

# Blood and Ruins

## The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945

Richard Overy, Viking, New York, 2022, 1040 pages



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There has been a recent trend among historians and other authors to challenge the standard time frame of the Second World War—one that begins in 1939 and ends in 1945. Other paradigms have been suggested. Author Robert Kaplan, in a recent article written for the Center for a New American Security, refers to the “Long European War,” which he dates from 1914 to 1989, encompassing both world wars as well as the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> In his seminal one-volume history of World War II, historian Antony Beevor questions the various time parameters used in the past to frame the war and observes, “History, however, is never tidy.”<sup>2</sup> Beevor notes that Western historians tend to neglect Asian roots of World War II, while some Asian historians “argue that the Second World War began in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.”<sup>3</sup> In a magnificent new single-volume history of the period encompassing the war, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945*, British historian Richard Overy examines a wider swath of time as suggested by Beevor. As the title indicates, the author’s perspective is from that of empires, or “nation-empires,” which sets the book apart from other single-volume

histories. The title also suggests—with its reference to “blood and ruins”—that the demise of empires is not a peaceful one. Both themes resonate throughout the book, in which Overy makes a singular contribution to our understanding of the roots, conduct, and aftermath of the Second World War.

*Blood and Ruins* is an impressive work—massive in size and scope, and expansive in the number of different issues it addresses. It is unlike other single-volume treatments of the Second World War, both in the author’s overall approach as well as in the emphasis he places on areas he believes are neglected in other works. As laid out in his preface, the author contends that the war cannot be viewed in its typical Axis versus Allies context, pitting competing ideologies against each other without regard to proper consideration for the geopolitical historical context. Thus, the author challenges the standard chronology of the war, takes a much more global rather than theater or regional context, and focuses on the diverse kinds of wars, or “wars within wars,” the protagonists fought. He also focuses on the many devastating negative aspects of war between empires as covered by the book’s thematic chapters.

Overall, this approach leads to the author's thesis—so eloquently stated in his preface—"that the long Second World War was the last imperial war."<sup>4</sup>

The organization of *Blood and Ruins* is clearly innovative and reflective of the emphasis Overy places on the aspects of war beyond policy, strategy, campaigns, and operations. The prologue and the first three numbered chapters are chronological narratives that place the "long Second World War" in context from the perspective of the "nation-empires" that fought them. In the prologue, the author describes the global imperial order and the rise of the "New Order" states—Japan, Germany, and Italy—whose imperial ambitions laid the groundwork for the global conflagration to come. Unlike other one-volume histories of World War II, Overy devotes considerable time and space to explaining the context of the international order, the rise of the new order states, and the political, economic, and social reasons for their creation. Uniquely, the author sees the militarism of Japan, Germany, and Italy not as causes of crisis but rather as its effects.<sup>5</sup> Because of Overy's analytical lens, the first of the numbered chapters following the prologue begins with the year 1931, as indicated in the book's title. It marked the year that Japan invaded Manchuria and thus embarked on its "imperial project." It would later be joined by Italy and Germany on their similar quests for territorial expansion and national

prestige. Thus, the author sees the war in a global, imperial context as the new order states sought to establish hegemony in a world dominated by the existent imperial powers—primarily Great Britain and France. Chapters 1–3 cover the periods 1931–1940, 1940–1943, and 1942–1945, respectively. They catalog the rise to power, the high-water marks, and the subsequent demise of Japan, Italy, and Germany in pursuit of their imperial ambitions. The

three chapters constitute about a third of the book and demonstrate Overy's remarkable ability to synthesize and evaluate events at the strategic, operational, and—to a lesser extent—tactical levels of war. Overall, the prologue and first three narrative chapters analyze and evaluate about eighty years of history, thus covering the entirety of other single-volume histories. Consequently, the author focuses more on the broad forces and long-term aspects shaping the imperial powers during this period, placing less emphasis on the details of military strategy, campaigns, and operations. While this sets the book apart from works such as Max Hastings' excellent *Inferno: The World at War, 1939–1945*, his lens from the imperial perspective is original and highly insightful.<sup>6</sup>

*Blood and Ruins* then deviates from chronological narratives to seven thematic chapters, a departure reflective of the author's desire to cover subjects he feels are underemphasized by other writers. These seven chapters are likewise remarkable for their analysis of a broad range of topics applied across not only the imperial actors but to the United States and Russia as well. Chapter 4 discusses mass mobilization and how each protagonist maximized use of its economic and labor forces—whether male or female, slave or free. In the next chapter, "Fighting the War," Overy shows how and why the Axis members—or "new order" empires, initially so successful, were eventually overtaken by Allied advantages in airpower, amphibious doctrine, mechanized warfare, as well as technological edges in radio and radar. Most readers of this publication will readily identify the term "force multipliers," which the author employs to categorize these military advantages that were so instrumental to Allied victory. Chapter 6 focuses on how each of the combatants adapted their peacetime economies to war, highlighting the role of national culture in the production of weaponry. In a cleverly named subchapter, "Weapons of Mass Production," Overy contrasts how America's culture of "Fordism" (assembly line manufacturing) contrasted sharply with the German preference for quality and specialized manufacturing.<sup>7</sup> This contributed to America's ability to outproduce by itself all its enemies combined by 1943.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 7, titled "Just Wars? Unjust Wars," addresses how each imperial power justified the righteousness of its cause, whether as a member of the Axis powers or Allied coalition. Overy's comparison of the various

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moral justifications by the combatants is quite illuminating; he observes, “The pursuit of victory at all costs was the moral cement that held the war effort together.”<sup>9</sup> Both Japan and Germany justified their wars of aggression in terms of self-defense against either encirclement by Allied imperial powers, or against a Jewish world conspiracy. They also accused the Allies of hypocrisy—the British for their emphasis on preserving their empire at the expense of colonial populations, the United States for its treatment of Native Americans and African Americans. Overy adeptly covers all the nuances in these narratives; no combatant’s justification for war was invulnerable to attacks by its adversaries. Even America was constantly at odds with its British partner over any strategy that prioritized the preservation of its empire, while both Allies had to set aside their aversion to communism after Russia entered their camp in the summer of 1941. In the end, however, Allied justifications for the war prevailed, helping to shape the immediate postwar period as well as the Cold War that followed. The legal principles outlawing wars of aggression were set forth during the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg, and concepts such as self-determination, so vehemently advocated by leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt, were later codified in the founding documents of the United Nations.

The final three thematic chapters in the book underscore the “blood and ruins” characterization of the war found in the book’s title. (Overy’s final three chapters are reminiscent of Keith Lowe’s excellent study of immediate postwar Europe, which encompasses similar themes).<sup>10</sup> Chapter 8 addresses the many ways in which civilians were drawn into the abyss of conflict—whether manning civil defense positions or taking part in the fighting as part of resistance or partisan movements. Overy makes a unique observation in this regard: “The battle lines involving civilians were, as a result, more incoherent and more dangerous than service in the military war effort.”<sup>11</sup> In his next chapter, “The Emotional Geography of War,” the author examines how both the military and civilian sectors coped with the mental strain of war, investigating such topics as “combat exhaustion” for those on the front lines, and the psychological damage wrought on civilian victims of bombing raids, particularly in Britain, Germany, and Japan. His statistics regarding the psychiatric casualties in the armies of multiple nations are particularly

devastating. Chapter 10, “Crimes and Atrocities,” focuses on the grimmest sides of the war—ranging from “hundred-man killing contests” practiced by the Japanese on Chinese civilians to Germany’s genocide of European Jews. He also documents other heinous acts including looting, pillaging, starvation, and crimes against women. While difficult to read, chapter 10 underscores the violent, annihilationist nature of the last imperial war, with civilian death tolls that are incomprehensible. The author estimates that sixteen million innocents died in the Axis-Soviet war, while ten to fifteen million Chinese perished in the war against Japan.<sup>12</sup> The imperial projects of Japan, Italy, and Germany truly ended in “blood and ruins.”

The author returns to the chronological narrative style in his conclusion, “Empires into Nations: A Different Global Age.” Here, Overy states, “The most significant geopolitical consequence of the war was the collapse within less than two decades of the entire European imperial project and the establishment of a world of nation states.”<sup>13</sup> Serving as a conclusion as well as an epilogue of sorts, the chapter emphasizes that out of the wreckage of the last imperial war—so aptly documented in the previous chapters—came a “widespread popular rejection” of imperialism and the dissolution of the system that pitted the “new order empires” against the old.<sup>14</sup> Japan, Italy, and Germany failed in their imperial ambitions and underwent radical reconstruction, while the victorious ones—Britain and France—eventually saw the demise of the empires they so desperately sought to maintain. The near global endorsement of the right to self-determination, the rise of independence movements, and the eventual creation of the United Nations sounded the death knell for empires and ushered in the modern era of nation-states. Overy notes that the Second World War, more than any other conflict, “created the conditions for transforming not just Europe, but the entire global geopolitical order.”<sup>15</sup> In the tour de force that is *Blood and Ruins*, the author has certainly made his case.

*Blood and Ruins* is unique in several aspects, which make it a very worthwhile investment in time. Perhaps its greatest strength is perspective. Overy links events temporally across the globe from the view of each nation-empire, making frequent observations that give the reader a broader perspective of the war. As an example, the author notes that “Stalingrad, Guadalcanal

and El Alamein were the furthest points of advance,” underscoring the pivotal years of 1942–1943.<sup>16</sup> His chronological as well as thematic chapters are replete with valuable insights that compare and contrast the actions of the “new order empires” (Japan, Italy, Germany)—with their “old order” adversaries (Britain and France) across the wide range of themes noted above. Next, Overy’s overall expertise and command of his material is nothing short of astounding. He is equally adept at describing the major political and military developments of the war while providing detailed analyses on topics ranging from Lend-Lease to economic mobilization to gender crimes. Overy’s use of data and statistics underscore his points dramatically, giving his readers new points to ponder. A final noteworthy aspect of the book is in the variety of themes it tackles, including some of the darkest, most unpleasant aspects of war. His chapters on the emotional geography of war, as well as crimes and atrocities, are necessary to understand the magnitude of violence inherent in the global conflagration that was the Second World War. Perspective, expert insights, and depth—these are qualities that mark *Blood and Ruins* as a book to be studied, not just read.

Because of the book’s perspective and emphasis, *Blood and Ruins* may not appeal to all readers. Those seeking greater detail on the purely military aspects

of the war should consult other one-volume histories such as those mentioned in this review. Overy’s lens is wide; as an example, his analysis of the Russo-German war from the onset of Operation Barbarossa to the first German defeats in the East takes up only twelve pages in chapter 2. As noted, the author condenses the years 1931–1945 in his first three narrative chapters, focusing more on the more geopolitical aspects of imperial war. Hence, it is more difficult to glean out the military aspects of a particular campaign, operation, or battle than in a more topical history. However, all readers will benefit from the insights the author provides in chapter 4, “Fighting the War,” which analyzes the military factors inherent to Allied victory.

*Blood and Ruins* has this reviewer’s highest recommendation. While by no means a casual read, it contributes a unique perspective that challenges the reader’s assumptions about World War II, the conduct of its protagonists, and the aftermath that ensued. It represents the highest levels of scholarship, is meticulously researched, and articulately written. Overy clearly is at the apex of his craft. *Blood and Ruins* will appeal to students of World War II as well as those interested in the origins of the Cold War. The book would make a welcome addition to one’s professional library and will reward its audience with something to think about long after its first reading. ■

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## Notes

1. Robert D. Kaplan, “The Return of Marco Polo’s World and the U.S. Military Response” (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017), 2, accessed 1 February 2023, <http://stories.cnas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CNASSTORY-MarcoPolo-Final.pdf>.

2. Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 1. In his single-volume history of World War II, the author uses a chronological approach and a standard timeline. Chapter 1, “The Outbreak of War,” covers June–August 1939, while his closing chapter, “The Atomic Bombs and the Subjugation of Japan,” spans May–September 1945. Several of this thematic chapters, such as the one describing the Shoah, have longer timelines, in this case 1942–1944.

3. *Ibid.*, 2.

4. Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945* (New York: Viking, 2022), xiii.

5. *Ibid.*, xii.

6. See Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939–1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011). Hastings takes a more conventional approach to his excellent and highly accessible one-volume history of World War II. The author emphasizes the use of first-person narratives and anecdotes throughout his text. While taking a more topical

approach to the war, Hastings does consider the issue of empires in his chapter on “Divided Empires.” Like Overy, Hastings also devotes a chapter to the war’s horrific impacts on noncombatants titled “Victims.”

7. Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, 527.

8. *Ibid.*, 526.

9. *Ibid.*, 597.

10. See Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2012). Contrary to popular images of a blissful Europe following Victory in Europe Day, Lowe shows that the horrors continued for many on the continent and the killing did not stop. He explores multiple issues such as the plight of the millions displaced by the war, vengeance on Axis collaborators, ethnic cleansing, and the many “wars within wars” that ensued following the formal termination of war.

11. Overy, *Blood and Ruins*, 665.

12. *Ibid.*, 784.

13. *Ibid.*, 826.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 878.

16. *Ibid.*, 237.