

*Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*, by Rana Mitter,  
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston and New York, 2013), pp.464

China's heroic struggle for survival during its War of Resistance Against Japan from 1937 to 1945, which caused about 20 million deaths and another 90-100 million refugees, is not generally acknowledged in the West. The result of a decade-long research project, generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust, *Forgotten Ally* by Oxford historian Rana Mitter not only chronicles the eight-year long ordeal by incorporating new archival materials accessible after the liberalisation of China and the end of the Cold War, it also provides a profoundly touching human perspective to the sacrifice, fortitude and dedication of the Chinese people during that conflict. Navigating with refreshing clarity through the thicket of a politically complex narrative, it inspires the reader to delve further into the pivotal but convoluted and little understood episode of the ancient country.

The time-frame of the book inevitably puts the focus on the rise of Japan and its eventual military might, to which Professor Mitter attributes the unprecedented defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. However, he elides the key role of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 in facilitating Japan's expansionism for the subsequent two decades, and the overall Western support in empowering and catapulting it onto the stage of international politics – thereby becoming instrumental in containing Russia, as well as subverting “pernicious” Chinese nationalism. It may be mentioned that, for the good part of the twentieth century, China was regarded as “geopolitical Goldilocks’ porridge” of sorts, which was not to become too powerful to threaten the West, nor to remain too weak to be “hijacked by a non-Western power,” i.e., either Russia/Soviet Union or Japan. During World War II, U.S. and British interests too diverged fundamentally over the question of a post-war “strong China,” reflecting deep-seated Western ambivalence toward it.

Not quite a “revisionist” history of China's War of Resistance, *Forgotten Ally* is a reassessment of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's role in combating the Japanese military challenge, whose imperatives at times compelled him to opt for politically expedient, but morally culpable and strategically controversial steps—firstly, the November 1937 decision to “fight to the death” for the

disastrous defence of Nanjing, for which the Kuomintang or KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party) army was ill-equipped. Secondly, the breaching of the dikes of the Yellow River in June 1938 to forestall the Japanese march toward Wuhan, the KMT military headquarters, which eventually capitulated. Fighting a two-front war with the Chinese Communists and the Japanese, Chiang's policy was to first subdue the Communist opposition led by Mao Zedong, and then tackle the Japanese threat ("internal unity before external danger"), which resulted in his contribution to the anti-Japanese war largely negated in the historiography of the People's Republic of China, a legacy now being reevaluated by Beijing.

Mitter portrays Chiang as a tragic figure, whose political fate, sealed as it was by the brutal realities of international politics, was further compounded by intra-KMT factional rivalry, flawed military strategies and tactics, economic sabotage, corruption, war-induced societal disruption, demoralization and desertion of his troops, etc. For one thing, he was kept in the dark about the secret negotiations during 1944-45 between the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union that rode roughshod over China's sovereignty by conceding Dairen, Port Arthur and the Chinese Eastern Railroad (lost in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War), to Moscow, at Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam. That the British military objective in the war was not so much the liberation of China from Japanese occupation as the recovery of their colonial possession (with the prospect of KMT establishing control over Hong Kong being a particular concern), was a concomitant hazard that undermined his position. Although Chiang desisted from making a separate peace with the Japanese (and potentially complicating the Allied war-efforts in the Pacific), he nevertheless intuitively realised that the U.S. administration would ultimately dispense with him, especially in the aftermath of his falling-out with Stillwell in October 1944, which further aggravated the anti-Chiang sentiments already circulating among U.S. policy-makers, scholars and the media. A January 1945 paper of the State, War and Navy Coordination Committee (SWNCC), the predecessor of the National Security Council (NSC), ominously suggested that, militarily assisting China (as an Allied country after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December, 1941), was only a short-term U.S. goal, "while its long-term aim was to bring about the unification of China. For the former aim, Chiang Kai-shek was the only candidate who could lead China, but for the latter aim, Chiang was not necessarily the only one." The first official U.S. contact with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Peoples Liberation Army, the United States Army Observation Group, or "The Dixie Mission" (July 1944 to

March 1947), to the Communist headquarters in Yan'an, famously observed that, "The Communists are in China to stay. And China's destiny is not Chiang's but theirs." In the Nationalist indictment, the claim of US\$2 billion war-time American military aid to the KMT government was a myth, which estimates effective U.S. military assistance to the Republic of China between 1941 and 1948 to be around US\$200-300 million. U.S. Lend-Lease aid to China from 1941 to 1944 was mostly spent on General Claire L. Chennault's 1<sup>st</sup> American Voluntary Group/14<sup>th</sup> Air Force ("Flying Tigers"), transporting supplies from Assam, India to Kunming across the Eastern Himalayas (popularly called "the Hump"), for the American forces in China, rather than on the KMT army. Even the US\$125 million allocated by U.S. Congress through the China Aid Act of 1948, after the 1946-1947 arms embargo, did not reach KMT government till December 1948, a delay significantly shifting the balance of power in favour of the CCP, in the ongoing civil war.

Mitter aptly concludes that, "There was nothing inevitable about the [CCP]'s coming to power in 1949. Without the war with Japan, there would have been a greater possibility of an anti-imperialist, anti-Communist Nationalist government consolidating power. It would have still been an immensely hard task, not least because of the Nationalists' own huge flaws, but the war made it nearly impossible." Although it is still unclear exactly who or what triggered the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937, some Nationalist critics hypothesise that it was the pre-meditated handiwork of the Comintern which provoked it through Chinese GRU(Main Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet Army General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union) agents in order to start a second Sino-Japanese war (the first occurring in 1894-95), the twin objectives of which were to annihilate KMT forces, as well as get Japan bogged-down in it.

While Mitter discusses the December 1937 Nanjing massacre (one of the worst in recorded history), in a somewhat limited format, he regrettably refrains from addressing the true nature and magnitude of Japanese wartime atrocities in China, which even today remain a toxic issue between Beijing and Tokyo, casting a long shadow over their bilateral relations. He maintains total silence about the infamous Japanese "Unit 731" in Harbin, Manchuria that was in operation from the early 1930s till 1945 as a biological warfare research centre for conducting inhuman experiments on Chinese civilians and prisoners of war, as well as Russians, involving infection of contagious diseases and vivisection, among other things. Yet, not a single person associated with the unit was tried

at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East or, Tokyo Trial, for war-crimes.

The complex story of China's 1937-1945 war against Japan, and the course of its communist revolution call for further research in order to provide the missing pieces of the jig-saw puzzle of one of the crucial chapters of modern history. A well-written, informative albeit sanitised history of China's War of Resistance, *Forgotten Ally* is indisputably a major scholarly work, deserving a front-row placement in the discourse of modern Chinese history that should be read by anyone interested in better understanding the historical background of present-day China.

**Ruksana Kibria\***

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\* Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka