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Rebellious Army of Imperial Japan By Danny
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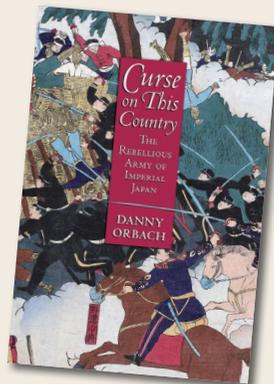
BOOK REVIEW

Curse on This Country: The Rebellious Army of Imperial Japan

By Danny Orbach

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Reviewed by G. Clinton GODART



An historian of British naval history once lamented the lack of interest in the navy among historians of Britain, saying that assessing the eighteenth-century British state without mentioning the Royal Navy would be like “writing a history of Switzerland without mentioning mountains, or writing a novel without using the letter ‘e.’” The problem was not a lack of specialized studies of the navy, ships, and battles, but a lack of understanding of the import of the navy in modern British history as a whole. No aspect of modern British history, he argued, would be complete without assessing its naval component.¹ The same can probably be said about modern Japanese history and the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). While all historians of modern Japan are of course well aware of the tremendous import of the military, the number of serious historical studies in English on the Japanese military and the military *in modern Japanese history* are few and far between. Hence Danny Orbach’s masterful book on the Japanese army, *Curse on This Country*, should be more than welcome.

Curse on This Country is a history of the IJA from the Meiji period to the beginning of the Asia-Pacific War, but through a particular angle, namely what Orbach identifies as a particular penchant, a “culture” for independent action, insubordination, and rebellion. As this also bears on the problem of military-civilian relations, and thus the role of the military in Japanese society, this book is of significance for all historians of modern Japan. Orbach, a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is well placed to write this history, working with archival materials in multiple languages and having previously published *The Plots Against Hitler* as well as articles on acts of military insubordination and conspiracy in countries other than Japan.² Well-crafted and lucidly explained, *Curse on This Country* takes us on a journey from the *bakumatsu* era through a series of acts of insubordination, unauthorized military actions abroad, civil-military clashes, and rebellion, such as the 1874 Taiwan expedition, the assassination of the Korean Queen Min, the Taisho political crisis, and the cascade of violent acts beginning with the 1928 assassination of Manchuria’s

1 Rodger 2005, lxii-lxiv.

2 Orbach 2016.

warlord leader Zhang Zuolin, the Sakura kai attempted coup and the Manchurian Incident of 1931, and culminating in the rebellion of 26 February 1936.

Most of these incidents are well known to a historian of modern Japan, but Orbach shines new light on each incident and the circumstances surrounding them. However, the book's greatest contribution is that—to the best of this reviewer's knowledge—for the first time it ties all these together in one historical narrative, and as aspects of an evolving, but nevertheless single, phenomenon of Japan's modern army: its "culture of subordination." Whereas previous research studied the rash actions by the military in the 1930s primarily as a product of that era, Orbach places these in a longer history of the army going back to the 1860s. *Curse on This Country* reads at times like a thriller, but it harbors a sophisticated argument of an historical nexus of power and insubordination. Central to the argument is that the culture of insubordination was the result of systemic flaws in the makeup of modern Japan's political and military structure that were put in place in the Meiji period. Orbach describes these flaws with the metaphor of "bugs" in computer software, flaws that do not prevent the state from running: "Only in certain situations, under specific conditions, did they cause severe failures that eventually undermined the entire system" (p. 3). The book is thus also a study of how power worked in prewar Japan.

The bugs are, first, the "hazy legitimacy" of power, in particular that of the emperor, whose "will" was almost never manifested and thus always open to interpretation, strife by different factions, including mid-and-lower-ranking officers who could always act out while believing or saying it was in the emperor's name; second, "territorial expansion as a one-way street," a broad understanding that expansion was always the goal, allowing frustrated officers to set *faits accomplis* abroad (such as the Manchurian Incident). This also made it difficult to punish these officers or reverse their actions, in effect creating legal impunity, which in turn endowed officers with optimism that their actions would bear results. And third, "territorial expansion as an endless road," the absence of a defined goal for expansion, making officers never satisfied with the status quo. The bugs "created room, ideological encouragement, and endless pretexts for rebellion and resistance in the imperial Japanese army" (p. 265). Also important is that violent acts of insubordination bred later incidents as army officers consciously remembered and tried to relive the *bakumatsu shishi* culture of rash and violent action, fueled by drinking bouts and a conspicuous absence of planning. Despite these continuities, the culture of insubordination also changed overtime, and Orbach uncovers important changes such as the "democratization of insubordination" (p. 226), a process whereby each subsequent action tended to involve officers of lower ranks: the Taiwan expedition and assassination of Queen Min were planned by higher ranks, the Manchurian Incident by mid-ranking officers, and the 26 February Incident by junior lieutenants. In the end, the tide of rebellions was dealt with harshly and eliminated after the February uprising of 1936, albeit with an afterlife as the army used the threat of rebellion to get its way. No particular individual was responsible for what turned into its final crash during the Pacific War, and often the systemic flaws were the result of good, or at least rational, intentions.

A minor point of critique in my opinion is this: in the very final stage of the book Orbach rushes somewhat too quickly to connect the culture of insubordination to the escalation of the Japan-China War and the outbreak of the Pacific War (pp. 256, 259–260). That the fear of rebellion and/or insubordination was a constraining factor in decision-making for Japanese leaders, such as during the early months of the Japan-China War, is

indeed an important dimension that historians should take into consideration. But it is also one that should be carefully measured against such factors as the tactical situation on the ground, the flow of information and debates at the Army General Staff, and the series of decisions leading to all-out war in 1937, including also Chinese actions and decisions, such as that to open a second front around the Shanghai area. Orbach's book also raises questions for further research. He argues the army and even society came to be pervaded by the culture of insubordination, but also describes a tension between rebellious officers and those keen to maintain order. How should we understand the balance between rebellion and radicalism on the one hand, and conservative tendencies and figures on the other, leading up to the Pacific War? To what degree were elements outside the IJA aware of the "bugs" in the system, and to what degree did they criticize or try to change it? Orbach's focus is rightly limited to the army, and although he does touch upon the navy at times, including the involvement of navy officers in several plots, the question arises as to whether the navy was overall less prone to subordination, and if so, why, given it was functioning in the same bug-infested operating system. *Curse on This Country* is a rich and sophisticated history that deserves to be read widely by students of modern Japanese history and military history.

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