria border, and a pretext for invading Manchuria in northeast China; the Tokyo government was unaware of the plan but once underway it accepted the result—ownership of Manchuria in China's north, an area that gave it access to natural resources and which placed eastern China in a pinscher between and its new state of *Manchukuo*—formed in 1932 under the puppet governor Pu-yi, China's last emperor.

With Japan now directly bordering central China on two sides, Japan and China entered an era of chronic border disputes and increasing tension. The 1937 *Marco Polo Bridge Incident* near Beijing—an extended exchange of gunfire with no apparent origin—was the spark for the Second Sino-Japanese War. Chiang Kai-shek declared this minor skirmish as the last straw and countered the Japanese with force. This was the first outbreak of what would become an eight-year war between the well-resourced forces of a unified and militarized Japan and the poorly organized and weak forces of a disunified China. It was the first stage of World War II, well before the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and of France in 1940.

Chiang Kai-shek's *Kuomintang* was a coalition of warlords and diverse Republican political interests waving the banner of Sun Yat-sen's republican principles. Those of us who are of a certain age recall the intense controversy about Chiang in the U. S. Liberals (primarily Democrats) charged him and his cronies with massive corruption and incompetence: looting his nation through onerous taxes and misdirection of revenues, misdirecting foreign assistance (primarily Lend-Lease resources) to his personal use, fighting a defensive war against the Japanese while using his forces to fight internal opponents, and failing to bring the Japanese to bay. U. S. Conservatives (yes, Republicans) supported him because of his strong anti-communism and because he was holding the Japanese down in China, a major achievement in light of the gross imbalance of military assets between China and Japan.

But Mitter's assessment of Chiang presents him as a visionary seeking to bring China into the modern political world (and just ruthless enough to do it), and as a competent military leader whose single-minded focus on creating a nation and defeating the Japanese was the glue that held China together against the

Japanese onslaught. Because the Japanese offensive power was so great, Chiang was necessarily on the defensive and often on the move. He moved his government westward from Nanjing to Chongqing ("Chunking") just before the Japanese arrived in force to decimate Nanjing.

When the Japanese army arrived in Nanjing it was a city filled with defenseless civilians crowded into a small International Safety Zone in the hope that the Japanese would respect its neutrality. The Japanese would have none of that—their army began an episode of mass rape, pillage, and murder that took 200,000 lives (according to the post-war International Military Tribunal) or 300,000 lives (according to Chinese records). Japanese brutality in China is well documented, but if one needs a taste of it, Mitter's section on the Rape of Nanking is sufficient. It was not an isolated event.

As the Japanese pursued him from Nanjing, Chiang understood that that he couldn't stop their advance and that that his new position in Chongqing government was not secure. He decided to move again, this time farther west to the megametropolis of Wuhan (Wang Jingwei's old capital). There was a reasonable chance that the Japanese would reach Chongqing too soon and capture Chiang before he could relocate to Wuhan, so Chiang made an horrific decision: he breached the dikes holding back the Yellow River, flooding a large part of central China (particularly Henan Province). The effect was to slow the Japanese enough to allow the move to Wuhan, but at the cost of an estimated 500,000 Chinese deaths from famine and disease associated with the destruction of a large and very fertile region. From a modern Western standpoint, this was a morally reprehensible decision that, if made in the U.S., would cause breast-beating for centuries. But from a Chinese standpoint it was both business as usual and an effective way of preserving China from Japanese rule.

**[Speculation:** Chiang was clearly the best leader China could muster against the Japanese: the Wang Jimwei faction of the Nationalist Party was both weak and inclined toward conciliation with Japan; the CCP was far too weak militarily for an effective military contest and preferred to keep its powder dry and let the Nationalist take the brunt of Japanese aggression. Had the Chiang government fallen it is likely that a leadership vacuum would result and all of China would become a Japanese vassal. Records show that the Japanese military—that is, the Japanese government—had intentions to invade the USSR, so Chiang's defeat would put Japan on the USSR's eastern border. Had this happened Germany's 1941 invasion of the USSR would put Stalin in a fight on two fronts—a fight he barely survived on one front. Would the USSR—the European bulwark against Germany—have survived this? If not, the Axis led by Germany and Japan would control Europe and most of Asia (perhaps all of it if India were also taken).]

In that case Germany's full military strength could be devoted to its western front. This might have changed the outcome of the 1944 D-Day invasion of France, or entirely prevented the invasion. The British might now be speaking German, and we in America could have faced an insurmountable global hostile force. Given that China's war with Japan cost an estimated twenty million lives, and that Mao's leadership of China cost at least as many deaths, the death toll in Henan Province seems in scale for a major action that might rescue the globe from an existential crisis.]

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now portrays itself as victorious against Japan, but in reality it was of very little consequence throughout the war. Located in a remote area that the Japanese could readily ignore, its energies were devoted to building the strength to fight Chiang. There was only one significant engagement between the CCP and the Japanese army during the war—the Battle of the Hundred Regiments in August-October of 1941, when over 40,000 CCP troops continually attacked Japanese infrastructure (bridges, rail and roads) for an extended period.

All “top-down” histories of the war highlight the overweening egos of the major actors and the intense hostility and jealousy between them. This history is no different. Chiang's contempt for the British in

general, and Churchill in particular, was born of British colonial history in China; the contempt was mutual. When FDR insisted that Chiang accept Lt. Gen. "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell as his Chief-of Staff it began an episode in which Chiang soon came to the conclusion that Stilwell was rash, careless with Chinese troops, excessively risk-taking, overconfident, and bent on using Chinese troops to fight an Anglo-American war to preserve Britain's colonies, particularly Burma and India. Stilwell openly derided Chiang as a weak and incompetent military leader whose defensive actions showed cowardice and whose corruption was his primary motive for leadership. Stilwell broadcast this view to FDR and Congress, and to the American press.

Mitter points to evidence exonerating Chiang: Stilwell insisted on using Chinese troops to open the Burma road so goods could be transported to China, but Chiang opposed this on the grounds that this diverted his troops to a British theater. This seems reasonable since both Britain and America were also at odds about whose interests were central to their alliance. But over Chiang's objections Stilwell diverted Chinese forces and resources (much of it Lend-Lease) to Burma to reopen the Burma Road to bring matériel into China. Chiang had said that Stilwell would be overmatched, and he was—Stilwell's forces were surrounded in Burma and when Chiang ordered a retreat to British India Stilwell and his army made a brutal overland trek to safety.

Stilwell was incensed by Chiang's order to retreat—apparently he had the Japanese just where he wanted them! His vitriolic *ad hominem* attacks on Chiang were blasted to FDR and to all who would listen. The American press went viral and Chiang's image in America was formed largely from Stilwell's perspective. FDR, losing confidence in Chiang, appointed Stilwell to be Commander-in-Chief of the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater, making him supreme commander of Chinese forces. Stilwell chortled with delight, penning limericks about his political defeat of "The Peanut," as he called Chiang. But, still obsessed with Burma Stilwell used his new power to attempt another reopening of the Burma Road. Once again he took Chinese troops to Burma, and once again he was besieged. This time he fought his way out with 80 percent casualties and almost complete decimation of the elite Merrill's Marauders Ranger unit. The Burma Road was reopened, but by that time air transport over the Hump was the main transportation route and the Road provided little value-added.

After this costly debacle Chiang demanded that Stilwell be recalled. FDR pointed out that the Lend-Lease resources that the US had given Chiang would cease. Chiang replied that it made little difference because most of it had been used by Stilwell to finance his failed ventures in Burma. Stilwell was recalled and as he left he penned and distributed poisonous words about "The Peanut."

In China Stilwell has a reputation as an arrogant American without combat experience—he was a military planner, logistician and West Point professor known as an excellent trainer of troops—who failed to see that Chiang had been battling the Japanese on a shoestring for six years and was still in contention. He is also a symbol of the lack of real U. S. support for China's war, and for U. S. inability to understand the importance of China to the Chinese, as well as Chinese objectives and methods. In the U.S. Stilwell has the reputation of a successful general stymied by a corrupt and weak Chiang, a view buttressed by Barbara Tuchman's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1971 book *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*—a book based largely on Stilwell's papers!

Stalin and Chiang had far more in common than did FDR and Chiang—both would sacrifice their citizens to the cause of national survival on a scale far beyond the U.S., both would see the US as niggardly with its resources (though Stalin was the clear winner), both saw the Allies as leaving them to take the hits while focusing only on the European western front.

That Chiang could resist the Japanese for so long with only lukewarm support from the USSR (which Stalin

wanted to prevent the Japanese from casting their military eye on Russia) and little more than rhetorical support from the U. K and U. S., is indicative of success as a wartime leader, not the failure with which he has been painted. Chiang might have been the right leader at the right time during China's most serious existential crisis.

Mitter's is a story well worth reading. Completed 65 years after the end of WWII and forty years after Tuchman's book, it is based on a far more complete record than earlier histories; this lends verisimilitude to the story—a ring of truth (or of balance) that is enhanced by Mitter's non-Anglo perspective. Mitter's take on the 1937-45 Sino-Japanese War is written with the same attention to both historical detail and to “boots on the ground” background as Max Hasting's histories of the war in Europe. It is a fascinating tale, and remarkably well told.

Five stars!

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## Stephen says

Two years before a mad painter's schemes plunged the world into war, China was fighting for its life. It began the 20th century at a crossroads; the old imperial order had faded away, and in the vacuum that followed, the great land was fair play to a variety of ambitious men from both within and without. Idealists dreaming of building a better future for themselves struggled against opposing visionaries, petty warlords and would-be-colonizers. Scarcely had the young Republic of China begun establishing itself than it became an object of proprietary interest to the rising Empire of Japan, and after a near-decade long struggle for survival that merged with World War 2, the republic finally fell prey to internal enemies. Postwar politics made forgetting the Chinese trial against Japan easy, but in the eyes of Rana Mitter, China's experience of World War 2 was uniquely formative. The bloodletting wasn't just a tragic episode to be endured, but destroyed what progress had been made in the 20th century and led to a completely new economic and political order. *Forgotten Ally* is a mostly-political history of the war which views it was nothing less than the birth of modern China, born of a decade of frustration and sorrow.

The odds were against the Republic of China from the start. China is a vast land, and the Republic's command of it was never perfect; the ascendant west pockmarked China's coast with colonies, and internal division reigned, from brigands to communist rebels. Japan, increasing in both wealth and power after its own successful leap into industrialization, took advantage of that internal weakness to announce itself as Asia's new leader. Positioning itself as a big brother, it promised to chase off Occidental intruders and establish a new order, of Asia for the Asians. Beginning in the late 19th century, Japan began asserting itself on the Asian mainland, and as its armies grew closer to China, the celestial kingdom stood alone. Between world wars and depression, the United States and Britain were hardly in a place to stop them. The Russians had made noise before and gotten a bloody nose and a sunken fleet for it, and as another crisis in Europe loomed no one wanted to provoke a Japanese attack on their Asian colonies. Relations with potential allies were tense to begin with; Britain had opened a drug market in China and waged war against those who protested it, and Russia frequently flirted with supporting the Republic's armed in-house opposition. Cooperation did happen, however; before the United States was ever attacked, American volunteers trained Chinese pilots and helped wage guerrilla aviation, and even after the Japanese had secured much of southeast Asia, the Allies sent what resources they could by air.

In addition to the ordinary destruction of war, made worse by particularly vicious invasion tactics ("Kill All,

Loot All, Burn All"), China's chronically stressed government became its own enemy. Its attempt to keep soldiers in the field caused famine, and another strategic move (destroying dikes that checked the Yellow River) slowed down the Japanese advance but led to the deaths of a half-million Chinese civilians. Both the Nationalist government and the Communist splinter in the north developed brutal police-state agencies throughout the war, attempting to consolidate their power and expunge dissent, but the Nationalists controlled and thus disaffected more people. Between this and Chiang Kai-Shek's increasingly poor relations with the American commander on the ground (controlling lend-lease supplies), the Republic lost legitimacy both in China and abroad with every passing year. Throughout the chaos of war, the Communist state grew in strength, its ranks filling with bombed-out and ordered-about peasants who considered Mao a less brutal choice than Chiang; no sooner had the guns of World War 2 fallen silent than did a civil war erupt in China, one which saw the Nationalists exiled to Taiwan, and China overtaken by the Communists.

*Forgotten Ally* is largely political history, one in which the war is an essential backdrop but not the express subject. Mitter is primarily concerned with how the war damaged the prospects of Chiang and allowed Mao's to blossom. Mao began the war as an exiled rebel, forced to retreat to the hinterland, but he would end it as China's new master. That is an accomplishment cut with opportunism, for while the Nationalists were taking the brunt of Japanese assault, having to move entire factories into the interior to keep the war going, the Communists were able to sit pretty, making the occasional raid against Japan but never engaging it in open battle. Despite the inhumanity of Chiang's regime, considering what followed after, it seems a tragedy that his China fought World War 2 through the end, only to succumb to its wounds afterwards. Their role in resisting Japan should not be forgotten, although a little more military meat might have served this book well -- demonstrating, for instance, how much of Japan's resources were consumed in fighting the Nationalists that would have otherwise been deployed fighting the United States and the Commonwealth nations across the pacific. Aside from this quibble, this is a history well worth considering.

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### **Fluttershy says**

An important addition to my understanding of WWII, and of the formation of modern China.

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### **Jimmy Fahey says**

This is up there with *Fear Itself* as one of the best history books of 2013. I bet that you can line kilometres of shelves with books about the war in the Pacific and three times as many about the war in Europe. And yet so little has been written about the catastrophic war between China and Japan. Mitter's extensively researched and eloquently written account of the war does a lot for even one book to readdress this gross imbalance.

What I like about Mitter is that he frames the war in terms of contemporary geo-politics. Only after reading this book did I learn that China won a permanent place on the UN Security Council because along with the United States, the Soviet Union, France and the United Kingdom, China was regarded as been one of the main contributors to the defeat of the Axis powers (a primary school teacher told me that they'd won a place on the Security Council by virtue of being the most populous nation). This goes to show that many in the west either overlook or are oblivious to the vast sacrifices the Chinese made during the Second World War. This along with Japan's continuing refusal to come to terms with its war crimes causes great offence to Beijing. Furthermore, Japan, the nation that refused to come to terms with its war crimes in China and

throughout Asia, benefits from the US' protection. China, despite its contribution to Allied victory in the Pacific, was and to some extent remains a pariah state.

The accounts of the siege of Shanghai and the rape of Nanjing were graphic, as to was the account of a famine in Southern China. Miller did a great job of placing the struggle in the context of a wider struggle among the 'great powers' for supremacy over China that stretches back to the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. It was interesting reading about overbearing influence of US generals during the war.

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### **Hadrian says**

The common perception of the Chinese involvement in the Second World War is often vague and formless, if it exists at all. In many respects, it is like how we viewed the Soviet contribution before we had access to their archives. Again, like the Soviet-German front, it was a titanic struggle, with immense destruction and loss of civilian life, and it continues to play a role in contemporary geopolitics, even beyond the German-Soviet war.

The subtitle is slightly misleading. The Japanese invasion of what we know as mainland China began in 1931, with the invasion of the region of Manchuria, three northeastern provinces with a largely non-Han Chinese population. This was a cause for concern in China, but less so in the Western powers, who were largely in the mire of the Great Depression, and had little interest in problems in East Asia. Chiang Kai-shek, the supposed ruler of much of China, was not pleased with the situation, but he also had the difficult task of trying to form a more coherent Chinese government with the loose coalition of warlords, as well as the persistent threat of the Communist insurgency, which was nearly extinguished in 1934, but had miraculously survived after the Long March.

The main conflict began in 1937, after an armed skirmish between border troops near the Marco Polo bridge. A continuing series of catastrophes. The loss of the major cities of Beijing and Tianjin on the coasts, then much of the northeast. In '37 and '38, we see the naval invasions of Shanghai and Nanjing, which led to a tremendous loss of civilian life which I cannot recount here. For much of the time, the task of Chiang Kai-shek was how to conduct an organized retreat, and the transport of as much industrial infrastructure as possible to the interior of the country. Chongqing, the new provisional capital, was not even the capital of its *province* before it became the new seat of Chiang's government.

In many ways, China's situation was like that of the British Empire from 1940-1941: it was desperately alone. However, this state of affairs began not in 1940 after the fall of the French, but from the beginning of the war in 1937. The Western Allies were wobbly over Hitler and Czechoslovakia, to say nothing of China, the Soviets were in the middle of Stalin's purges, and the US was still isolationist and FDR was in the middle of implementing the Second New Deal. The Germans, oddly enough, had significant trade routes with China until 1938, when the Japanese forced them out of it as a precondition for joining the Axis Powers against the Soviet Union. Major leaders in Chiang's government defected in hopes of forming a collaborationist regime and buying time for peace, but the Japanese had no real use for them, and continued to dream of a broader Japanese-led pan-Asian empire.

One disheartening episode is the destruction of the Huayuankou dam of Zhengzhou to prevent the Japanese from taking the major river port of Wuhan. It is a decision nobody should have to make - to sacrifice over 500,000 civilians, or to lose the city immediately and lose millions more? Chiang gave the order to blow up the dam, but lost the city a few weeks later than usual.

The Chinese did not have the immense benefit of Lend-Lease and other material aid programs. There was the small contingent of American pilot volunteers known as 'The Flying Tigers', which were a fine boost to Chinese morale far more than any material impact, and the unsteady flow of airlifted supplies over 'the Burma Hump'.

After December 1941, the Western Allies began their role in the Pacific Conflict. The American military chief of staff in China, Joseph 'Vinegar Joe' Stillwell, openly hated Chiang, and the two could not cooperate at all. The 'Europe First' policy adopted by the Western Allies was an upset to Chiang, and he felt bitter over being treated as a lesser partner in the Allies. The situation deteriorated further, with increasing abuses of power by his secret police, and the near total collapse of agriculture and massive famines.

As late as 1944-5, the Japanese were still making territorial advances with the bulk of their armies in China, despite the crushing of their naval forces by the American and British forces. The victory over the Japanese was a strange one, driven by the strangling of their supply lines by submarine warfare, and the bombing of their cities. Mitter thus argues that the enormous casualty figures taken by the Chinese were a major factor in the deployment of the Japanese army, and thus played a role in the Western war effort.

At the end of the war, the Japanese Minister of War committed suicide, and left a brief note apologizing to the Emperor for 'the great crime'. The Nationalists had 'won', but the bulk of their industry was destroyed, over twenty million civilians were dead, and Chiang would lose control over China and flee to Taiwan after the Civil War.

Again in the broader revisionist tradition of understanding the war. Chiang was not uniquely incompetent, as Stilwell and the American Experience in China by Barbara Tuchman describes him, but forced to make impossible decisions with no real expectation of help. Mitter makes it clear that he was no saint, but forced into a worse situation than almost any other Allied leader in the war.

A fine book, which makes clear the outlines of this tremendous conflict, and its repercussions today. I only cover a few points of the book, but Mitter's arguments are sound and well-written. It is important in that it will fill a major gap in the perception of Chinese history.

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