

## Book Review

Secret War In Shanghai: Treachery, Subversion and Collaboration in the Second World War

By *Bernard Wasserstein*

London: Profile Books Ltd, 1998. pp. xiv + 354. Three maps. £ 8.99 pb (1999)

Bernard Wasserstein's *Secret War in Shanghai* is an entertaining and stimulating, but most of all an overdue contribution to the fields of Chinese history, colonial history and military history of the twentieth century. Most people the cliches about Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s – the 'Babylon of the Orient', so full of every vice and corruption one can possibly imagine – which have long and often been perpetrated by various books and movies. Playing along with these myths, even building on them and backing them up with a wide range of sources, Wasserstein proves that in this case the reality was even stranger than fiction. In many aspects Shanghai was indeed as bad as its reputation, if not worse.

Although the title mainly suggests Axis and Allied military intelligence activities within the timeframe of World War II, the actual content of the book is so much more. Besides depicting official and unofficial secret service operations, Wasserstein also draws a vivid picture of Shanghai's social and political life, ranging from the criminal underworld through the ranks of all participating armed forces and colonial governments to the upper echelons of the local high society. The chapters of the book follow loosely a chronological order, starting in 1937, when the Sino-Japanese War broke out, and ending in the late 1940s. Besides delivering a chronicle of events, however, Wasserstein also focusses in each chapter on very distinctive facets of the more than complex topic, as well as on certain individuals involved in the shadowy deals of the 'Secret War'. This makes it almost impossible to summarize the content of Wasserstein's work. The wheelings and dealings of the different branches of the British, American, Japanese and German intelligence services alone are beyond description. Shadowy machinations of every kind are abundant, ranging from successful cooperation to constant bickering about authority and from amateurish bumbling to treacherous collaboration.

Other participants in this 'Great Game', like the various colonial administrations and the international businessmen in the foreign concessions of Shanghai, create even more complexity, as do the Chinese authorities, sympathetic either to the Allies or to the Japanese, and the triads of Shanghai's criminal underworld. Since such chaotic circumstances always bring forth colourful characters, certain individuals like the American gentlemen traitor Hillaire du Berrier, the seductive Indian adventuress 'Princess' Sumaire or the tough-as-nails arms trader

'One-Arm' Sutton got involved as well, be it as active players or as mere pawns. Caught in the middle of the conflict were the masses of Chinese civilians and the countless homeless drifters and refugees from the West. Yet despite this presumably unfathomable amount of historical facts, the book never loses its clarity. By reconstructing the perplexity of World War II intelligence operations in East Asia and their surroundings, Wasserstein reveals that in war and politics only on the rarest occasions a definite distinction between black and white can be made. This way, the microcosm of Shanghai in the late 1930s and 1940s actually mirrored the macrocosm of foreign military policy in Asia and on the global stage.

Seen from the standpoint of an interested reader, *Secret War in Shanghai* is both very informative and pleasing, delivering a bulk of previously unknown facts, while catching the mood of this enigmatic city and taking the reader away. Bernard Wasserstein definitely deserves credit for tackling the seemingly impossible task of writing a comprehensive chronicle of Shanghai in its probably most convoluted period of history. However, the incredible extent of the topic is also the reason why a review of the book must be done with mixed feelings. While Wasserstein is an excellent storyteller, his book, seen from the more demanding standpoint of a historian, is also a little bit disappointing. To cover all the different aspects and to forget none of the many colourful characters, he had to cut back on depth in their respective descriptions, can therefore often only scratch on the surface and leaves the reader behind wanting more detail.

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