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Japan 1941: Countdown To Infamy



Synopsis

When Japan attacked the United States in 1941, argues Eri Hotta, its leaders, in large part, understood they were entering a conflict they were bound to lose. Availing herself of rarely consulted material, Hotta poses essential questions overlooked by historians in the seventy years since: Why did these men - military men, civilian politicians, diplomats, the emperor - put their country and its citizens in harm's way? Why did they make a decision that was doomed from the start? Introducing us to the doubters, bluffers, and schemers who led their nation into this conflagration, Hotta brilliantly shows us a Japan never before glimpsed - eager to avoid war but fraught with tensions with the West, blinded by traditional notions of pride and honor, nearly escaping disaster before it finally proved inevitable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hotta's book is an almost day-by-day account of the deliberations of the Japanese government during the year leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Using surprisingly detailed notes of the highest-level meetings she takes us through the tortured process which led to the infamous, and ultimately self-destructive, launching of the war against the US, a war, the author makes clear, many high officials knew Japan could not win. The degree of debate and uncertainty, the powerful forces trying to avoid the war, the indecision and -- to a westerner -- surprising influence of the emperor, were all to this reader unknown, and extremely interesting. The fact that the US had broken Japan's diplomatic codes meant that FDR knew that Japan was preparing for war even as they sent their

ambassadors to try to negotiate a guarantee of peace. The fact that we hadn't yet broken their military codes explains why we didn't know when or where they were planning to attack. This book debunks the old idea that FDR knew the attack on Pearl Harbor was coming and let it happen, in order to get us into the war. He did indeed predict an attack, on December 1, but was not only wrong about the date but had no idea Japan was capable of attacking Hawaii. A wonderfully readable and important book.

This is an excellent account of the lead-up to Pearl Harbor from the perspective of Japan's military and political leaders. By Hotta's account, a war with the U.S. was not inevitable; nor did most Japanese leaders believe they were likely to win it. Even those who favored the attack recognized it as a tremendous gamble. So how did it happen? Hotta blames a combination of groupthink, institutional weaknesses, and individual cowardice. She dissects the formal and informal deliberations of the key players to show that Japan did not make the decision blindly or quickly. Officials afraid to put their reservations on the record, preferring to talk tough and hope that someone else would stop the march to war. Last-minute peace feelers -- though sincerely intended as such by many -- were so vaguely defined that they became a smokescreen for war preparations, lending further color to Pearl Harbor's stain of treachery. Hotta presents a damning case against the Japanese leadership. However, she goes a bit easy on the Americans, particularly President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, whose "Hull Note" in late November 1941 seems hardly to have been calculated to grasp what possibilities for peace remained. Still, even if the U.S. took a hard line to provoke the Japanese, that doesn't excuse Japan's leaders from the reckless miscalculations that would drive their country to ruin within four years.

Poor writing style detracts from the story of what prompted Japan's decision to attack the USA at Pearl Harbor. Written exclusively from the Japanese point of view. Good research of a difficult topic. Worth the money and time to buy and read.

This is a much-needed antidote to the usual narrative of the lead-up to the war with Japan, giving deep history and context to the muddled thinking and wishes of Japan's leaders and their ineffective, at times incompetent diplomacy with the U.S. Sadly, one comes away with the firm belief that this war could have easily been avoided, and millions of lives saved. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned here.

I'd started wondering what the folks living in Japan were up to, say, pre-12/07/1941. Who dominated the then-equivalent distribution of evening news. Were there opposing, significant citizenalia/points of view? How did the stronger Japanese camp win and supportive Japanese citizens were? Or did the samurai even acknowledge that others also inhabited their land? "Japan 1941" addresses these questions and I'm fascinated with the answers I'm finding in it. I've read recently a number of books about "us back home" -- I was 6 yrs old when it hit the fan.} It's all fitting together -- what folks at home did during WW2 whether 'home' be USA, western Europe, Japan, early-victim-Asia . . .

Overall this is very hard to beat as an exploration of the critical latter stages of the process by which Japan's leaders steered her into a war that was bound to be disastrous. Hotta has not only an excellent command of the English- and Japanese-language source but of the world view of the Japanese leaders. She's not quite as good on the U.S. leadership, principally because she doesn't fully understand how Japan's folly had caused the German and Japanese threats to meld in their minds, but we cannot expect everything and on Hotta's announced subject her account is truly excellent. And she writes well to boot.

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