



# The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-45

*John Toland*

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# The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-45

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## **The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-45** John Toland

This Pulitzer Prize-winning history of World War II chronicles the dramatic rise and fall of the Japanese empire, from the invasion of Manchuria and China to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Told from the Japanese perspective, *The Rising Sun* is, in the author's words, "a factual saga of people caught up in the flood of the most overwhelming war of mankind, told as it happened—muddled, ennobling, disgraceful, frustrating, full of paradox."

In weaving together the historical facts and human drama leading up to and culminating in the war in the Pacific, Toland crafts a riveting and unbiased narrative history. In his Foreword, Toland says that if we are to draw any conclusion from *The Rising Sun*, it is "that there are no simple lessons in history, that it is human nature that repeats itself, not history."

## **The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-45 Details**

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**John Toland**

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# From Reader Review *The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-45* for online ebook

## Bou says

*Winner of the 1971 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction, this book covers the War in the Pacific from a Japanese perspective. Extensive, well researched and readable, covering the timeframe from the invasion of Manchuria and China to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.*

After the Japanese invasion in Manchuria, the book starts off with the efforts of the American ambassador and the Foreign Minister of Japan to try to prevent war due to the boycott that the Western powers have established. It is painful to see read how the good intentions are hampered by ignorance, impatience and indignation on the American side and military extremism on the Japanese side. Inevitably, this flows into the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbour and the consequent campaign.

What struck me was the underestimation of the Japanese of the Western powers, the wishful thinking of the generals and admirals. Seeking the decisive battle it happened time and time again that the Japanese thought they had destroyed the enemy fleets and their carriers, only to find them still active after each battle. After Midway, Japan was doomed but it seemed not to be realised by the Japanese Army and Navy.

The book quotes several eye witness accounts of Japanese soldiers, mainly focussing on the battle of Guadalcanal, Okinawa and the Philippines. Other than the title might suggest, this is not a study of the fall and decline of the Japanese empire, but a war account. For example the American successes against the Japanese merchant fleet is only sparsely mentioned, while in my eyes this was one of the deciding factors.

For someone who needs a good introduction for the War in the Pacific, this is a good introduction and highly recommended. For someone already well known with the aspects of the Pacific War, this book may have required some more depth.

Let me finish with a quote by Japanese general Kawabe, after he witnessed the respect the Americans showed him after the Japanese defeat:

"If human beings were to sincerely exercise justice and humanity in their relations with one another, the horrors of war in all likelihood could be avoided, and even if a war unfortunately broke out, the victor would not become arrogant and the suffering of the losers would be alleviated immediately. A truly great cultural nation in the first requisite."

3,5 stars.

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## Mikey B. says

An epic account of the Japanese war. Toland tells the story from many different perspectives – from the Emperor and his aides to the lowly soldier trapped in Guadalcanal. It is all here – the prelude to Pearl Harbour to the finale of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Many aspects are of interest – the Japanese were continually obsessed with striking the fatal knock-out blow. At Pearl Harbour they believed they had accomplished that. They tried again at Midway, Tarawa (to be held for one thousand years), Saipan and on and on... They even believed they could destroy the enemy on the Japanese mainland. Another aspect is the ferociousness of the combatants who refused to surrender – and viewed suicide as the honourable way to leave life. There were always substantially more Japanese deaths than American ones in most of the conflicts.

John Toland's varying montages of the agony of battles, of prisoners of war, of the victims of fire-bombing are all very poignant. The build-up to the attack on Pearl Harbour, and the frustration and miscues on both sides is very well told. The end, with the Potsdam Proclamation that was completely rejected by the Japanese government, followed by the dropping of the atomic bombs well documents the legacy of the wars' ending. I feel at times that Mr. Toland is too lenient with Hirohito's performance; he could have prevented Pearl Harbour and the subsequent Japanese onslaught in Asia. The Japanese had signed the Tri-partite Pact with Hitler and Mussolini – and this was ill-received by the Anglo-American democracies. This was somewhat overlooked by Mr. Toland. Nevertheless this book is a great accomplishment and presents the war, with all its' detailed planning, from the Japanese viewpoint.

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## **Arminius says**

With a Nobel prize winning book, John Toland accomplishes telling the Japanese side of WWII.

The 1930's were an interesting time in Asia. Japan had an exploding population and no natural resources. They also had a very dangerous enemy in Communist Soviet Union threatening her. Japan's solution laid in Northern China's Manchuria. They occupied Manchuria easily because China was too weak to defend it. Japanese business moved in and Japanese populated it. Manchuria provided a number of benefits to Japan. They included not only a territory to expand into but also had some natural resources. More importantly, however, it was a buffer between the Soviet Union and Japan itself. China's fear of further Japanese aggression led their weak governmental military forces to combine with (the government's inner-enemy) the Chinese Communist forces in a joint effort against Japan.

Soon menacing Chinese forces fired on the Japanese at the Marco Polo Bridge. Japan retaliated thrashing the Chinese forces and occupying vast Chinese territory including Nanking. However, some poorly disciplined Japanese soldiers, unbeknown to their Commander General Jwane Mastui, raped, murdered and massacred as many as 300,000 Chinese civilians.

With this background the book gives us a good detail of the history of American/Japanese relations. They began in 1853 when Mathew Perry's ships pulled into Tokyo Bay with a letter from President Milliard Fillmore asking Japan to open its doors to American goods. Good relations continued with America's support for Japan in the Russo Japanese War. American Investment Bank Kuhn, Loeb and Co. financed much of the war for Japan. And in 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace prize for brokering the end of the Russo Japanese War. Also, in doing so saved Japan from economic collapse. However, the Japanese people were never told by their government of their pending economic collapse (due to the cost of the war) so they correspondingly held the U.S. accountable because the war was stopped while Japan was clearly winning.

Now back to the story. Japan had taken control of Northern China (Manchuria) and Vietnam where she had a

place to populate her growing citizenry. As a result, America instituted restricting exports to Japan. Oil was the main restricted export. In fact, Japan received 100% of its oil from the U.S.A. Without oil Japan could not maintain its expanding territory. Japan had also partnered with Germany and Italy because she feared an Anglo Saxon takeover of the World by America and England. She also correctly held the view that the West held her to a double standard specifically because of her race. What Japan meant was that England had colonies in the Caribbean, Central America and elsewhere. America had taken Texas and California from Mexico as well as annexing Hawaii and the Philippines. Yet, Japan had no right to expand.

Japan had intensively prepared for the Pearl Harbor attack. They also tried to avoid attacking America through diplomacy. However, combinations of forces worked against a diplomatic solution. First, FDR's Secretary of State Cordell Hull did not trust the Japanese. Second, America's friendship with England and Japan's alliance with Germany did not bode well for the Japanese. England had already been at war with Germany at the time of Japan's attempted diplomacy. Third, Japanese atrocities committed against the Chinese provided a less sympathetic American government. Fourth, bad translations of messages turned sincere attempts at reconciliation into belligerently viewed intelligence.

In addition, Japan had been running out of oil, so the longer they waited for a diplomatic solution the more dire their situation got.

With those conditions, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was very successful from their point of view. They had killed 2403 Americans, sunk 18 ships and destroyed 188 planes.

When Winston Churchill found out, he immediately called President Roosevelt. When the President confirmed Winston hung up went to bed and had a good night sleep. America was now in the war, England was now saved.

The war in the Pacific did not start out well for the Allies (America and England). First, the Japanese stunned the English with a victory at the Battle of Singapore. In 7 days Japan inflicted upon England their largest surrender in their very active military history. That followed with a Japanese Sea victory at Java, an island south of Borneo.

The Allies luck changed with the Battle of Midland. The Allies learned of the coming Japanese attack and planned a brilliant counter by surprising Japan with a bombing raid on Japan's homeland. This was planned and implemented by James Doolittle. This attack shook Japan's air of invincibility. The Allies triumphant victory followed.

As the war went on America saw more victories. Long lasting military heroes such as Douglass MacArthur, Bull Halsey and Chester Nimitz emerged as a result. Mr. Toland vividly describes the atrocities of all of the major battles with spine chilling accuracy. The fact that the Japanese belief that surrender was worse than death was something that only made their state worse. Mr. Toland describes the compassion American soldiers had on Japanese prisoners of war. Feeding, nursing and treating their captives with respect were the typical American prison camp norms.

When America developed the Atomic bomb, it was calculated that using it would end the war and save thousands of lives. However, leaflets dropped on Japan about the dire consequences that America's new weapon would bring were ignored. And still, after the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima they refused to surrender. The second bomb dropped on Nagasaki would finally and reluctantly convince Japan to capitulate. At the surrender ceremony MacArthur gave an absolutely brilliant speech which left the Japanese newspaper Nippon Times to say "a new Japan which will vindicate our pride by winning the respect of the world."

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## David says

This is the third big book on the Pacific War I have read recently. Ian Toll's first two books (of a planned trilogy), *Pacific Crucible* and *The Conquering Tide*, were a magnificent historical account of the war from both sides. So given that this book covers much the same ground, though it was written much earlier, I will do a lot of comparing with Toll's books, though I think Toland's book is equally good and you will not find it at all repetitive to read both authors.

As thick as this book is, it's only one volume, whereas Ian Toll is writing three whole volumes on the entire war in the Pacific. Thus, while Toll devotes a great deal of attention to the politics and individual political and military leaders on both sides of the conflict, *The Rising Sun*, as its title indicates, focuses mostly on Japan. Naturally the planning and personalities on the American and British (and later Chinese and Soviet) sides are mentioned, but mostly only inasmuch as they were pitted against their Japanese counterparts.

One of the things most striking about Toland's narrative is that he lays out all the blunders that were made by both Japan before, during, and after the war. These margins where the errors occurred and where history could have been changed are one of the things I find most interesting in non-fiction histories, when competently examined. Let's start with whether or not war was inevitable.

### Did we have to go to war with Japan?

The basic historical facts are well understood: the Japanese wanted a colonial empire, and Europe and the US didn't want them to have one. When the Japanese invaded China, the US put an oil embargo on them. This would inevitably strangle the Japanese economy, as for all its rising technical prowess, Japan remained a tiny resource-impooverished island. So the Japanese pretty much had no choice but to give up their ambitions or go to war. We know which one they chose.

The question for historians is whether or not this could have been averted.

Ian Toll seems to think that war was inevitable - the Japanese and the West simply had irreconcilable designs. But John Toland seems to, not exactly argue, but present a great deal of evidence, that miscommunication and misfortune had as much to do with Japan and the US being put on a collision course as intransigence. Of course Japan was never going to give up their desire to be a world-class power, which means there was no way they would have accepted the restrictions imposed on them forbidding them fleets or territory on a par with the West. Whether the West could have been persuaded to let Japan take what it saw as its rightful place at the grown-ups table is debatable. But in the first few chapters of *The Rising Sun*, John Toland describes all the negotiating that went on between Japanese and American diplomats. The Japanese were split into factions, just as the Americans were. Some wanted peace no matter what; some were hankering to go to war and really believed their jingoistic propaganda that the spiritual essence of the Japanese people would overcome any enemy. But most Japanese leaders, from the Imperial Palace to the Army and Navy, were more realistic and knew that a war with the US would be, at best, a very difficult one. So there were many frantic talks, including backchannel negotiations among peacemakers on both sides when it became apparent that Secretary of State Henry Stimson and Prime Minister Hideki Tojo were not going to deescalate.

There were a number of tragedies in this situation. Sometimes the precise wording of some of the phrases used in Japanese or American proposals and counter-proposals were mistranslated, resulting in their being interpreted as more inflexible, or disingenuous, than they were intended, causing both sides to mistrust the other. Sometimes communications arrived late. There was also a lot of particularly labyrinthine political maneuvering on the Japanese side, where political assassinations were commonplace at that time and the position of the Emperor was always ambiguous. Toland apparently interviewed a very large number of people and read first-hand accounts and so is able to reconstruct many individual talks, even with the Emperor himself, putting the reader in the Imperial throneroom as Hirohito consults with his ministers, and then in telegraph offices where communiques are sent from embassies back to Washington.

Toland doesn't definitively state that war could have been avoided, because it's still not clear what mutually agreeable concessions might have been made by either side, but what is clear is that both Japan and the US could see that war was looming and neither side really *wanted* it. At least initially, everyone except a few warmongers in the Japanese military did everything they could to avoid it.

Unfortunately, diplomatic efforts were for naught, and the Emperor was eventually persuaded to give his blessing to declare war.

Admiral Yamamoto knew very well that Japan had no hope of winning a prolonged war, which was why when war happened and he was put in charge of the Japanese fleet, he planned what he hoped would be quick, devastating knock-out punches - Pearl Harbor and Midway - that would sink the US back on its heels and persuade the Americans to negotiate an honorable peace before things went too far.

This was unlikely after Pearl Harbor. Nobody on the Japanese side seemed to realize just how *pissed off* America would be by this surprise attack (though the unintentionally late formal declaration of war - delivered hours after the attack when it was supposed to have been delivered just prior - certainly didn't help). But it was a forlorn hope after the debacle at Midway in which, aided by superior intelligence from broken Japanese codes, the US fleet sank four Japanese carriers. Many military historians grade Yamamoto poorly for this badly-executed offensive, which rather than delivering a knockout punch to the US fleet, proved true his prophecy that "The Americans can lose many battles - we have to win every single one."

The bulk of the book covers the war itself, including all the familiar names like Guam, Guadalcanal, Wake Island, Corregidor, Saipan, Okinawa, Iwo Jima. Toland does not neglect the British defense of India, the tragic fate of Force Z, which blundered on ahead to its doom despite lack of air cover and thus heralded in the new reality that air power ruled above all, and the multi-sided war in China in which communists and nationalists were alternately fighting each other and the Japanese, with both sides being courted by the Allies. Any military history will cover the battles, but Toland describes them vividly, especially the first-hand accounts from the men in them - the misery and terror, and also the atrocities, like the Bataan Death March, and the miserable conditions of POWs taken back to Japan

One of the things evident in many of these battles was just how much is a roll of the dice. Human error, weather, malfunctioning equipment, pure luck, over and over snatched defeat from the jaws of victory or vice versa. Inevitably, the US had to win - they simply had more men, more equipment, more resources. The Japanese began going hungry almost as soon as the war began, while the Allies, initially kicked all over the Pacific because they were caught off-guard, began pouring men and ships and, often most importantly (!),

**food** - well-fed troops - into the theater. Still, individual battles often turned on whether or not a particular ship was spotted or whether torpedoes hit. Luck seemed to favor the Americans more often than not, but I found Toland's descriptions particularly informative in recounting how little details about equipment, and the human factor - decisions made by individual commanders, and how the willingness to take risks or an unwillingness to change one's mind - often determined the outcome of a fight.

### **Who were the war criminals?**

Two of the other big questions I find most interesting about World War II are the ones that will probably never be answered satisfactorily.

First: was Emperor Hirohito a war criminal?

I was in college in 1989 when Emperor Hirohito (more properly known as the Showa Emperor) died. I had a friend who was a Japanese exchange student. She was grief-stricken. All of Japan mourned.

There is a particular narrative I heard growing up. It is one that was pushed heavily by the Japanese from approximately the moment the decision was made to surrender until about the time Hirohito died. According to this version of history, Hirohito was a figurehead, a puppet of Japanese military leaders. He had no real decision-making power, and any active resistance on his part would have led to his being killed. Thus, he was not responsible for the war or any of Japan's war crimes; he was an innocent, born to assume a hereditary throne and assume a position of purely symbolic importance.

I was a little shocked when I read an article in some British tabloid denouncing Hirohito upon his death and cheering that the "war criminal" was now in hell.

Yet while neither view is strictly accurate, it is certainly more complicated than the sanitized version that was accepted for so long. This sanitized version was in fact produced in part by the US, particularly Douglas MacArthur, from the moment the war ended, as a deliberate strategy to secure faster Japanese cooperation and reconciliation. It was predicted that trying Hirohito as a war criminal - as about one-third of the American public wanted to do at the time - would have resulted in widespread guerrilla warfare and the need for a much longer and more active occupation of the Japanese homeland. When the Japanese finally began negotiating terms of surrender, one of the sticking points, the one thing they tried to carve out of the demand for an "unconditional" surrender, was that the Emperor would retain his status (and, by implication, not be charged with war crimes).

So, how active was Hirohito in the war planning? According to Toland, he was very much involved from the beginning, and had far more than symbolic influence over his cabinet, ministers, and military. Could he have simply forestalled a war by telling them not to go to war? Maybe. While political assassination was common, it seems unlikely that anyone would have dared laying a hand on His Majesty himself. And according to the cabinet meetings and private conferences Toland describes, even the most zealous Japanese leaders felt unable to proceed without getting a final say-so from the Emperor. So if Hirohito had been resolutely against a war, it seems likely that the militarists would have had a much harder time getting one.

At the same time, Hirohito was in many ways bound by his position. Traditionally, the Emperor did not make policy, he simply approved it. He wasn't supposed to veto anything or offer his opinion, he was just supposed to bless the decisions that had already been made. Hirohito, especially later in the war, departed



from this tradition more than once, shocking his advisors by taking an active role or asking questions during ceremonies that were supposed to be mere formalities.

Personally, he seemed to be a rather quiet, studious man who would have been much happier as a scholarly sovereign and not the Emperor of an expansionist empire. He possessed a genuine, if abstract, concern for the Japanese people, and this motivated him later to accept surrender and even put himself in the hands of the Allies, whatever they might decide to do with him.

Almost certainly, he also had no direct knowledge of Japanese atrocities. So, Hirohito was no Hitler. Still, neither was he the uninvolved innocent that it became politically expedient to portray him as after the war.

Hideki Tojo, on the other hand, the Minister of War and Prime Minister, who was tried and executed as a war criminal, probably deserved it. Initially lukewarm about going to war with the US, he became a zealous prosecutor of the war, as well as an increasingly megalomaniacal one who seized more and more authority for himself, quashed all dissent, and most damningly, towards the end, when most Japanese leaders were seeing reality and talking about terms of surrender, was one of the hold-outs who insisted Japan should fight to the end. Along with a few other generals who were willing to see Japanese civilians take up bamboo spears and die by the millions fighting off an Allied invasion, Tojo deliberately prolonged the fighting well after it was obvious to all that Japan was finished. I think it is not unfair to say that he caused hundreds of thousands of needless deaths on both sides.

### **Did we have to drop the bomb?**

Toland spends only a little time, in the last few chapters, talking about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the decision leading up to the use of the atomic bomb on Japan. This is another very loaded historical question in which there are people with strong opinions on both sides. Some have argued that the US didn't need to use the bomb - Japan was already negotiating surrender - and that we did for reasons ranging from racism to a desire to demonstrate them as a deterrent to the Soviet Union. Others claim that Japan was fully willing to fight to the last spear-carrying civilian, and that the atomic bombs saved millions of lives on both sides by preventing the need for an invasion.

Entire books have been written about this subject, and Toland, as I said, does not try to dig into it too deeply, but he does represent much of what the Americans and Japanese were thinking and saying at the time. The case he presents would suggest that the truth, unsurprisingly, is somewhere in between.

Yes, the Japanese knew they were going to have to surrender and were already trying to negotiate an "honorable peace." But it's not at all clear that it was the dropping of atomic bombs (I was surprised to learn the Japanese actually knew what they were, and indeed, Japan had already started its own nuclear program, though it hadn't gotten very far) that convinced the holdouts to agree to an unconditional surrender. At the time, the atomic bombs did not seem all that impressive to them - they were already willing to endure horrific casualties, and the firebombing of Tokyo had killed many more people than died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was more likely the declaration of war by the Soviet Union, when Japan had been hoping the Russians would help them negotiate peace, that was the deciding factor. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just drove home their inevitable defeat.

Could we have gotten an unconditional surrender when we did without the atomic bombs? We will probably never know. But only a few people at the time really appreciated what new era had been ushered in. Harry

Truman, interestingly, said afterwards, and continued to say, that he gave very little thought to the decision to use the bombs, and felt no moral angst about it. Indeed, two more bombs were being prepared for use when the Japanese finally did surrender.

If you want one volume that covers the entire span of the war against Japan, I think this monumental work by John Toland leaves very little out, and I highly recommend it to WWII historians. However, I also encourage interested readers to then seek out the more recent works by Ian Toll, who devotes more pages to the American commanders as well, and talks about some of the political issues among the Allies that Toland treats more briefly, as well as going into even more detail about individual battles.

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## **David Eppenstein says**

I generally avoid histories of WWII. I enjoy history immensely but between Hollywood, the History Channel, and the vast array of fictions and histories this war has been done to death. I would guess the reason for this is that it is still in our living memories, it was the last war with a clear line between good and evil, and because it was readily captured by contemporary visual media and preserved for us to see everyday. Having said that I still occasionally pick-up a WWII history if it has something that piques my interest. The last WWII book to really do that for me was James Bradley's "Flyboys" which I thought was the fairest treatment of the war in the Pacific I had read up until now. I found this book, a Pulitzer Prize winner of some time ago, thanks to reading a review by another GR friend (thanks Matt). The POV of the book is what caught my interest. It is written primarily from the Japanese side of the war. After reading Bradley's book I became aware for the first time that there was another side to WWII that I had never heard or read about and it was a legitimate point of view. This book promised to increase my knowledge of that aspect of the war so I ordered a copy (thanks Amazon). Unfortunately, I was not aware of the size of this tome and I do mean tome. It is just short of 1,000 pages, 877 pages of text and then about another 100 pages of notes, bibliography, sources, and index. To put it mildly this is not a book that is easy to get physically comfortable with. I wish the author and publisher had considered publishing it in more than one volume just for the sake of old bones. It also obviously will take a commitment to finish a book of this length but I can't imagine anybody seriously interested in the history of WWII not reading this book. It expands my understanding of the Japanese culture of that time and the psychology of their people and their military. The book also explains the Japanese motivations for beginning the war. This was something that had been hinted at in Bradley's book but was really explored in detail in this book. What really struck me was the aspect of WWII as it affected the native populations in the countries where the war was fought. I was never aware of the undercurrent of hostility of the native populations for the white colonial governments and military. That the Japanese entered this war carrying the banner of unity and freedom for Asians and the overthrow of the European overlords was very surprising. As a boy growing up in the 50's I remember the dismantling of the British Empire and how our world maps seemed to change every year when another country had gained independence. I also recall reading about the European double cross of the people of the Middle East after WWI and now was reading that the Asians weren't going to let this happen to them. The Asians were really caught in the middle with a choice between the Europeans that treated them with disdain or going with the Japanese who probably weren't going to be much better and maybe worse. Fortunately, they, for the most part, opted to back the Allies but they expected to be paid back after the war and that is the subject of another book that I may have to look for. It would appear, however, that what took place in the world during the 50's and early 60's was the result of an antiquated colonial system and outright racism in which the U.S. was a fully participating actor. That President Truman rejected the idea of independence for Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Viet Nam in favor of restoring French colonial rule came back to bite both France and the U.S.

in the figurative ass. Another thing that strikes me about what I have read is how avoidable this war was. Of course that isn't really a fair judgment since I am using hindsight. But like almost all wars, including those we are fighting today, they are usually the result of cultural ignorance and an inability to view things from the other side. The Japanese underestimated the people of the U.S. and the U.S. underestimated the Japanese and probably all Asian peoples. This book is a must read for any student of history or any reader that enjoys reading about WWII. What I would love to now discover is that this author has written a book following the aftermath of this war in the Pacific and what transpired in Asia. Some of us old enough know what happened as we lived through it but knowing why things happened as they did would be enlightening. I guess I'll have to explore GR and Amazon to see if this book or one like it exists.

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## **Tim says**

I found this to be two books in one. The first half covers the diplomatic, military, and economic reasons that led to World War II. It does so by weaving accounts of Japanese officers and government officials with the historical record all while appearing to avoid the narrative fallacy. The second half of this book covers the war in the Pacific. Unfortunately, it does so at a more tactical level filled with anecdotes and human interest stories as opposed to the macro level approach that made the first half of the book so enjoyable. Overall, an interesting book for someone who slept through multiple history classes.

“America’s greatest mistake in World War II, I believe, was in failing to recognize that she was fighting two different kinds of war simultaneously: one in Europe against another Western people and philosophy, Nazism, and one in Asia which was not only a struggle against an aggressive nation fighting for survival as a modern power but an ideological contest against an entire continent.” 138

“And a moral policeman’s lot is not a happy one, particularly when his own morality is in question.” 145

“The Americans were inspired by three motives: a desire to trade, spread the Gospel to the yellow pagans and export the ideals of 1776.” 1306

“With the seizure of Manchuria and the invasion of North China, the gulf widened as America denounced Japanese aggression with increasingly forceful words. This moral denunciation only hardened the resolve of the average Japanese. Why should there be a Monroe Doctrine in the Americas and an Open Door principle in Asia?” 1335

“The Japanese takeover in bandit-infested Manchuria was no different from American armed intervention in the Caribbean. Moreover, how could a vast country like the United States even begin to understand the problems that had beset Japan since World War I? Why was it perfectly acceptable for England and Holland to occupy India, Hong Kong, Singapore and the East Indies, but a crime for Japan to follow their example? Why should America, which had grabbed its lands from Indians by trickery, liquor and massacre, be so outraged when Japan did the same in China?” 1338

“All this emotional turmoil was worsened by marked differences between East and West in morality, religion and even patterns of thinking. Western logic was precise, with axioms, definitions, and proofs leading to a logical conclusion. Born dialecticians, the Japanese held that any existence was a contradiction. In everyday life they instinctively practiced the concept of the contradiction of opposites, and the means of harmonizing them. Right and wrong, spirit and matter, God and man—all these opposing elements were harmoniously united. That was why a thing could be good and bad at the same time.” 1345

“Unlike Westerners, who tended to think in terms of black and white, the Japanese had vaguer distinctions, which in international relations often resulted in “policies” and not “principles,” and seemed to Westerners to be conscienceless. Western logic was like a suitcase, defined and limited. Eastern logic was like the furoshiki, the cloth Japanese carry for wrapping objects. It could be large or small according to circumstances and could be folded and put in the pocket when not needed.” 1350

“To the Japanese, a man without contradictions could not be respected; he was just a simple person. The more numerous the contradictions in a man, the deeper he was. His existence was richer the more acutely he struggled with himself.” 1356

“This was all expressed in the word sayonara (sayo—so, nara—if), that is, “So be it.” The Japanese said sayonara every moment to everything, for he felt each moment was a dream. Life was sayonara. Empires could rise or fall, the greatest heroes and philosophers crumble to dust, planets come and go, but Change never changed, including Change itself.” 1369

"Understanding little or nothing of either the Wheel of Causality or the power wielded by the dedicated young rebels, informed Americans mistakenly assumed that the takeover in Manchuria and the foray into China were steps plotted by military leaders who, like Hitler, wished to seize the world for themselves.” 1376

“Thus philosophy was brutalized and brutality was philosophized.” 1379

“There were also numerous petty differences between East and West that needlessly aggravated matters. If a Westerner asked, “This isn’t the road to Tokyo, is it?” the Japanese would reply yes, meaning, “What you say is correct; it is not the road to Tokyo.” Confusion also resulted when the Japanese agreed with the Westerner just to be agreeable or to avoid embarrassment, or gave wrong information rather than admit his ignorance.” 1385

“This embarrassing rehearsal for war not only caused a revolution in Japanese weaponry and military tactics but drove Japan closer to an alliance with Germany and Italy, since she felt that the Soviet Union, England, China and America might combine against her at any moment.” 1403

“In the last war the United States made use of Japan through the Ishii-Lansing agreement, and when the war was over, the United States broke it. This is an old trick of theirs.” 1698

“On the night of July 26 he ordered all Japanese assets in America frozen, and Britain and the Netherlands soon followed suit. In consequence, not only did all trade with the United States cease, but the fact that America had been Japan’s major source of oil imports now left Japan in an untenable situation.” 1941

“They had secured the bases in Indochina by negotiation with Vichy France, a country recognized if not approved by America, and international law was on their side; the freezing was the last step in the encirclement of the empire by the ABCD (American, British, Chinese, Dutch) powers, a denial to Japan of her rightful place as leader of Asia and a challenge to her very existence.” 1944

“Then he warned that Japan’s oil stock would only last for two years, and once war came, eighteen months, and concluded, “Under such circumstances, we had better take the initiative. We will win.””1950

“We should not lose sight of the fact, deplorable but true, that no practical and effective code of international morality upon which the world can rely has yet been discovered, and that the standards of morality of one

nation in given circumstances have little or no relation to the standards of the individuals of the nations in question. To shape our foreign policy on the unsound theory that other nations are guided and bound by our present standards of international ethics would be to court sure disaster.” 1964

“For three decades Americans had held a highly idealized picture of the Chinese, looking upon them as childlike innocents who needed protection against the imperialism of Britain and Japan. China was a helpless, deserving nation whose virtues America alone understood.” 1986

“There was no way to “checkmate the enemy’s king”—industrial potential—and a decisive initial victory was essential.” 2199

“While I was in France, Pétain and Clemenceau told me, ‘Germany was an eyesore to the United States in Europe and it did away with her in the Great War. In the next war it will try to get rid of another eyesore, this one in the Orient, Japan. America knows how inept Japan is diplomatically, so she’ll make moves to abuse you inch by inch until you start a fight. But if you lose your temper and start a war you will surely be defeated, because America has great strength. So you must bear anything and not play into her hands.’ The present situation is exactly as Pétain and Clemenceau predicted. At this time we must persevere so that we won’t get into war with America. You’re a member of the Konoye Cabinet. In the Army, an order must be obeyed. Now the Emperor and the Prime Minister want to bring about the negotiations. As war minister, you should either follow their line of policy or resign.” 2357

“Of course, we may lose,” he said, “but if we don’t fight, we’d just have to bow to the United States. If we fight, there’s a chance we can win. If we don’t fight, wouldn’t that be the same as losing the war?” 2954

“How could you trust a nation that played the two-faced game of talking peace while preparing for war?” 3062

“What particularly infuriated every man in the room was the categorical demand to quit all of China. Manchuria had been won at the cost of considerable sweat and blood. Its loss would mean economic disaster. What right did the wealthy Americans have to make such a demand? What nation with any honor would submit? 3331

“Who was to blame—the United States or Japan? The latter was almost solely responsible for bringing herself to the road of war with America through the seizure of Manchuria, the invasion of China, the atrocities committed against the Chinese people, and the drive to the south. But this course of aggression had been the inevitable result of the West’s efforts to eliminate Japan as an economic rival after World War I, the Great Depression, her population explosion, and the necessity to find new resources and markets to continue as a first-rate power. Added to all this were the unique and undefined position of the Emperor, the explosive role of gekokujo, and the threat of Communism from both Russia and Mao Tse-tung which had developed into paranoiac fear.” 3343

“How could a nation rich in resources and land, and free from fear of attack, understand the position of a tiny, crowded island empire with almost no natural resources, which was constantly in danger of attack from a ruthless neighbor, the Soviet Union?” 3353

“America herself had, moreover, contributed to the atmosphere of hate and distrust by excluding the Japanese from immigration and, in effect, flaunting a racial and color prejudice that justifiably infuriated the proud Nipponese. America should also have perceived and admitted the hypocrisy of taking such a moral stand on the four principles.<sup>b</sup> Her ally, Britain, certainly did not observe them in India or Burma, nor did she

herself in Central America where “gunboat diplomacy” was still upholding the Monroe Doctrine.” 3354

“Her self-righteousness was also self-serving; what was morality at the top became self-interest at the bottom.” 3358

“Finally, America made a grave diplomatic blunder by allowing an issue not vital to her basic interests—the welfare of China—to become, at the last moment, the keystone of her foreign policy.” 3359

“Until that summer America had had two limited aims in the Far East: to drive a wedge between Japan and Hitler, and to thwart Japan’s southward thrust. She could easily have attained both these objectives but instead made an issue out of no issue at all, the Tripartite Pact, and insisted on the liberation of China. For this last unattainable goal America’s diplomats were forcing an early war that her own militarists were hoping to avoid—a war, paradoxically, she was in no position to wage. America could not throw the weight of her strength against Japan to liberate China, nor had she ever intended to do so. Her major enemy was Hitler. Instead of frankly informing Chiang Kai-shek of this, she had yielded to his urgings and pressed the policy that led to war in the Far East—and the virtual abandonment of China. More important, by equating Japan with Nazi Germany, her diplomats had maneuvered their nation into two completely different wars, one in Europe against Fascism, and one in the Orient that was linked with the aspirations of all Asians for freedom from the white man’s bondage.” 3361

“There were no heroes or villains on either side. Roosevelt, for all his shortcomings, was a man of broad vision and humanity; the Emperor was a man of honor and peace. Both were limited—one by the bulky machinery of a great democracy and the other by training, custom and the restrictions of his rule. Caught up in a medieval system, the Japanese militarists were driven primarily by dedication to their country. They wanted power for it, not war profits for themselves; Tojo himself lived on a modest scale. Prince Konoye’s weaknesses came largely from the vulnerable position of a premier in Japan, but by the end of his second cabinet he had transformed his natural tendency for indecisiveness into a show of purpose and courage which continued until his downfall. Even Matsuoka was no villain. Despite his vanity and eccentricities this man of ability sincerely thought he was working for the peace of the world when he saddled Japan with the Tripartite Pact; and he wrecked the negotiations in Washington out of egotism, not malice.” 3369

“Nor were Stimson and Hull villains, though the latter, with his all-or-nothing attitude, had committed one of the most fatal mistakes a diplomat could make—driven his opponents into a corner with no chance to save face and given them no option to capitulation but war.” 3376

“The villain was the times. Japan and America would never have come to the brink of war except for the social and economic eruption of Europe after World War I and the rise of two great revolutionary ideologies—Communism and Fascism. These two sweeping forces, working sometimes in tandem and sometimes at odds, ultimately brought about the tragedy of November 26. America certainly would never have risked going to war solely for the sake of China. It was the fear that Japan in partnership with Hitler and Mussolini would conquer the world that drove America to risk all. And the ultimate tragedy was that Japan had joined up with Hitler mainly because she feared the Anglo-Saxon nations were isolating her; hers was a marriage in name only.” 3379

“A war that need not have been fought was about to be fought because of mutual misunderstanding, language difficulties, and mistranslations as well as Japanese opportunism, gekokujo, irrationality, honor, pride and fear—and American racial prejudice, distrust, ignorance of the Orient, rigidity, self-righteousness, honor, national pride and fear.” 3384

“Perhaps these were essentially the answers to Händel’s question: “Why do the nations so furiously rage

together?” In any case, America had made a grave mistake that would cost her dearly for decades to come. If Hull had sent a conciliatory answer to Proposal B, the Japanese (according to surviving Cabinet members) would have either come to some agreement with America or, at the least, been forced to spend several weeks in debate. And this hiatus would in turn have compelled postponement of their deadline for attack until the spring of 1942 because of weather conditions. By this time it would have been obvious that Moscow would stand, and the Japanese would have been eager to make almost any concessions to avoid going into a desperate war with an ally which now faced inevitable defeat. If no agreement had been reached, America would have gained precious time to strengthen the Philippines with more bombers and reinforcements. Nor would there have been such a debacle at Pearl Harbor. There is little likelihood that the implausible series of chances and coincidences that brought about the December 7 disaster could have been repeated.” 3386

“Morality is an unstable commodity in international relations. The same America that took a no-compromise stand on behalf of the sanctity of agreements, maintenance of the status quo in the Orient, and the territorial integrity of China, reversed herself a few years later at Yalta by promising Russia territory in the Far East as an inducement to join the war in the Pacific.” 3431

“The idea for a surprise attack was based on the tactics of his hero, Admiral Togo, who had, without any declaration of war, assaulted the Second Russian Pacific Squadron at Port Arthur in 1904 with torpedo boats while its commander, an Admiral Stark, was at a party. The Russians never recovered from this loss—two battleships and a number of cruisers—and the following year almost their entire fleet was destroyed in the Battle of Tsushima during which, incidentally, young Ensign Yamamoto lost two fingers on his left hand.” 3460

“(The concept of achieving decisive victory by one surprise blow lay deep in the Japanese character. Their favorite literary form was the haiku, a poem combining sensual imagery and intuitive evocation in a brief seventeen syllables; a rapier thrust that expressed, with discipline, the illumination sought in the Japanese form of Buddhism. Similarly, the outcome in judo, sumo [wrestling] and kendo [fencing with bamboo staves], after long preliminaries, was settled by a sudden stroke.)” 3464

“This message, which would have meant a warning of attack on Pearl Harbor to anybody reading it, was intercepted in Hawaii and passed on to the cryptographers in Washington for decoding, but since it concerned Hawaii and had nothing to do with diplomacy, its low priority sent it to the bottom of somebody’s basket.” 4218

\*Quotes are a selection of the 32 pages taken from my exported Kindle highlights and bookmarks. The numbers refer to the location in the Kindle version and not to page numbers.

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## **Erik Graff says**

Looking for a relatively light read I picked this off the shelves where it had been sitting for years. Having read a couple of his other books, I was pretty sure that Toland would be interesting.

Indeed, he was—even more interesting than I had expected, neither expecting that this book would be so sympathetic to the Japanese perspective nor that Toland’s wife was Japanese. No expert, but certainly not unread about the war in the Pacific, I was rather blown away by the presentation, the other books I’d read being very much pro-Allies, anti-Axis.

Among the propositions put to the reader by Toland's text are how Japanese policy was substantially independent of that of the other Axis powers and how the Pacific war might well have been avoided had the U.S. State Department another secretary at the time. Other contentious positions taken by the author include a rather critical portrayal of MacArthur and a rather positive one of Emperor Hirohito. Roosevelt and Ambassador Grew come across well. Rumors that Roosevelt knew beforehand of the Japanese intention to attack Pearl Harbor are discounted.

Most particularly, however, I liked how Toland used, and defined, a number of Japanese terms and expressions, employing this as one means to get at the Japanese mindset, something few in the U.S. government or military understood.

Like the original Tora, Tora motion picture, coproduced by citizens of both countries, or like Clint Eastwood's recent diptych on one battle of the war, this book is unusually balanced and is to be highly recommended.

Now I just have to find the second volume as this one ends with Guadalcanal, arguably the turning point of the Pacific War.

--I have since found this edition, a combination of both volumes, and have given the first volume of the other edition away to a Japanese friend for her reactions.

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## **Antonio Nunez says**

This exceptional, Pulitzer prize-winning book tells the story of the Japanese empire from the takeover by militarists among assassinations in early 1936 to the unprecedented visit by emperor Hirohito to Supreme Commander MacArthur in September 1945. In between it is a story of hubris in which a strong and vibrant people allow faulty leaders to guide them from a dominant role in the far East (in which they held Manchuria, Korea and other territories like the Caroline, the Marshall, the Palau or the Mariana Islands) to life in a militarily emasculated occupied territory, with about three million less people than would otherwise have been the case, and near-universal hatred in many neighboring countries, notably China. Toland tells the story exceptionally well. He does a very good job at the set pieces (Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, the Bataan Death March, Midway, Saipan, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Hiroshima and Nagasaki), but he also brings to life a time in which a group of military fanatics, samurais displaced in the mid-twentieth century, held sway over hundreds of millions of people. Especially interesting is how the Japanese decided to bring war undeclared to the US, the UK, France and The Netherlands with a very flimsy rationale, and as matters evolved even this vanished leaving them without any strategic options. Like in Germany, the fanatics thought sacrificing tens of millions of their fellow countrymen was an affordable price for the preservation of the national honor. In the case of Japan, even more than in Germany, it clearly wasn't. Japan was not defeated in WWI (it was on the winning side at a very low cost, after having thrashed China in 1895 and Russia in 1905). It had its empire on the mainland and in the mandate islands. Yet the military leadership saw no way forward from various short-sighted American decisions, other than invasion and war. The fate of Japan in this period should make us wary of people recommending military actions without clear rationale, for reasons of national prestige or national honor. I think every country has mentally unhinged people who would not hesitate to sacrifice the entire people to some metaphysical goal. In democracies we all have a mandate to keep such people from power. Japan flourished in the post-war when it put this madness behind and dedicated itself to hard work and prosperity.



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## **Dave Hoff says**

Old, reread after O'Reilly's book, Toland has more from the Japanese side. Can see O'Reilly used it as a reference. Especially the Russian-Manchuria part at end of WW2. Good history book, required reading for this generation.

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## **Bart Thanhauser says**

I took far too many notes on this book trying to remember the events and people that dot these pages. But what resounds more than these pages of notes, is my belief that Tolland's greatest success is in what he didn't do: Tolland avoided the Cold War lens and the Great Man theory. In avoiding these pit falls, he has not only written a fascinating, highly readable book (especially considering it's length), but he has set a standard by which I think all history books should be held.

The Cold War lens is when writers apply the Cold War--the ideologies, cultures and people that were at war for decades--to explain most 20th century events. I was born just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and as a result the Cold War doesn't loom as big. But I think many history books written before the Wall's fall apply the Cold War lens too freely and too often. The Cold War is used to explain and understand events that are more diverse than this lens. Tolland does not ignore the Cold War altogether--and towards the end of the book, he explains how World War 2 shaped and affected the bipolar world that followed. But he does not let this lens overwhelm the true subject matter--Japan--and the key relationship to this book: the US and Japan. Having written this book in the 1960s, this is an impressive feat.

The Great Man theory is the idea that a single man or woman changed the course of history. By this logic, if another man or woman was in power at a certain moment in history, events would've played out differently. This is a pretty appealing theory; if Hitler had never existed, Germany would not have tried to take over Europe. If not for Truman, the US would not have dropped the atomic bomb. But it can be used too liberally. It's a lot more fun to read about big personalities, and it's much easier to explain events through the Great Men than through multiple, smaller causes. As a result I think history writers sometimes hyperbolize their characters and simplify their narratives. I personally think that most events in history are a result of greater, bigger forces (I'm not trying to make this too dense, but see Graham Allison for more info). Put anyone in the president's shoes and in the same political context, and they'd make the same decision that the "Great Man" made. And if they are the kind of person that would make a different decision, then the context they lived in would not have allowed them to become president in the first place. This means that there would've been World War without Hitler, and the bomb would've dropped without Truman. In short, context determines history more than a single person and context itself is determined by a web of people and forces greater than just one man. Tolland does an admirable job of capturing these greater forces, and in so doing he not only creates a fascinating, readable tome on modern Japanese history, but he also sets a standard for the care and seriousness to which all history writing should aim.

I originally picked up this book because I wanted to read about the Japanese in Indonesia. I've been living in Indonesia for the past year and people here sometimes say that the 3 years the Japanese were in power in Indonesia were worse than the 300 years of Dutch colonialism. This book doesn't give much information about the Japanese in Indonesia, or for that matter the Japanese in East Asia as a whole. This book was

mostly about American-Japanese relations and was heavy on battle details and political details. But it was nonetheless fascinating. If you had told me I'd read a combined 300 pages about battles for tiny, forgotten Pacific Islands I'd probably be skeptical. But somehow even the maneuvers the charges and retreats and naval skirmishes all kept my interest and were imbued with both thoughtful analysis and emotion.

I wrote mid-read, "For a ~900 page book this is very readable. Still, man is it long." This is a pretty worthy assessment. You don't need me to tell you this. This is a long book. But it's about as readable as any history book can be. It's a smart and emotional tome. A long cast of characters (most of whom Tolland personally interviewed) string Tolland's writing together, and the result is a wide reaching history book that still manages to carry an intimacy to it. Letters and personal journals pick up the narrative of history and then are lightly put down. They make this dense book personal while still being full of information.

#### 4.5

Also, here are some additional notes on 3 things that I learned from this book that I'd like to hold on to. They are unique mini-theses that Tolland presents. Feel free to skip this.

1) One of the reasons that Japan and America collided was Japan was a growing nation that needed land and resources. In Japan, an aggressive military clique rose to power and these vital national needs (land, energy) became an attempt to establish hegemony in Asia. Many thought, if the US is allowed to establish hegemony in America and mine other nations for needed resources, why can't we? Many people besides Tolland have argued this, but it's still an interesting point. Especially the details that Tolland gives about Japan's too-powerful military.

2) Japan for all its imperialistic aggression was also a liberator. This is an incredibly interesting point. Many outside the military saw the war in the Pacific as a war where Japan would liberate Asia from Western colonialism. And although this point was pumped up with propaganda, there was a lot of truth to it. Japan gave independence to many nations that it conquered and it recognized the rebel governments fighting for independence in Western-colonized nations (like India). They were doing some remarkably forward thinking, democratic stuff. While the US and Britain were writing the Atlantic Charter but not following through with it (still holding colonies, still selling Polish sovereignty to Russia), Japan was gathering Asian leaders, declaring their sovereignty and pledging a mission to Asian freedom from the Western colonial yoke. During the war Japan held the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo for all foreign Asian, anti-colonial leaders. There was a lot of propaganda to this--especially since Indonesia was considered an exception, and Japan deemed not-ready for independence while it mined it for resources--but it's still powerful, inspiring stuff.

3) Truman did not need to drop the bomb, and Japan's military elite were sort of nuts. Truman did not need to drop the bomb. There were plenty in Japan that were ready for peace and actively wanted it. The Emperor was close to publicly espousing peace, and Japanese diplomats were already contacting Russian and European nations to help mediate a peace. The US could've detonated a bomb on a deserted island or in the air, to push these leaders to faster action. At the same time, Japan's military elite was pretty nuts. Many of the top most leaders believed that this had to be a fight to the death, a fight to the last man. They wanted to arm men, women, and children on the mainland to at least make the US suffer. They believed 100 million were prepared to die, and should die to defend Japan. Surrendering was out of the question.

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## Paul says

This is quite a long book, and covers an overview of the Japanese involvement in World War II. It goes into quite a bit of minute detail about the "war is hell" parts of things, and a lot of the politics - which was quite interesting - but in general I still feel it does not paint the full picture. I think very little mention was made of the numerous war crimes committed by the Japanese - the book touches on it in the description of the Bataan Death March, but that seemed like just another incident in the war. As far as I recall, the *Rape of Nanking* is not mentioned nor most of the other war crimes committed against occupied civilians or western POWs. This makes me find it a bit hard to trust Toland's characterization of Emperor Hirohito, who (as far as I can tell) was the subject of a positive propaganda machine after the war, to ease the transition into American occupation.

Still, there were numerous interesting stories about the war (some of which are insanely disgusting), so if you like these sorts of personal anecdotes, it's an interesting enough book.

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## Shawn says

I love John Toland. He may be one of the most prolific historians during my lifetime. Possibly a precursor to the popular historians such as McCullough or Ambrose. I read his well received, but not academically praised biography of Hitler, and the controversial Day of Infamy and I thought that those books were both well done and convincing; however, I have shied away from *The Rising Sun*, more from its intimidating length than its content. It is immense - running nearly a thousand pages with ample footnotes. The book is well worth the time and effort.

Toland begins with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and he does not sugar coat the barbarity of that conflict. He describes in detail the atrocity in Nanjing and the mindset of the troops that led up to the war crimes. He follows chronologically the border conflicts with the Soviets, joining the Axis powers, the desperation and fear of isolation after the US declared an oil embargo. Tojo's decision to attack Pear Harbor and the victorious march down the Malaysian Peninsular. I found it fascinating the Japanese warlords thought that it might even be possible to conquer India and meet up with the Nazis in the Caucasus. The defeat of Shanghai and the conquest of the Philippines is described in detail and the Death March of Bataan and Corrigidor is absolutely heartbreaking.

At this point, Japan lost the war. True, there would be further victories as vastly distant as the Aleutians and New Guinea; but from this point, the might of US production was going to crush the territory of the Empire. It is hard not to feel for the ordinary Japanese soldiers and the civilians who were driven by a Bushido code to suffer unimaginable hardships. It was that determination and fanaticism that would ultimately sway the decision to drop the atomic bombs. The military, moral and political decision to drop the bombs is outlined and well done. The suffering of the civilians are balanced by the what exactly President Truman was trying to accomplish and the information he had in front of him predicting an unbelievably bloody invasion of the home islands.

It is also telling that a palace coup nearly imprisoned the Emperor and forced a continuation of the war. This is a sad and violent history that is a difficult read. The book on the whole is an amazing accomplishment and well deserving of the Pulitzer it won. If there is a problem with the book, and it is a small one, the book seemed heavily weighted to tell the story of the fighting between the Americans and the Japanese. I would

have loved to learned more about the campaigns in Burma and India that seemed a bit short-shifted.

Still this is an excellent read.

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### **Adam Nelson says**

Excellent narrative history of Japan's experience in World War II, examining the issues and circumstances leading to Japan's involvement, strategic battles and encounters throughout, and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I must confess that I tapped out at various points in my reading of this book, but that doesn't mean that it didn't have tremendous value. Toland offers writing here that ought to please all readers of history, whether it be to gain factual or strategic knowledge or to get a socio/psychological understanding of Japanese thinking and culture that contributed to its involvement in the war and the choices major Japanese officials and strategists made throughout. I personally was more interested in the latter. I found the portions of Volume II detailing first-person accounts of the bombings to be very chilling and haunting. Black and white pictures we have seen of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima do not do the horror justice, and I must admit that I am conflicted regarding Truman's cavalier attitude toward the decision to drop the bombs. I had been led to believe it was a much weightier decision for him, but Toland portrays him as rather ruthless and absolutist about it.

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### **D. Wayne says**

Wow, Japan had logical reasons for attacking us. Who knew? Japan viewed its expansion in Asia as equivalent to the U.S. continental expansion and power grab in the western hemisphere.

Why would the U.S. stop another with a near identical view of national destiny. Japan adopted All-American values like crushing "lesser" people, gobbling resources for exploitation, and providing economic opportunity for a burgeoning population at home. All this was conducted under a parliamentary democracy determined to bring a "better way" to less fortunate souls abroad. Sounds like good people. Really, there were many millions of acres of untapped land, minerals, and ocean views begging for good management in southeast Asia.

It was Japan's drive for oil to fuel this ambition that gave the U.S. an opportunity to intercede. The U.S. blockade triggered a frenzy of diplomatic efforts to carve up Asia to both country's liking. America, however, did not show flexibility toward Japanese expansion. Yes, America could certainly use another slice of this or that, but Japan should get back to its own islands.

With days of fuel remaining, the Japanese military brass gained the upper hand in government planning. At great risk, the attack on Pearl Harbor was launched and a nation's destiny was carved in stark terms.

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### **Matt says**

By my last count, there were one gazillion books on World War II, with more coming out every week. And it will never stop. World War II will continue to be refought between the covers – and on Kindles – long after human memory of the event is gone. It will be told for as long as there are people to tell stories.

The question, then, is which of those books to read? You can spend your entire life reading World War II books and not even scratch the surface. Besides, there are other things to do in life. Like drinking or reading about the American Civil War or doing both at the same time.

Thankfully, there are a few landmark books, the ones that everyone can name, the ones that are certified as classic, that stand out from the pack, like a guy wearing an Armani suit at a clown college (or a clown at an Armani store, if you prefer).

In the European Theater of Operations, one of those classics is William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Shirer was a journalist who spent time in prewar Nazi Germany, and even followed the Nazis into France. Concerned that the Gestapo was going to arrest him, Shirer fled Germany in 1940 and later wrote his seminal account, a history of the Second World War as seen through the eyes of Hitler and his henchmen. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* has its shortcomings (among them an archaic and heavily belabored distaste for homosexuality), but there is no denying its place in the firmament. All books coming after had to deal with its shadow.

John Toland's *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire* is a Pacific Theater counterpoint to Shirer's masterwork. It tells the tale of the other side of World War II, and does so (mainly) from the point of view of the Japanese. Upon publication, it won the Pulitzer Prize, and can be found in the endnotes and bibliography of just about every subsequent book written about the Pacific War.

More than anything, though, it is a book that finds that perfect balance between macro and micro, between general and private (and civilian). It always strives to hold the big picture clear, but never fails to remind you of the individuals who collectively made that big picture. As such, this is a rare history, one that is scholarly and massively researched, yet also shot-through with empathy, compassion, and humanism.

It is one of the best books I've read on World War II.

Toland begins in 1936, with young Japanese radicals bent on assassinating several of the Emperor's advisers. These men were practicing *gekokujo*, or insubordination, a semi-legitimate form of rebellion. In this opening chapter, Toland briskly (sometimes too briskly) outlines the background that fomented *gekokujo*: the fall of monarchies after World War I; the competition between democracy, socialism, and Communism that came in its wake; the rapid westernization of Japan (and the resulting scandals and corruption); Japan's population explosion; and the inevitable blowback by conservatives and nationalists.

During Japan's rise as a Pacific power, it invaded Manchuria – which it saw as a buffer against the Soviet Union (with whom they'd warred at the beginning of the century) and as a source of raw materials – and, in 1932, established the puppet state of Manchukuo. The creation of Manchukuo obviously heightened tensions between China and Japan. Those tensions came to a head in 1937 at the Marco Polo Bridge, in an "incident" that better marks the actual beginning of World War II (as opposed to the September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland by Hitler).

The clash at the Marco Polo Bridge led to full scale war, including the infamous Nanking Massacre.

The only real criticism I have with *The Rising Sun* is in Toland's handling of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Part of the reason I bought this book was to learn more about this forgotten theater. Unfortunately, however, Toland deals with China in a cursory fashion. He does not take the time to develop the strategy of the war, or explain in great detail how it unfolded. The fall of Nanking merits barely a page. This stands in stark contrast to the space devoted to the American-Japanese conflict beginning in 1942. For instance, Toland devotes an

entire (and yes, brilliant) chapter to the battle of Guadalcanal.

In other words, despite the broad claims of its cover, *The Rising Sun* is mainly focused on the war between American and Japan. This means less attention (though it's not entirely ignored) paid to China's dual struggle (against Japan, and themselves), Britain's collapse in Singapore, the Burma Campaign, and the massive battles of Kohima and Imphal in India.

Even though Toland decides to place his heaviest emphasis on familiar territory, it nevertheless manages to be revelatory. After the earlier chapters, which felt compressed, *The Rising Sun* hits its stride in the run-up to Pearl Harbor. You get to see the rationale behind Japan's decisions, its attempts to negotiate with America (especially through Prince Konoye), and the different factions within the Japanese ministry.

When we think of Japan in World War II, we think of Nanking and Pearl Harbor, of the Bataan Death March and kamikazes. Prime Minister Tojo has become a caricature of evil, divorced from any of the human traits that even Hitler has posthumously been granted.

These conceptions do little to broaden our understanding of what actually happened. By taking us into the backrooms of Japanese policymaking, we get to see the world – and its perils – as they did. They faced many difficulties as a small, overcrowded island-nation, a net importer of just about everything. When President Roosevelt decided to turn off the oil spigot, it was as grave a threat to Japan as Khrushchev's October missiles were to the United States in 1962.

To be sure, Japan's colonial impulses were brutal, but they had learned from the best (that is, from Europe). It is also interesting, as Toland notes, how Japan's pan-Asian ambitions did not fall entirely on deaf ears. There were many people for whom an Asian power in the Pacific was preferable to the white powers that had dominated for a hundred years or more, using their human capital and removing their resources for exploitation elsewhere. (After the war, of course, that pan-Asian spark was enough to incite anti-colonial movements all over Asia, including Indochina and India).

The difficulty in writing this type of history is that you are taking the side of the conquered. And history, of course, is written by the winners. That means that Allied atrocities are subordinated to the carnage perpetrated by the "bad guys."

In other words, the casual reader, familiar with the winner's take, might feel that Toland is soft peddling Japan's crimes. I don't think he does. Anything that smacks of such is a function of the point-of-view he has chosen for his narrative. Nobody does evil thinking it is evil; there is always a rationalization, followed by a rationalization, until you're in too deep.

A good example of this is the Bataan Death March. Toland does not skimp on the horrors suffered by MacArthur's captured troops, but does place it in a milieu divorced from contemporary propaganda. He shows how the overarching cause of the Death March was Japan's poor planning and its utter surprise at America's collapse in the Philippines. They were simply not prepared for the influx of tens of thousands of starving, disease-ridden soldiers. (General Homma's execution at the end of the war can only be seen as MacArthur's crass punishment of the man who kicked his ass off Corregidor).

Though General Homma did not set out to massacre his prisoners, there were certainly men under his command who intended just that. This filtered down to the rank-and-file Japanese soldier, who was created within a framework of unending violence: beaten by his superiors; taught to fight to the death; imbued with the belief that capture was dishonor, and that the way of the warrior was death.

Toland was an author especially suited – as far as a white American could be – to tell this story, as he was married to a Japanese woman named Toshiko, who assisted as his interpreter. By giving an account of the Pacific War from the Japanese perspective, he gave them a humanity denied by wartime hyperbole of unthinking, unfeeling, murderous fanatics. Toland gives them a voice, quotes their letters and diaries, stands with them in their pillboxes or on the street the day a bomb exploded with “the light of a thousand suns.”

My greatest surprise in reading *The Rising Sun* was its emotional impact. It begins as a straightforward, chronological history, marked by tremendous research but structurally run-of-the mill. As the book progresses, though, you recognize the elegance of Toland’s construction, how he weaves the stories of heretofore unknown participants into the grander narrative. Part of the reason *The Rising Sun* is so effective, so powerful, is the way Toland threads the mini-arcs of participants into the larger story. During the Battle of Saipan, for instance, Toland follows the travails of a young Japanese nurse and shows you the war through her eyes, in all its terrible, limited scope:

In Garapan a young volunteer nurse by the name of Shizuko Miura – a tomboy with a round merry face – flinched as the first shells landed. She peered out the window of the first-aid station into the dim light. The Americans were bombarding the town again. As the explosions moved closer she helped transfer those wounded in the earlier shelling to a dugout. With daylight came enemy planes and an even more violent barrage from the ships. It is June 14, Shizuko thought calmly. I have lived for eighteen years and my time to die has come. A shell shook the dugout like an earthquake and knocked her to the ground. She staggered outside. The first-aid station was obliterated. She saw a piece of red metal – it was shrapnel – and, curious, touched it with her finger. It burned her. Planes droned overhead but no one was firing at them. Garapan was aflame. The heat was so intense that she could hardly breathe. She started to make her way through the rubble streets strewn with bodies...

Toland was able to tell stories like this because of his diligent primary research. In the source section, you will find ten pages filled with names, noting all the people with whom he’d conducted interviews. The names include prime ministers, admirals, and also Shizuko Miura.

For this reason alone, *The Rising Sun* is a touchstone of World War II writing. The firsthand information gathered from these participants, many of whom might have been forgotten, has proven invaluable to historians and writers who have followed in Toland’s footsteps.

But this is not the only reason to read *The Rising Sun*, or even the best. Rather, it is a testament to humanity in the midst of the most inhuman period of human existence. In Toland’s own words, it is a story that is “muddled, ennobling, disgraceful, frustrating, full of paradox.”

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## Alex says

This book is huge, and I’m thankful to have found a manageable, one volume paperback, looking something like a very thick novel, but very easy to carry around. No one will deny that there’s an enormous amount of information here detailing every major battle of the Pacific War from Pearl Harbor to the end and then some, but it’s also important to note how that information is organized.

The book finds its beginning with the 1936 coup attempt in Japan and then moves quickly into the lead up to Pearl Harbor. It all gets straight to the point, it's almost all directly related to the war. Japan's rise to Pacific domination, and the conflicts with China and Russia, as far as I can remember were all mentioned almost in passing, and I found that it helped to already have some background knowledge going into this.

The information is presented chronologically, to the point where chapters seem redundant. I can't remember the title of a single one, or ever feeling that I was in a certain, separate section of the book. It all goes neatly in order year by year.

What really changes is the perspective which is all over the place from the highest levels of government, to spies, diplomats, soldiers, and civilians. You do feel the suffering of war here, from the civilian and the military perspective, you even get a sense of how distressed and apprehensive the Japanese command was, both in the lead up to the war, and obviously towards the end.

It was a very point by point exposition though from a wide variety of people who experienced the war. The perspective was from the individual, through and through, and only collectively you began to see the course of the whole war. Before some of the island battles, Toland pauses to describe the history of the islands, and that was an occasional break from the usual style.

There's also no literary character here, almost at all. I can't remember any memorable passage, though there's vivid imagery perhaps simply due to the nature of war. Toland simply explains what happens, but even that sometimes is enough to leave an impact.

I was surprised how quickly the war turned around for Japan, and it does get less engaging towards the end, as the course of the war ends up leaving very little surprises left, even if you didn't know anything about it before, but I learned an enormous amount about a war which I had mostly up until now neglected to learn about, despite living on the Pacific Coast.

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## **Chrissie says**

This book explores Japan's involvement in World War II. It focuses upon the Pacific theater and upon battles, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and finally it explains in detail why it took so long for the Japanese to surrender. All related to the Japanese involvement is covered in detail. It is not hard to follow because it is written in a narrative voice projecting the views, thoughts and words of those who fought, both Americans and Japanese. What is difficult is the slaughter. Slaughter on both sides, mind you. I felt it was balanced, neither pro-Western nor pro-Eastern.

Keep in mind - that I should be able to read a book from start to finish that so closely follows battle after battle is pretty darn amazing. This is proof that it somehow was able to keep my attention. It was clear even to me, someone who shies away from books focused upon military battles and thus scarcely knows military terms. You follow - in detail - Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, the fall of Singapore, Midway, Guadalcanal, Saipan, the Battles of Leyte Gulf, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. Other battles too, but those named are covered in great detail. You learn the Pacific Islands.

If you listen to the audiobook you must dig up your own maps, but that is really no problem. It would have been nice if a word or two were added about the location of the particular islands. When it gets to the Battles of Leyte Gulf there are so many islands and so many fleets that I went to Wiki to get the movements on



paper!

The reason why you can follow these battles is that the soldiers speak, and joke and talk to the reader. Some change their mind; you follow their thoughts. I did wonder sometimes how in the world the author got this information. This is supposedly non-fiction..... Letters? Survivors' stories afterwards? This is not explained in an afterword or introduction. Maybe the printed book has notes? Harakiri, now this is exemplified many, many times in the text. This is a concept difficult to understand for Westerners. You need umpteen examples of particular individuals and situations to begin to understand the shame coupled with defeat in Eastern mentality. I understand better, but not completely.

I am very glad I chose this book. Well worth the time and effort invested. I personally think it is a book better read on paper than listened to. There are so many names and details to absorb. Maybe you are fluent in Japanese names, but I am not. My audiobook was narrated by Tom Weiner. Even if he does a good job, I would have preferred a snail's pace.

What did I like best? Maybe learning why it took so long for Japan to surrender. What do I think on closing the book? There should be strong controls on the military. Mistakes were made on both sides. On every side and by all parts.

I learned a lot.

One more thing. The author's wife is Japanese and the book received the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 1971.

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## **Grampus says**

The definitive source regarding the view of WWII from the Japanese perspective. An amazing amount of insight and information. Cannot recommend highly enough for those interested in WWII.

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## **Ahmed Chowdhry says**

This is one of the best books on Pacific War especially from a Japanese point of view that I have read. A detailed description of the Japanese aggression (in short form) and collapse (in long form) in World War II, told from the perspective of "inside the Japanese governmental and military command structures. I will not forget the build up to the Pearl Harbor attack and the strategy that was employed. The Japanese high command, both the Army as well as the Navy knew that they were waking up a sleeping giant.

The book tries to give a balanced account of events, giving perspectives of the major players (Japanese, American, Russian, Chinese and British), as well as fascinating insight into the political/diplomatic maneuvering that lead to key strategic, political, and military decisions in the war and their outcomes.

This is a must read for anyone interested in the second world war.

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## **Christopher Saunders says**

Mammoth history of Japan's involvement in the Second World War. Toland seeks to emulate the sweep, if not the editorial tone of Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, mixing high-level cabinet deliberations and diplomacy with military strategy and the on-the-ground experience of Japanese soldiers and sailors. Toland's portrait shows a Japanese leadership eager to exploit China but agonizing over their decision to attack America and Britain, the division among Japan's military and political leadership, and their wholehearted commitment once war's actually declared. Toland relishes details, from the importance of mistranslation in deteriorating diplomatic relations, to the slang and attitudes of Japanese troops. Because of its scope, the book's somewhat spotty on certain subjects: the Sino-Japanese War's barely touched on, while the Anglo-Chinese campaign in Burma's reduced to a brief chapter. There's a long section on the founding of the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and its popularity among pan-Asians, but no follow up on the movement's dissolving as Japan's brutality became evident. For that matter, Japanese atrocities are heavily downplayed, reduced to a sentence or two amidst detailed, multipage battle accounts. If Toland seems overly sympathetic to Japanese aspirations, he deserves credit at least for his comprehensive, multilayered approach.

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