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Book Review: Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945

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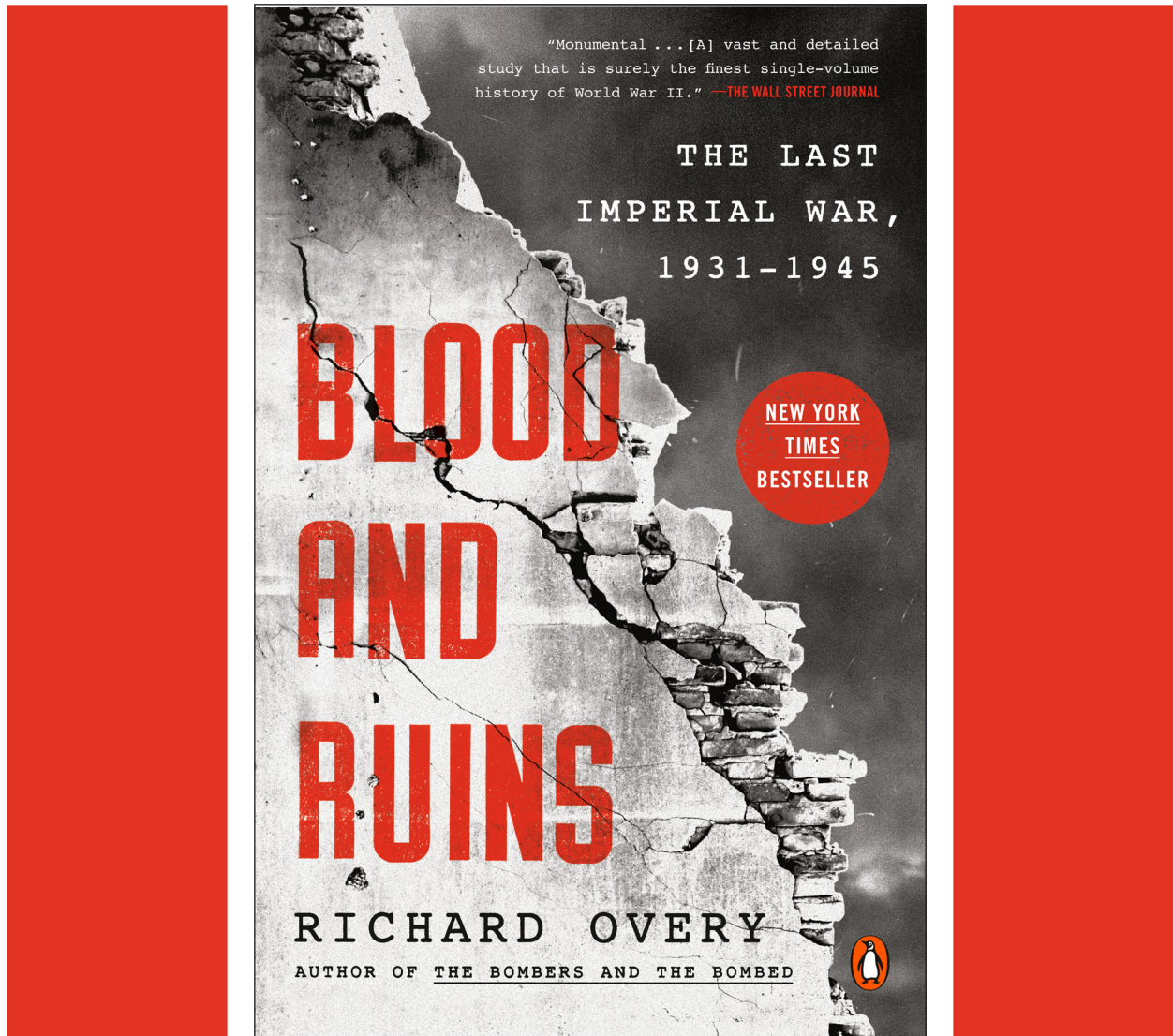
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Imperialism is the crux of distinguished British historian Richard Overy's latest World War II book, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931-1945*. Professor of history at the University of Exeter and a prize-winning author, Overy makes a convincing, new, and somewhat controversial argument that the desire for imperial expansion drove the belligerents to fight and was a core consideration in how they waged war. He extends the drive for empire to all belligerents, not just to the Axis powers as historians have in previous works. Overy also does the literature of World War II a service by attempting to shift the conventional, Eurocentric start of the war from Poland in 1939 to the war in China.

Historians use the term *periodization* to refer to how they break down time into discrete periods, as the British break down their history into the years of one ruler. For example, "The Victorian Period" refers to the years that Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain and its empire. The periodization for the start of World War II has conventionally been considered to be Germany's invasion of Poland. Many historians,

however, look to Asia for the start of the war. Overy points to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 as the start of the Asian war that eventually merged with the 1939 war in Europe, when Imperial Japan attacked the United States and the imperial holdings of the British, French, and Dutch in Asia. Historian Richard B. Frank makes a similar argument in his book, *Tower of Skulls – A History of the Asia-Pacific War: July 1937 to May 1942* (W. W. Norton, 2020). Conversely, he uses the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937, the more typically accepted starting point of the Second Sino-Japanese War, as the starting point of World War II. Overy views Manchuria as the first part of China the Japanese added to their empire, yet the Japanese had already acquired Taiwan, Korea, and other territories. Either way, both Overy and Frank correctly posit that World War II started in Asia, not Europe.

Blood and Ruins is a long work with nearly 1,000 small-print pages of text, detailed notes, and index topics. It also has an unusual structure. The prologue and chapter 11 are essentially an introduction and a conclusion, respectively. Chapters 1–3 are a chronological narrative of the war (nearly 350 pages long) focusing on policy and strategy and include forays into operational, tactical, and technical details to support his main argument. The following seven chapters are thematic in nature, covering topics that range from mobilization to crimes and atrocities. Overy does an admirable job connecting all these chapters to his larger argument that imperialism drove the war, which perhaps can be called “imperial determinism.”

Overy’s argument is fitting for Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan, as well as the long-time imperial powers of Great Britain and France. It is more problematic, however, for two of the war’s other major players. The Soviet Union inherited Russia’s empire and desire for expansion, but it had a more political purpose for growth than its czarist precursor. For the United States, Overy’s argument is more problematic. Antony Hopkins and Daniel Immerwahr, among others, have argued that it was and remains an empire. George Washington even referred to the United States as a “rising empire” during the Confederation period and as far back as 1770. Nevertheless, the American “empire” was (and is) different from empires like those of Rome or Great Britain.

There are many other lenses through which to view the war: ideology, a desire for autarky by the revisionist powers, balance of power, or simply an avoidance of becoming the next Carthage—surviving a total war. Whether you accept Overy’s argument of imperialism driving the war or his periodization, *Blood and Ruins* is well worth reading and pondering. National security professionals will find it an invaluable tool for exploring World War II policy and strategy.

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Keywords: imperialism, China, Japan, Poland, World War II

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