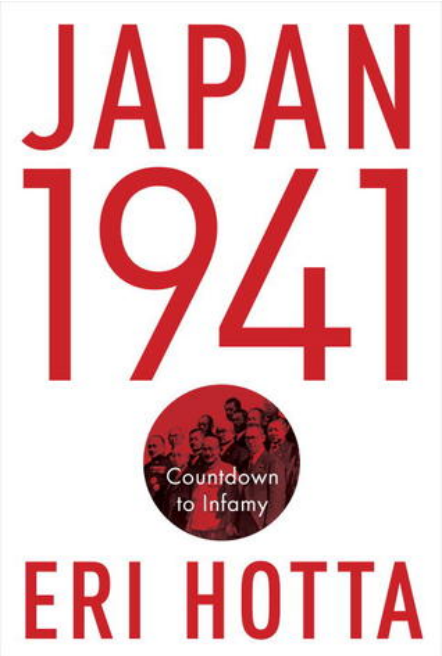

Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy

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A groundbreaking history that considers the attack on Pearl Harbor from the Japanese perspective and is certain to revolutionize how we think of the war in the Pacific.

When Japan launched hostilities against the United States in 1941, argues Eri Hotta, its leaders, in large part, understood they were entering a war they were almost certain to lose. Drawing on material little known to Western readers, and barely explored in depth in Japan itself, Hotta poses an essential question: Why did these men--military men, civilian politicians, diplomats, the emperor--put their country and its citizens so unnecessarily in harm's way? Introducing us to the doubters, schemers, and would-be patriots who led their nation into this conflagration, Hotta brilliantly shows us a Japan rarely glimpsed--eager to avoid war but fraught with tensions with the West, blinded by reckless militarism couched in traditional notions of pride and honor, tempted by the gambler's dream of scoring the biggest win against impossible odds and nearly escaping disaster before it finally proved inevitable.

In an intimate account of the increasingly heated debates and doomed diplomatic overtures preceding Pearl Harbor, Hotta reveals just how divided Japan's leaders were, right up to (and, in fact, beyond) their eleventh-hour decision to attack. We see a ruling cadre rich in regional ambition and hubris: many of the same leaders seeking to avoid war with the United States continued to adamantly advocate Asian expansionism, hoping to advance, or at least maintain, the occupation of China that began in 1931, unable to end the second Sino-Japanese War and unwilling to acknowledge Washington's hardening disapproval of their continental incursions. Even as Japanese diplomats continued to negotiate with the Roosevelt administration, Matsuoka Yosuke, the egomaniacal foreign minister who relished paying court to both Stalin and Hitler, and his facile supporters cemented Japan's place in the fascist alliance with Germany and Italy--unaware (or unconcerned) that in so doing they destroyed the nation's bona fides with the West.

We see a dysfunctional political system in which military leaders reported to both the civilian government and the emperor, creating a structure that facilitated intrigues and stoked a jingoistic rivalry between Japan's army and navy. Roles are recast and blame reexamined as Hotta analyzes the actions and motivations of the hawks and skeptics among Japan's elite. Emperor Hirohito and General Hideki Tojo are newly appraised as we discover how the two men fumbled for a way to avoid war before finally acceding to it.

Hotta peels back seventy years of historical mythologizing--both Japanese and Western--to expose all-too-human Japanese leaders torn by doubt in the months preceding the attack, more concerned with saving face than saving lives, finally drawn into war as much by incompetence and lack of political will as by bellicosity. An essential book for any student of the Second World War, this compelling reassessment will forever change the way we remember those days of infamy.

Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy Details

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From Reader Review Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy for online ebook

Stewart says

The surprise attack by Japanese naval forces on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, has been described and analyzed by dozens of books and depicted in several movies, almost all from the American perspective. The 2014 book “Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy” by Tokyo native Eri Hotta, who was educated in Japan, the U.S., and the U.K, gives the other side of the story.

The great question that students of World War II have asked is how could Japan, with the fraction of the population, resources, and manufacturing capabilities of the United States, attack that country and seriously think it would win, or at least force a stalemate. Admiral Isoruku Yamamoto is known for his prophetic comments about victory being highly improbable: “In the first six to twelve months of a war with the United States and Great Britain I will run wild and win victory upon victory. But then, if the war continues after that, I have no expectation of success.”

Yamamoto was not alone in his assessment, Hotta writes. After the national celebration after the successful Pearl Harbor attack, many in Japan shook their heads in disbelief, even Prime Minister Hideki Tojo. “The small number of Japanese with substantial knowledge of the West could not celebrate, either. They were too aware of Japan's limited resources and were convinced that the country would be annihilated in the end.”

Yamamoto was right: Almost six months to the day after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Navy was dealt a devastating blow at the Battle of Midway. Japan lost more than 3,000 sailors and pilots, 289 aircraft, and four aircraft carriers. From then on, the Japanese military was on the defensive, and the last year or so of the war brought death and destruction to Japanese cities from the U.S. Air Force.

So why did the Japanese government in 1941 decide to attack the United States? Hotta provides several reasons. One was group think: “There is no question that most Japanese leaders, out of either institutional or individual preferences, avoided open conflict among themselves. Their circuitous speech makes the interpretation of records particularly difficult. For most military leaders, any hint of weakness was to be avoided, so speaking decisively and publicly against the war was unthinkable, even if they had serious doubts.” Patriotism, of course, reared its ugly head as well.

Many in the Japanese government and the populace thought themselves victims of the Western powers, the U.S. and Britain in particular. There is some truth to this, but Japan’s aggressive military policies, including its bogged-down land war in China, were not in this discussion.

“Having talk themselves into believing that they were victims of circumstances rather than aggressors,” Hotta writes, “they discarded less heroic but more rational options and hesitantly yet defiantly propelled the country on a war course.”

“One should not, of course, underestimate the enormous pressure these leaders faced on the eve of Pearl Harbor. They felt they had to choose between waging a reckless war and giving up all of Japan's imperialistic conquest of many years in order to stave off war. They tended to ignore that such extreme choices grew directly out of their own recent decisions and actions.”

Arrogance is almost always a precursor in waging war. Hitler’s generals knew that the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 would probably in the long run bring ruin on Germany. Arrogance and rationalization was prominent in the U.S. in 2002-03 in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq: “Self-confidence bordering on hubris had become very much a part of the mind-set of Japan's policymakers as they contemplated the nation’s options in 1941.”

Hotta lays to rest several misconceptions by Americans then and now about the Japanese government of 1941-45. Unlike Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, Japan was not a military dictatorship, run by Emperor Hirohito and/or Prime Minister Tojo. In fact, as Hotta points out, Japan’s government was plagued by group think, infighting between the navy and army, the need to save face, and institution paralysis.

“The great irony in Japan's decision to go to war is that its leaders could not have even conceived of taking such a grand gamble had it not been for Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, who was fundamentally against war, Hotta writes. “As a coolheaded political analyst, Yamamoto warned the naval general staff in Tokyo in late September 1941 that ‘a war with so little chance of success should not be fought.’ But at the same time, as an operation planner, Yamamoto, Japan’s most informed commander and its biggest gambler, could adamantly insist on the adaption of his Pearl Harbor strategy even though he knew the United States would not give up the fight easily.”

Much has been discussed about the lateness of Japan’s presentation of its response on Dec. 7 to the U.S. government's proposals. Yamamoto and Hirohito had insisted that Japan follow international law and declare war before engaging in offensive military actions. However, the final response to the American diplomatic initiative delivered Dec. 7 did not break off diplomatic relations, much less contain an actual declaration of war. The multi-part message declaring an end to talks between the two nations was to have been delivered to Secretary of State Cordell Hull by 1 p.m. Eastern Time on Dec. 7, about 25 minutes before the attack. But because of delays in decoding and typing by the Japanese embassy, the message was actually delivered about an hour and 20 minutes after the attack began. Because Americans had broken the Japanese diplomatic code, Hull knew of the contents of the Japanese government response before negotiators Kichisaburo Nomura and Saburo Kurusu did.

But ultimately the timing of Japanese response didn't matter. The Japanese government did not deliver a declaration of war to Washington on Dec. 7. Hotta writes, “Even if the document had been handed to Hull before the commencement of the Pearl Harbor attack, it would not have eliminated the element of surprise – as well as illegality – from Japan's offensive. The late delivery in Washington did strengthen Roosevelt's case, helping him rally the country around the flag, but he himself made clear that the stealth of the Pearl Harbor strategy and the accompanying use of diplomacy as its cloak were the most abominable part of Japan's conduct.”

The two Japanese diplomats eventually realized they had been manipulated by their own government to continue negotiations to mislead the U.S. and disguise the Pearl Harbor attack.

Japan’s failure after its surrender in August 1945 to face up to the reality of its actions leading to war is similar to that of most countries in wars, both victors and vanquished throughout human history. For instance, have Americans finally accepted that the Vietnam War was not necessary and that fighting a land war in Asia would always be futile?

Honestly facing defeat and assessing its causes are difficult for any country. Hotta, in the final pages of her book, mentions that the movie “Gone With the Wind” was released for Japanese audiences in 1952, and it was a great box-office hit. Many Japanese identified with the indomitable Scarlet O’Hara and her adherence to “tomorrow is another day.” O’Hara did not contemplate in the movie how the Southern firebrands who urged secession had brought ruin to the Southern states. Even at this writing, 150 years after the surrender at Appomattox, the mythology of the “Lost Cause” is believed by many Southerners, arguing that the war was not about slavery, despite overwhelming evidence that the American Civil War was everything about slavery and the racism that produced it. Many still call the 1861-65 Civil War the “War of Northern Aggression,” although Southern states seceded before Abraham Lincoln had even been sworn in or done anything as president and Southern forces attacked Fort Sumter initiating the war.

Even though I was fairly knowledgeable about the events of World War II prior to reading the book, Eri Hotta’s slim volume provided information new to me and gave me insight into the thinking (and in many causes, nonthinking) of Japanese leaders in the years between 1938 and 1945.

George Miller says

This book covers the events and decisions that led up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor from the Japanese point of view. Japan's motivation to go to war with the US was based on the trade sanctions that the US placed on Japan because of their continued escalation of their wars of aggression with China and French Indo-China; these sanctions (the US cut off petroleum and steel exports to Japan)were impacting both Japan's economy and their war effort. I found it most interesting that the majority of Japanese Army and Navy senior officers considered a protracted war with the US and Britain to be unwinnable, but were unwilling to take responsibility for challenging the group thinking, face saving, and inter-service rivalries that continued to push Japan toward this war. In addition, there was the very common sunk cost argument for continuing war: the large number of Japanese soldiers killed and wounded in Manchuko, China, and French Indo-China whose souls would be dishonored if Japan withdrew from any of these venues. Japan's incapability to wage long term war against the US inspired Admiral Yamamoto's tactically brilliant but somewhat poorly executed attack on Pear Harbor. It was also interesting to read that Japan was overextended by its ongoing wars in China, Manchukuo (Manchuria), and French Indo-China. After reading this book, I think the primary blame for this strategically disastrous war rests on Emperor Hirohito, who did not have the fortitude to stand up to his military leaders and stop the rush to a war that be believed would be dipterous for Japan. Japanese culture also played a part, as the Japanese believed, and not without good reason, that the West did not respect them or their military capabilities. Some blame must also be assigned to the US and its pacifistic behavior in the mid to late 1930; the Japanese believed that the US was militarily and culturally weak, and would not have the stomach for a protracted war. This book is not an easy read, as some of the Japanese players have similar lats names (i.e., Tojo and Togo), and the author moves between these similarly named characters on a fairly frequest basis. There are references to the Meiji Restoration that are significant to the behavior of some of the main players; further elaboration would have been helpful for those of us without much knowledge of the Meiji Restoration. In addition, an introductory chapter covering the structure and culture of the imperial Japanese government would be useful.

Emmanuel Gustin says

This exploration of Japan irrational decision to go to war in December 1941 does not provide a clear view of a decisive moment, because there was not such moment; instead there was an irresistible drift to disaster. As such Eri Hotta's book is almost as much a study of the psychology of very bad decision making, as a historical account.

It is of course very difficult to document and prove the state of mind of people long dead, who lived in a very different culture; and writing such an account is risky. But this book approaches the main players in this story with a nuance that does not detract from the sharp criticism of their decisions. The caricatures that populate more superficial histories are replaced with credible portraits of dutiful but deeply flawed people.

The mechanism that led them towards the critical point was a deeply dysfunctional form of government decision making that induced people to show outward conformity with decisions that they internally disapproved of, combined with formal mechanisms to absolve people from any personal responsibility for their decisions. As bizarre as it is reading about it over seventy years later, it is also a phenomenon uncomfortably familiar to those of us who have sat on management committees.

It is a fascinating story. The repeated loopbacks in time in the first chapters make these a bit difficult to read, because it is easy to lose track of the chronology; but they set the scene. The later chapters provide a more linear account of the failed efforts at diplomacy and the strange way in which the decision was made -- or maybe more arrived at than made -- to start a war that Japan was certain to lose.

There are a few errors; for example the author seems to have relied too much on the debunked works of Mitsuo Fushida as a source. But they don't affect the core of the work.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books

(hide spoiler)]

Peter says

My interest in the Pacific Theater of WWII is a residue of my military background—the Marines were prominent in that theater—and of my father's role as captain ("Airship Commander") of a B-29 that bombed Japan from Tinian. So *Japan, 1941* (2013), by Eri Hotta—a Japanese-American specialist in international relations—was just up my alley. And an excellent read it is—loaded with detail about Japan's pre-WWII history, and its internal conflicts, its decisions, and its practices in the months before it attacked Pearl Harbor.

1940 Japan was engaged in a war with China that, at its outset in 1937, had been estimated to last three months but had lasted three years and was not near an end. Prior to its invasion of China, Japan's citizens had been deprived of consumer goods by a long global depression and a simultaneous diversion of production from civilian to military products. Japan depended almost entirely on imports for its natural resource products—oil, tin, iron ore, rubber, and so on; over 90 percent of its oil products came from the U. S., its rubber and tin were from French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. The Chinese invasion brought U. S. embargoes of raw materials, including aviation fuel but excluding oil and other fuels, that added to Japan's internal stresses and increased its resentment. The possibility of war with the U. S. was always lurking in the background, but now became a reality.

Japanese projections of a war with the U. S. indicated low odds for a successful outcome. In her preface Hotta notes that many in Japan's government—both civilian and military—believed that the chances of a successful war with the U. S. were somewhere between zero and none—even Japan's Army Chief of Staff, General Tojo Hideki, who would become Prime Minister in 1941, was skeptical about Japan's odds in a war with the U. S., referring to it as "jumping off the cliff."

So why did Japan jump off the cliff? Hotta's answer is largely two words: Pride and Resentment. Japan believed that it was a victim of Western racism and that it was discounted in the international community. It also was exquisitely sensitive to offense from others. Here, in a nutshell, is her thesis:

> Having talked themselves into believing that they were the victims of circumstances rather than the aggressors, they [Japan's leaders] disregarded less heroic but more rational options and hesitantly yet defiantly propelled the country on a war course. Manifest in Tojo's December 8 speech [December 7 in the U. S.] was the self-pitying perception that Japan was somehow pushed and bullied into the war by extenuating circumstances—be they U. S. economic sanctions, the willful U. S. misreading of Japan's peaceful intentions, or, more broadly, arrogance and prejudice.

Emerging Conflict between Japan and the U. S.

Japan's emergence as the victor in the 1904-05 war with Russia had been a tremendous morale boost for a country that saw itself as backward and second-class. It gave Japan its first major colony—the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty transferred Korea, heretofore a Russian protectorate, to a Japanese protectorate. In 1910 Japan peacefully annexed Korea with assurance by the Theodore Roosevelt Administration that the U. S. had no interest in the matter. This exacerbated Japan's colonial aspirations designed to consolidate its power in Asia and to obtain secure supplies of oil, rubber, tin, iron ore, and other essential commodities. These aspirations led to increasing militarization, converting Japan from a U. S. ally to a U. S. antagonist.

Tensions with the U. S. increased after 1931 when Japan's army manufactured the Mukden Incident, a minor skirmish at the border of Manchuria, and used it as a pretext for invading Manchuria and annexing it as the puppet state of Manchukuo. While the U. S. sharply criticized the action, there was little response, though the League of Nations condemned the land grab, prompting Japan to resign from the League.

In 1937 Japan invaded China following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, an unintended skirmish between Chinese and Japanese troops. This was less successful than the previous takeovers—at the outset Japan thought it would conquer China in three months, but the war was still going on in 1945. The U. S. levied both diplomatic objections to the invasion and imposed embargoes on U. S. exports to Japan; of particular importance was an embargo on aircraft fuel and machine tools; less refined fuels—gasoline and diesel—were excluded from the embargo.

As noted above, in 1940 Japan imported 93 percent of its oil and fuel from the U. S. The embargos bit deeply into fuel supplies, both military and civilian, and in mid-1941 Japan invaded French Indochina—Cambodia Laos, and the south of Vietnam—in order to obtain supplies no longer available in international markets. The U. S. amped up its diplomatic objections and increased the severity of its embargo, extending it to all oil and refined fuels.

This series of tit-for-tat measures between the U. S. and Japan was interpreted very differently in the two countries. The U. S. saw each embargo elevation as a response to previous international aggression; Japan saw each embargo elevation as a cause for further aggression—as if the embargos came out of thin air. This resentment, unwarranted though it seems, was a factor in the decisions that were to come.

Hotta makes it clear that while diplomats were feverishly negotiating, the Japanese always had one sticking point: it might consider removing its troops from some of the areas taken before the war, it would never commit to removing its troops from China. Since that was the U. S. sticking point as well, negotiations were effective only in allowing Japan time to prepare for its attack on Hawaii.

When the rhetoric is cut, underlying WWII in the Pacific was a contest between the U. S. and Japan over the allegiance of Asia, particularly of China. It was a turf war—a war between nations built on different assessments of national and world interests. Encouraging Japan's attack on the U. S. was the simple fact that the costs of Japan's military actions in China combined with the dismal state of its public finances and the emargos, created severe shortages of food and materials for the Japanese people. Given an unwillingness to put the toothpaste back in the tube by sacrificing its colonial aspirations, Japan's only recourse was to obtain its needs by force.

Japanese Decision-Making

Division into competing fiefdoms complicated Japan's governance. Since the middle of the Meiji period

(1868-1912), the civilian and the military functions were officially separated: the civilian hierarchy made and implemented domestic and foreign policy, the military made and implemented military policy. Neither was autonomous, but each could advance its cause with no veto until the Emperor—the Supreme Commander of the armed forces, was consulted for a final decision. It's as if our Department of Defense could plan a war without a civilian veto until final approval was needed—at which time the ducks were lined up and it was difficult to back off.

There was fierce infighting between and within the two fiefdoms. The civilians naturally preferred diplomacy; the military preferred force. But each was faced with bitter disagreement within its ranks. For example, the Army was far more aggressive on the Pearl Harbor plan than the Navy, perhaps because the Navy had to plan and execute that long-distance attack but also because the Army, born of the Samurai tradition, was innately more aggressive.

Often the left hand and right hand worked at cross-purposes to overcome the inclinations of the other. As an example, the 1931 Mukden Incident was initiated by the military without civilian approval; the civilian government was presented with a *fait accompli* that stacked the deck toward aggression.

In late 1940 Admiral Yamamoto Isoruko, the Japanese Navy's Commander of the Combined Fleets, first proposed the "Hawaii Plan" for a Pearl Harbor attack. Yamamoto was a naval planning genius and an anomaly in Japan—he was a prankster (often walking on his hands), a dedicated gambler, greatly respected and widely liked. Yamamoto did not want a war with the U. S., famously remarking after Pearl Harbor, "We have awakened a sleeping tiger." But he believed that if war was to come, Japan should strike first and that strike should be at the U. S. Pacific Fleet berthed at Pearl Harbor. This would eliminate the U. S. Pacific Fleet's ability to respond and delay U. S. arrival in the Asian theater while damaged ships had been repaired and new warships were constructed.

In January of 1941 Yamamoto was told to begin planning for the strike at Pearl Harbor; final approval would come—if it came—in late 1941. In mid-1941 the Japanese invaded French Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam) to get access to its raw materials. The U. S. responded with a dramatic increase in the severity of its embargo—now all oil and refined products were embargoed. This was taken by Japan as tantamount to a declaration of war.

In the fall of 1941 the military and civilian leaders presented their ideas to Hirohito. Within each group there was disagreement, but in essence the diplomats were skeptical of a war's success, the Army believed that the odds of success were acceptable if a strike at Pearl Harbor could disable the U. S. fleet for a substantial period. Hota repors that the military's estimates of Naval and Army losses from a war were doctored to understate losses of both ships and men during the subsequent war, thus enhancing the perceived odds of success.

Japanese Culture and Language

Hotta argues that the Japanese culture and language was insufficient to the task of clear decision-making in situations of conflict. Verbal communication was traditionally couched in soft terms designed to create cooperation and agreement, and to avoid offense. This limited the ability to make sharp distinctions, to speak to the nitty-gritty elements of a problem, and to express the intensity of one's thoughts. In spite of intense disagreements, the muted words did not convey the intensity of belief on either side of the "go—no go" divide at the Imperial conferences. Indeed, Hirohito did not clearly express his own reservations, and when the issue was laid before him in the Fall of 1941, his response was to read the following inscrutable poem,

In all four seas all were brothers and sisters. Then why, oh why, these rough winds and waves?

Tojo interpreted this as support for an attack on Pearl Harbor.

Yet another example of the Emperor's ineffectiveness occurred late in November of 1941. In the midst of panicked last-minute efforts by some diplomats to avoid war, Hirohito met with his brother, a Navy Admiral. The Admiral said that the Emperor—who also was against the war—should simply reject the attack plans of laid before him. Hirohito replied that there was neither constitutional provision nor historical precedent for the Emperor overturning a recommendation agreed on by both the civilian and military leaders. The Emperor, though a Shinto god, was really just a figurehead whose only authority was to rubberstamp proposals agreed on by the highest levels of government.

Another adverse aspect of the Japanese culture was its famous orientation toward "saving face." A decision, once made, was difficult to reverse without losing credibility, and credibility was the currency of both politicians and generals. We in the U. S. don't like "flip-floppers," but our distaste is much less than the Japanese disapproval of changing one's mind. This face-saving orientation had led Japan to withdraw from the League of Nations in 1932 after the League's condemnation of Japan's occupation of Manchuria.

Diplomacy in 1941

The leadership of Japan's civilian government in 1941 was in the hands of Prince Konoe, an indecisive man who was twice Japan's prime minister (1937-39 and 1940-41); Konoe retired in 1941 with General Tojo Hideki replacing him.

During Konoe's second tenure there were three diplomatic "breakthroughs" that altered the course of Japan's international relationships. The first was the *Tripartite Agreement* between Japan, Germany, and Italy. The effect of this agreement to stand neutral in the event of another signatory going to war allowed Japan to step aside when Germany went to war in Europe. Japan's entering the Tripartite pact signaled it's intent was to tell the U. S. that Japan had important allies in Europe should the U. S. flex its muscles over Japanese aggression in Asia.

The second was an April 1941 *Draft Understanding Between the United States and Japan*. This was initially thought to be an official document from Washington, but it turned out to be an unofficial document written by two priests. The Draft Understanding appeared to indicate a strong U. S. intention to negotiate on the China problem. When its unofficial nature was discovered, the Japanese thought balloons deflated. But eventually the U. S. adopted the Declaration as the foundation for negotiations *with no preconditions*. Japan, however, insisted on preconditions for negotiation, (e.g. the China issue was off the table). But the document did start a round of negotiations about negotiating that ended with the Pearl Harbor attack.

The third item was another April 1941 agreement, the *Neutrality Pact* between Japan and the USSR. This said that neither signatory would engage in military conflict with the other, and that each would remain neutral should the other signatory engage in military conflict with a third party. This relieved Japan of its worry that Russia would side with the U. S. in any Japanese conflict with the U. S. over the China situation.

The Attack on Pearl Harbor

On December 1, a week or so after the initial departure date, the Japanese attack fleet left for its attack on Pearl. The attack had all the aspects of efficiency and success, and was receivedwith patriotic hullabaloo in Japan. But it fell far short of its goal of significantly retarding the U. S. Navy's ability to respond. There

were several reasons, all associated with Yamamoto’s plan.

First, while the attack certainly destroyed some significant warships and damaged others, it did not destroy the ability to repair damaged ships: shipyards with their dry docks, hoists, and other structures were left intact. Furthermore, new ships were built at shipyards around the U. S. Second, the Pacific Fleet’s stores of fuel—both bunker fuel and aviation fuel—were untouched, allowing warships to depart once commissioned. Third, and very important, during the attack the U. S. carrier and submarine fleets were on exercises and not present at Pearl Harbor

Within six months the U. S. fleet was in position for the Battle of Midway when the Japanese Navy was at its peak strength for the entire war. The rest is history.

Five Stars.

Diane Henry says

2.5 stars. It's probably very difficult to try to re-create the thought-process of the major Japanese players leading up to Pearl Harbor and this is a valiant effort. Nonetheless, it was also a tough read. A huge number of people are introduced (usually with an awkward description/ranking of what they looked like) and there are multiple, irrelevant narrative diversions. It's tough to keep track of who is who and why they matter. Still not sure what the point of the inclusion of the Soviet spy, Richard Sorge, has to do with the decision to go to war with the US.

However, there was a lot of new (to me, anyway) information. Hotta offers a plausible narrative of how a government of a small, resource-poor country could even contemplate going to war with a resource-rich country with any expectation of winning. I also had no idea that Japan and the US were in a kind of diplomatic negotiations almost until Pearl Harbor. I had thought that the bombing came out of nowhere.

Can't quite say I'm glad I read it, but I know more than I did, and I like that.

Kathleen says

Book Lust

I often wondered during history class in middle and high school, “What did the other side think of this war?” Americans frequently are restricted to being taught only about their own side of a war, which puts us at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to understanding our world. It is for this reason that I truly appreciated reading Eri Hotta’s Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy.

The book puts into perspective Japanese culture and politics in the years and months leading up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In particular, it investigates the question of why Japan’s leaders entered into a conflict they knew they had no chance of winning. Through reading the book I was able to learn something about Japanese politics and how Japan’s admiration for the United States began to turn sour in the first part of the twentieth century.

Hotta is not forgiving toward her country for its actions before or after the bombing. She recognizes the mistakes that were made by Japan’s leaders due to arrogance or ignorance (or often both), and reveals how the Japanese people were fooled by their leaders into believing their country was more powerful and capable than it really was. She refers often to Japan’s “self-delusion” and “face-saving” tactics, which only exacerbated the country’s political problems.

I’ll be the first to admit that I have trouble sometimes staying focused on a book about history that includes so many names, dates, and places. However, in the front of the book you’ll find a map of the Asia-Pacific Region in 1941, as well as a list and description of major characters and a timeline of events in Japanese history from 1853 through April 1941. These references made the book much easier to comprehend.

Hotta’s book is a valuable new perspective in the history of World War II, and is a great read for anyone interested in the war, Japanese politics, or Asian culture and history.

Chin Joo says

Those who are interested in understanding of the events that led to Japan's fateful decision to attack Pearl Harbor will find this book an important one to read. It is one that is packed with information carefully written in an engaging way to provide great insights into how the Japanese eventually went into war with the US. What this book does is to show that such a momentous decision was not arrived in a clinical and logical fashion, rather readers of this book would not help noticing how illogical, convoluted, and even preposterous the decision process was.

It should be stressed that the book's focus is more on the decision process, rather than the decision itself, which as a bad one was a given. That it was a bad decision was not only clear in hindsight, you will see from the book that there were more people (including the emperor) who believed that it was a bad decision to go to war with the US than those who believed it was right, which only makes it more perplexing. Representing those who were really pushing for war with the US was the Imperial Army and very vocal too. The rest, represented by the Imperial Navy, successive prime ministers, and other members of the cabinet knew it would be disastrous to go down that road, but as the story developed, the reader gets to see how the strange behaviours among the 'doves' eventually made their own positions untenable, and had to be driven along to war with the US.

The author used the concept of Honne to Tatemae to throw some light on these behaviours. This is the concept of saying something or saying something is a certain way but carrying with it an intended meaning. In simple terms, the opposite of "calling a spade a spade". The trouble with doing this was that the listener who did not understand this might misinterpret what the speaker was trying to say, but more seriously, as shown in this book, it could be maneuvered by the listener to mean something else totally. And many a times it was used to good effect by those who advocated war while everyone else looked helplessly at each other, hoping that someone else would find this one small gap to exploit so that they could heap on more doubts and hoped that it snowballed into something big enough for all to decide that war was a bad idea, apparently even the army faction was hoping for that while advocating war (p.g., 210).

Yet they did attempt to find a way out of the situation, initiating many contacts with the US which unfortunately led to nowhere. They attempted to have a summit and when that was not progressing well , Sato Kenryo was quoted in the book saying "What idiots they are in Washington! If they agreed to meet with

Konoe without any conditions, everything would go their way." For many it would be hard to imagine staging this summit between two heads of states when everything Japan was saying and doing was pointing towards preparing for war. But for the Japanese leaders, there was no contradictions, they have to keep up the appearance while trying to avert war - Honne to Tatemae.

Dr Hotta wrote an earlier work Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945 which I had enjoyed very much. It was written in the academic style and was not so easy to read. This one, Japan 1941, is clearly meant for lay-readers and is therefore much more readable. Unfortunately I think I was spoilt by her earlier book and had hoped that she would repeat that feat. She did in contents, but she had to avoid going into too much analysis in a book thus positioned. Still I must commend her for being very immaculate, for example she used "U.S." and not "US" and implanted her reasoned voice throughout. The inclusion of the timeline of major events in the book was of great value and the Prologue makes a compelling introduction to the whole book. I was however unsure about the purpose of including characters like Richard Sorge, the poet Kaf? Nagai, and Soldier U. These are important people in their own rights but while it has added colour to the book, they were not important to the development of the author's narrative and sometimes came out distracting.

The author, being Japanese, has a nuanced understanding of her own culture and therefore was able to explain the behaviours of the Japanese in 1941 exceptionally well. Paradoxically it can be misinterpreted as an attempt to excuse their behaviours and so she would sometimes have to illuminate her own attitudes towards them and the war itself by criticising them severely. I think it is something that she had to do in order for us not to dismiss her too quickly.

We read history in the sometimes vain hope of learning from it, so that we do not repeat it. The lessons in this book were most obviously "what not to do / how not to behave when making an important decision." Many readers would take the series of events as too ridiculous to conceive that we would ever do the same. Yet we have to be careful; as illogical and unimaginable as they have behaved in 1941, would we not have done the same? How many of us would really stand up and confront a seemingly stupid idea? Have we not come across situations in which everyone sitting in a meeting knew that a course of action was disastrous but finding everyone quiet, kept to our own counsel? I certainly have. Somehow the long-term and more severe pain cannot make me suffer the short-term embarrassment. And we will go out of the meeting whispering to each other that the decision taken in the meeting was a wrong one. Everyone suddenly appeared to agree to something opposite of what was agreed upon in the meeting, but no one was really at fault, because "someone" else pushed everyone along.

Pay attention to all the conversations in the meetings in the book, pick a character who disagreed with the war, then ask what you would do if you were him.

Steven Z. says

The last half of 19th century was a period when European nationalism flourished and began to spread its influence eastward. The lessons of nationalism were absorbed in Asia, and Japan became an excellent pupil of western industrialization and expansion. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan slowly remade itself by emulating the west. Unlike China, Japan had no difficulty in assimilating western institutions in order to develop into what they perceived to be a great power. By the 1890s Japan was able to defeat China in the Sino-Japanese War, and in the following decade she surprised Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, the first time a non-white power defeated a Caucasian power. Japan continued its program of making Asia safe for Asians and projecting themselves as a power on par with the west. During World War I it asserted its

rights to expansion with its Twenty-One Demands to gain suzerainty over parts of China, and in 1931 it invaded Manchuria and set up the “puppet state” of Manchukuo. Japan continued its attempts to dominate China in 1937 by precipitating an attack that justified an invasion. From 1937-1941 Japan fought to defeat the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-Shek, but despite repeated military victories it was unable to gain total control as Chiang’s army retreated into the interior. The war in China used tremendous resources and brought Japan into conflict with the United States. At a time when the long drawn out war in China was reaching a stalemate, why would Japan contemplate a war against the United States? In her new book, JAPAN, 1941, Eri Hotta seeks to answer that question.

Hotta’s work is a marvelous work of historical synthesis that seeks to explain how the Japanese government reached the decision to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Many are familiar with the works of Gordon Prange, Robert Stinnet, Walter Lord, Herbert Feis, and Roberta Wohlstetter. The story has been told by many; whether from the American diplomatic viewpoint, the intelligence breakthroughs, the military story, and conspiracy theories concerning Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, no one has attempted to mine the Japanese sources extensively and try and understand how the Japanese bureaucracy and government officials reached decisions that would ultimately result in the destruction of their country by 1945. This is the task that Hotta takes on and with excellent command of the primary materials and the internal working of the Japanese government from 1931 onward reaches the conclusion that Japanese “leaders, after numerous official conferences, made a conscious and collaborative decision to go to war with the West. Having talked themselves into believing that they were victims of circumstances rather than aggressors, they discarded less heroic but more rational options and hesitantly yet defiantly propelled the country on a war course.” (15) Hotta’s conclusion is presented in a thoughtful narrative, and supported by a well reasoned thesis.

Hotta’s approach is an interesting one. Though she devotes most of her time to discussing the bureaucratic machinations of Japanese diplomatic and military politics by integrating the major figures involved, ranging from Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro; Tojo Hideki, who served as army minister in Konoe’s cabinet and later Prime Minister; Matsuoka Yosuke, Konoe’s Foreign Minister; Kido Koichi, Emperor Hirohito’s closest advisor; Shimada Shigetaro, navy minister; Yamamoto Isoroku, who planned the attack on Pearl Harbor; and Emperor Hirohito among many government and military officials. The author also discusses the role of Japanese citizens outside of government service. For example, the integration of the thoughts of the novelist Nagai Kofu, who represented, in part the anti-militarist sentiment in segments of Japanese society, providing insights into the private thoughts of Japanese citizens who were afraid to make their feelings known publicly. The work of Richard Sorge, a German journalist based in Tokyo, who was also a Russian spy and was good friends with the German ambassador to Japan is also fascinating. In addition, the mini-biography of Soldier U, who in 1941 in his late thirties was recalled to military service and sent to China, and later to Indo China has a story that could be a separate book in of itself. These individuals and others present a well rounded picture of all aspects of Japanese society, as their government was privately was planning on expanding their war for control of Asia.

What separates Hotta’s work from others is that aside from presenting the Japanese viewpoint, she also includes intimate details of the rifts that existed on personal and diplomatic levels between the major players in the Japanese government, i.e.; Prime Minister Konoe and Foreign Minister Matsuoka. The reader is given a snapshot into the decision making process as Hotta relies heavily on liaison meetings of the Japanese government throughout the book. These meetings included the most important senior officials, both civilian and military. She singles out the most influential figures and allows the reader to understand the reasoning behind the decision-making process of each person as debate evolved throughout 1941 as to whether war was the only option, or should diplomatic avenues have been explored further. The positions of men like Konoe, Tojo, Nagano and the bakuryo officers, (mid-level bureaucrats who prepared most of the positions

taken) are analyzed and one can witness how difficult it was to achieve any consensus on policy in this environment. However, once a consensus was reached, no matter how convoluted the decision making process and delusionary some of the ideas of policy makers were it was almost impossible to alter or change the course toward war. Hotta proves without a shadow of a doubt that the Japanese leadership suffered from self-delusion as they constantly came up with arguments to buttress themselves against the sound reasoning that a war against the United States was futile. In large part, Japanese pride and belief in their own superiority led them to take such a huge national gamble.

Hotta makes many astute observations as she points out the Japanese goal of creating a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity sphere under Tokyo's leadership was very similar to how the United States approached the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere. For Japanese policy makers what was the difference between theirs and the American approach to expansion. Further, Hotta spends a great deal of time discussing Japanese perceptions of their own inferiority visa vie the west. They saw it through the lens of racial discrimination that clouded their judgment when making decisions. As Alfred Adler pointed out in his studies of the inferiority complex; that people (and nations?) who perceive themselves to be inferior; to overcome that self-perception must strive to be superior. A case in point is the reaction to a note from American Secretary of State Cordell Hull on November 27, 1941. It was seen by Japanese leaders as a provocation and a disgrace as they felt they were being bullied and humiliated. The note itself was taken as an ultimatum, which it was not.
Hotta is able to review the history of Japanese modernization and expansion that led to World War II very nicely, but she does it in such a way that she able to dissect the all too human characteristics of Japanese leaders that were torn by doubt in the months preceding Pearl Harbor, but could not overcome their own need to save face, and finally pushed Japan into a war because of their own incompetence and lack of political will. The reader should gain a great deal from reading Hotta's narrative which is enhanced by her integration of the words of the characters she employs. JAPAN, 1941, as of now is the best work dealing with the Japanese viewpoint and decision making process leading to war with the United States, and should remain so for a long time to come.

David says

Eri Hotta, a Japanese historian, tackles a subject that much of her country, even today, has difficulty talking about - the events leading up to Japan's disastrous decision to go to war with the United States. It's more an indictment than an apologetic - you can sense Hotta's desire to be as even-handed as possible while acknowledging that Japan's actions were short-sighted, ill-advised, and driven by petty egos, intercultural blunders, miscommunication, arrogance, delusion, and multiple failures of will. Of course outside of Japan's far right nationalist circles, hardly anyone today tries to defend Japan's imperialism in the first half of the 20th century, let alone their conduct during World War II, but much of modern Japan prefers to look away from that entire time period. (Though Hotta does name a few other Japanese historians who have taken it on.)

This book is specifically about everything that led to Pearl Harbor, and so it begins in the early 20th century (with some references to the historical background of the Meiji Restoration that still informed the attitudes of many of Japan's leaders) and ends with the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the die was cast.

The most interesting question, of course, is always "Why would Japan do this?"

The easy answer is that Japan was being hemmed in - the United States and Britain were constraining Japan's ability to expand and extract resources from the rest of the Pacific, imposing economic sanctions over their invasion of China (which Japan called throughout "the China Incident," never acknowledging it as a war), and enforcing earlier treaties that limited the ratio of warships that Japan could build. Japan had imperial ambitions and wanted to be recognized as a great power herself. The Japanese had a keen sense of how the West saw them as inferiors, and had also spent centuries under the shadow of China. You could almost say that Japan went to war because they wanted to sit at the big kids table and the other big kids wouldn't let them.

Of course there were other options. Both sides could have made concessions, and indeed, both sides were willing to. But Japan was in an inferior position and was never going to get everything they wanted. So how did they make the decision to go to war, a decision that every thinking person knew beforehand, not just with historical hindsight, would prove to be disastrous?

Japan could never have won the war. Despite the "Japan Banzai!" attitude that prevailed once war got underway, the delusional propaganda the Japanese government fed its people, the cold hard facts were indisputable - the United States' manpower and production capacity was many times that of Japan's even before the US shifted to wartime production. The Japanese strategy was to knock out the Pacific fleet in Hawaii, consolidate gains in the Pacific and Dutch East Indies, and then present the reeling, demoralized U.S. with a fait accompli and enter into negotiations. The idea was the U.S. would be too shocked and lacking in political will to engage in a prolonged war for Pacific possessions the American public didn't really care about. So the Japanese, after their surprise victories, would be able to say "Look, just let us keep what we have now and we can end this unpleasantness."

This was a severe miscalculation on many levels, but it was one that Japanese diplomatic and strategic blunders pushed them into.

There is a lot of blame to go around, but a lot of the blame, according to Hotta, would seem to fall on the shoulders of Yosuke Matsuoka, an ambitious, self-aggrendizing career politician who, ironically, spent his childhood in the United States, graduated from the University of Oregon, and was a baptized Christian. When he returned to Japan, he rose through the bureaucracy to eventually become Japan's Foreign Minister.

Matsuoka seemed to have that talent many men do, especially ambitious and somewhat amoral men, to embrace contradictions without cognitive dissonance. He was a Christian in the U.S. but a Buddhist in Japan. He was for war and against it. He saw no contradiction in signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy and yet trying to convince the U.S. later that it didn't really mean anything and that Japan could still be friends with the U.S. even if the U.S. went to war with the Axis.

Most damningly, during the frantic last ditch efforts to negotiate peace with the U.S. even while they were preparing for war, Matsuoka sabotaged many of those efforts because he saw them as undercutting his own position.

Prince Konoe, the Prime Minister who appointed Matsuoka, comes off looking quite weak, being unable to restrain the Foreign Minister whom he appointed. He also tries to negotiate peace with the U.S., but is stymied by Matsuoka, and by the feuding Army and Navy.

This was a pattern throughout 1940 and 1941 - Japan's government was divided into multiple factions, with the Imperial Army and Navy acting as independent, sometimes opposing, sides, each wanting to dictate the direction of the coming war according to their own needs and capabilities. The civilians in the government might side with the Army or Navy or neither, while civilian and military leaders alike had to be mindful of their rebellious underlings - Japan at this point had something of a tradition of firebrand young officers leading mutinies and assassinations of senior officers whom they thought were not sufficiently zealous or supporting of the military. Military officers and senior government officials alike had been killed, and much of what happened in China was, at least on the surface, commanders on the ground letting their troops get out of control (or actually directing them to do so), contrary to the orders of their superiors back in Japan. Even though everyone was in theory a servant of the Emperor, whose own powers were theoretically limited by the Japanese Constitution (which gave him nominal but little actual legal authority), no one was really "in charge" of everything.

In this environment, what happened was a tragic farce of high ranking officials saying one thing in public meetings while expressing the opposite opinion in private. No one wanted a war with the U.S. - every study, exercise, and projection they conducted showed that Japan couldn't possibly win. And yet they began sidling and stumbling towards the point of no return, all the different parties eying one another and hoping someone *else* would step up and say "Wait a minute, we shouldn't do this!"

There was even more of this in the last-minute negotiations in Washington, which involved, among other things, an optimistic peace proposal presented to the Japanese Prime Minister as a solid offer from the U.S. when in fact it was really just a list of propositions resulting from informal negotiations by a pair of unofficial diplomats operating through back channels. Both sides were operating under misapprehensions as to what the other side was actually offering and on whose authority the offer was made. This sort of thing happened a lot, and did much to convince the U.S. that Japan acted duplicitously, and convince Japan that the West couldn't be trusted.

"Climb Mount Niitaka"

Even as the Pearl Harbor strike force was sailing for Hawaii, negotiations were still underway. Admiral Yamamoto was prepared to turn back even until the last minute, if he received orders from Tokyo to call it off. But he didn't, and so came the famous order "Climb Mount Niitaka" - meaning, attack.

This led to one of the many additional small tragedies of the war, because back in Washington, the Japanese ambassadors were ordered to deliver Japan's declaration of war just before the attack. Due to technical difficulties in decrypting their orders from Tokyo, they delivered the message late, thus the infamous "sneak attack." (As a practical matter, it wouldn't have made a difference if they had delivered the declaration before the actual attack, since the U.S. would still have had only a few hours notice.) This was a personal tragedy for the Japanese ambassadors, who had been sincerely trying to negotiate peace in the belief that this was what their government wanted, unaware that the decision to go to war had already been made. The Japanese ambassador's final meeting with Secretary of State Cordell Hull was thus an acrimonious one.

Hotta isn't able to resolve the lingering historical question of Emperor Hirohito's role in the war, but her position seems to be more sympathetic, while not absolving Hirohito completely. According to her, the Emperor also seemed to embrace contradictions - he wanted peace, but was willing to lead Japan in war. He was involved in many high-level meetings at which his role was expected to be merely ceremonial, and yet he sometimes broke tradition and interrogated or scolded his generals and admirals and cabinet ministers. He

was probably unaware of Japanese atrocities, but he was certainly aware of, and approved, Japanese aggression. Many officials after the war were complicit in hiding the extent of Hirohito's knowledge and involvement in actual war planning, but it is hard to see Hirohito as a complete innocent here.

More interesting than "How much did he know, and how involved was he?" is the real question — "Could he have stopped it?" Were there points at which Emperor Hirohito could have prevented war by calling a halt to their plans? His authority was apparently a bit fuzzy legally - technically he did not have the Constitutional authority to dictate government policy or forbid the military to do anything. And yet, he was the Emperor, and no final decision could be executed without his nominal approval. There have been suggestions in the post-war years that the Emperor himself could have been assassinated if he had tried to go against what the military leaders wanted. So we will probably never know if Hirohito could have stopped the war, let alone whether he actually wanted to.

Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy does a good job of explaining the ins and outs of negotiations, diplomatic situations, and rationales from both the Japanese and American sides. I am not sure it presents a lot that's new (I've learned much of what Hotta presents here from other books about World War II), but with its focus on the prelude to the war and the personalities involved, it examines an interesting facet that most histories summarize much more briefly, since people are more interested in what happened once the fighting began. Hotta doesn't really interject her own viewpoint very often, other than acknowledging that Japan's leaders bore responsibility for their decisions, and that they were frequently guilty of wishful thinking and ignoring what they didn't want to hear.

Sean Chick says

The west has long been obsessed with Nazi Germany and its lessons. What is forgotten is how unusual the Nazis and the rise to power was. Japan in 1941 has much more to teach us. Japan blundered into war, pursuing a peace and war policy at once because no one could settle on what to do. Yet, Japan could not pull out of China without being dishonored, nor accept the demands of America. However, I came away thinking Hull and Roosevelt were a bit too inflexible despite Hotta's assertions. In the end, pride, scarce resources, blunders, and resentment with the west slowly drove Japan to war. This is a tale that is less tragic than it is stupefying. The leadership all but sleepwalked into oblivion and those who opposed war were unwilling to take responsibility and the shame of backing down in front of the Americans.

Hotta's strengths lie with understanding personalities and their interactions. Her analysis though is a bit tepid and the prose sometimes wanders into asides. The attempts to talk about Japanese society at the time are clumsy next to her detailed accounts of cabinet meetings. She also advances a few long debunked ideas, such as Nagumo not sending a third wave to attack Pearl Harbor.

All in all, a book with flaws, but well worth a read.

Mike says

Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy

Since the age of the Thunder-Lizards (or at least the actors in the latex suits) I've been a fan of Japanese entertainment. When I eventually reached its shores on business trips I found that I enjoyed the people, culture, and land as much as I had the Monsters, Sci-Fi, and Anime. I've retained that affection and interest into what we call the Modern Era. For the last couple of years I have made pitiful progress in trying to learn a bit of the language.

Among the various fiction and non-fiction books I have read, was one detailing post-WWII life on the island (*Embracing Defeat* by **John Dower**). This describes conditions immediately after the surrender and during the American Occupation, but does not cover the resurgent prosperity that was latterly called, "Japan, Inc." (I recommend this book to those who want to understand how the people and economy of Japan coped with and survived reconstruction and US-led political dictates. I had some issues with repetition, but overall it is a sober look at a defeated and destroyed nation.)

Japan 1941, is not really a counterpoint to that book. While it is true that economic conditions for ordinary people do have some mention, the focus of this book is almost entirely on the powerful and the organizations that wielded influence in the inter-World War period.

It is a very well-written and researched book. Personally, I do not think it attempts to "improve" Hirohito's image. There are passages that suggest that despite his divine authority, he truly was a figurehead who tried, with all the official methods at his disposal to question and delay the decision to undertake war with the United States and its start. By themselves, one might be skeptical of these sections, but when combined with the details of the actions of the military and political leadership it seems more credible that the Emperor was not in control of events.

The details of this book are fascinating if you have any interest in the mistakes that people and countries make. I'm going to provide more details in the spoiler section below, but I recommend the book to anyone who wants to no more about this topic than the quote, "a date that will live in infamy". (BTW – The attack was scheduled for December 8th from Tokyo's point of view.)

(view spoiler)

I hope that many people decide to read this book. It is a different and rewarding look at a country who went from friend to foe to friendly dependent to economic competitor (some might say “victor”). I started reading this book in February and had to leave it behind during a trip to Asia. I picked it up again during April only to leave it once again during another Asian trip. I finally finished it in May. It is an indication of how good the writing is that I retained my interest and thoughts over this long period (and several bouts of jet lag). I don’t know what other books the author has written, but I will be taking a look very soon. **Four and one-half (4.5) well-deserved Stars.**

Brandon Abraham says

Eri Hotta's Japan 1941 attempts to find answers as to why a nation's political and military leadership decided to embark on a mission which was virtually impossible to attain victory in service to an Axis alliance whose benefit to Japan was based on speculation and wishful thinking. Hotta's analysis emphasizes how Japan's parliamentary peak during the Taish? era gave way to increasingly militarist leadership in the 1930's, which subordinated the Japanese economy to the service of the military.

Such leaders, themselves frustrated with their own quagmire in China, capitalized on the momentum of the German blitzkrieg and used this in order to quell pro-British sentiment throughout Japan. The rough thinking was that the defeat of both Britain and the USSR by Germany would force the Allies to the table in the Pacific, particularly since Japan's Imperial Navy seemed to have strategic advantage over war-weary Britain and the seemingly war-averse United States. Certainly, conquering Singapore would take Britain out of the war and probably convince the US to reconsider.

While we all know how flawed such thinking turned out, Hotta's analysis raises interesting questions. First, knowing the racial theories of Nazi ideology and the disparaging remarks in Mein Kempf about the Japanese, how did the Japanese leadership sell the Tripartite Pact? Second, most Western audiences have never heard the stories of pro-British Japanese politicians. I would have liked to have heard more on resistance to the Axis alliance. Lastly, how did the militarists convincingly sell a war to a population already wary of fighting an unsuccessful war in China? Outside the most die-hard believers in nationalist ideology, nobody believed Japan would emerge victorious over the combined efforts of the Allies, nor did they believe Germany could effectively aid Japan in this effort. While Hotta explores these questions, the answers are not entirely convincing.

Hadrian says

Study of how Japan's political leadership blundered into a war with the United States, even after it had been at war with China since 1931. We already know what happens - Japan launches a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, but Hotta's reconstruction of the decisions of the political class make this a narrative of tense relationships, a constrictive organizational structure, and short-sighted stumbling into war.

Hotta pushes back against a trend of revisionist historians on the political right who deny responsibility and claim that Japan was "forced" into war - the number of communiques and offers to negotiate on the American side, well before the Hull note of November 1941, were proof enough of that.

The Japanese economy did not "suddenly" feel pressured after the US oil embargo in August 1941. Food and fuel were running out by 1937. Rice was already of such low quality that one diarist says it was like mouse droppings. And while the author uncovers some diarists and memoir writers who were *happy* when war broke out, she finds none of the top leadership were even confident of victory -- even the most optimistic considered it a gamble. How?

Hotta finds much fault at the very top. For example, Prince Konoe Fumimaro (?? ??), Prime Minister from 1937-1939 and 1940-October 1941, oversaw Japan's slide into dictatorship, against the wishes of the elder statesmen who appointed him. He agitated in favor of the Anti-Communist Pact with Nazi Germany in 1936. Even this early, the United States was not interested in war. This was ignored in internal discussions.

The author is even harsher towards the American-educated Foreign Minister, Matsuoka Yousuke (?? ??), who acted almost randomly, with the one thing he does consistently is to build up his own ego.He encouraged Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations to gain a bigger audience. He worked for a non-aggression pact with the Soviets in 1941 to get himself in the news again, and then, after Germany invaded in June of that year, then wanted to invade them from the east.

Military pressures on civilian leadership did not help. The army and navy competed for scarce resources, yet both insisted on time constraints for diplomatic solutions and refused to back down. Even Tojo Hideki saw a war with the United States would be painful -- yet did little to stop it.

There is more. The emperor was often sidelined and was at times a rubber stamp for other's plans, the media was constantly braying for war, and other leaders carried a "victim complex" of being bullied and humiliated, and that was a motivation for empire. This is a fresh and invigorating look at how a nation can stumble into a painful and debilitating war, and one that Japan barely survived.

Bonnie_blu says

The book is a thorough, exhaustive analysis of Japan's political, military, and social conditions leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack. I came away with a much greater understanding of why Japan decided to launch the sneak attack and go to war with the United States in 1941. Even though there were some unique circumstances that led Japan to this decision, there were also numerous circumstances that can be found in some current nations and that lend credence to the saying "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it" (George Santayana). Has Japan learned from its history? Not exactly. Japan still refuses to expose its actions to the light of day and to take responsibility for its conduct in China and elsewhere. How can its citizens learn to avoid the same mistakes if they don't know the full story?

Before going any further, I must add that the book would have been much stronger and an easier read if its structure were more linear. The author's constant jumping back and forth in time from the 1800s to the 1940s, made it more difficult than it should have been to keep track of the players and events.

SPOILERS BELOW

Some of the main takeaways from the book are:
1. Isolated societies, as Japan was for much of its history, are often the victim of cultural inbreeding. That is, cultural idiosyncrasies, both positive and negative, can become deeply entrenched and make it difficult for a society to accurately view and understand the outside world. Japanese leaders really had little to no

understanding of the western world and how their aggressive actions would be perceived. Also, they failed to see that East Asian nations would not welcome Japanese "guidance."
2. Because Japan was forced to open its doors to western nations, their leaders often felt as though they were "being ganged up on." Feelings of helplessness and insecurity led to a desire to prove that they were not only as good as, but better than, other western and eastern nations. As Japan entered the modern world, its leaders devoted enormous resources to looking like and acting like western nations. However, they soon found that western and eastern racism still relegated Japan to a secondary status. Another result of entering the modern world was that Japan quickly realized how poor it was in resources, especially petroleum.
3. Young Japanese military men especially believed that Japan was better than any other East Asian nation and that they had a divine right to exercise control over those nations. The young leaders exerted enormous pressure on higher ups to take what they felt was rightfully theirs. In addition, if they didn't get action fast enough, they were inclined to assassinate those who stood in their way.
4. The ideology of "keeping face" was deeply rooted in Japanese society. Appearances were supremely important. For this reason, Japanese leaders would rarely challenge superiors. Also, the need to keep face meant that the Japanese people were kept in the dark about their leaders' failures for years during the war.
5. The political structure was basically no structure at all:
- There was a lack of clear lines of power and authority among the military leaders, politicians, and the emperor
- Appointments and promotions were usually given without regard to the man's qualifications
- The lack of a strong political system made it possible for a few strong men to push their agenda of conquering East Asian nations for their resources, and eventually, of going to war with the United States because of its "unfair" banning of exports to Japan, mainly petroleum (Japan received 90% of its petroleum from the U.S. during the lead-up to Pearl Harbor)
- The two individuals (Hirohito and Konoe) who could have accomplished pulling out of China, breaking the Tripartite Act (treaty with Germany and Italy), and gaining a treaty with the U.S., failed to act until it was too late because of indecision, weakness, and the desire to avoid confrontation
6. Japanese leaders thought that the U.S. could be forced to sign a treaty if it were overwhelmingly attacked at Pearl Harbor. They did not understand U.S. culture and how its citizens would react. However, they did realize that if the U.S. did not sue for peace, Japan had no chance of winning a war with the United States. And yet, they went ahead, gambling with their nation and people.

So, at the end of all the greed, fear, insecurity, obtuseness, and aggression we are left with thousands of dead, destroyed cities, a terrible, new weapon, and a country that still refuses to accept full responsibility for its actions. Japan should take a lesson from Germany, a country that has faced up to its past and learned from it. As long as Japan covers up its terrible transgressions against humanity, it will always be a nation afraid and insecure.
