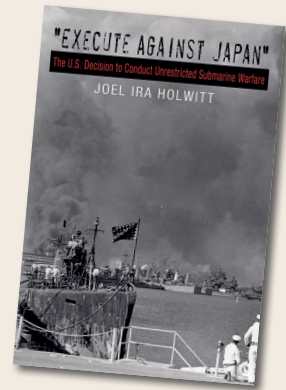


BOOK REVIEW

***“Execute Against Japan”:
The U.S. Decision to Conduct
Unrestricted Submarine Warfare***

Joel Ira Holwitt

Texas A&M University Press, 2009
262 pages.



At 1752 Eastern Standard Time on Sunday, December 7, 1941, about four and a half hours after [...] the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations released a simple but dramatic message:

EXECUTE AGAINST JAPAN UNRESTRICTED AIR AND SUBMARINE WARFARE.

Thus begins Joel Ira Holwitt’s masterful *Execute Against Japan*, which seeks to understand how unrestricted submarine warfare came to be the service-wide policy of the U.S. Navy during World War II. Anathema to American naval officers during the First World War—when submarine captains who sank merchant vessels were subject to hanging under international law against piracy—unrestricted submarine warfare became, by the opening hours of World War II, one of the key elements in the American naval strategy against the Japanese Empire. Holwitt brilliantly lays out how this came to be, and sets the stage for future studies to shift to a more broadly political consideration of why successive presidential administrations from Wilson to Roosevelt wanted a formerly repugnant tactic to be a cornerstone of American naval warfare.

Holwitt’s monograph is divided into eleven short chapters. Roughly the first half of the book examines the history of the American doctrine of freedom of the seas; the development of submarine technology which created new paradigms of navigation and warfare (particularly since submarines cannot practically spare crew members to take merchantmen as prizes or offer berths to prisoners from seized or sunken ships); and the ways in which international law and the American political and military bureaucracies attempted to craft new policies to guide submarine warfare.

The second half of the book is the most damning to the myth of American innocence in the run-up to the Pacific War. Here, Holwitt describes in exhaustively-researched detail the development of War Plan ORANGE, which, over the course of many drafts from its inception in 1906 (thirty-five years before Pearl Harbor!), came to view with increasing certainty the prospect of a naval war of attrition against Japan. Militaries the world over are constantly planning for war with every conceivable foe, it is true. But War Plan ORANGE was different in that, unlike other war plans imagining a war with, say, Great Britain, New Zealand, or Ireland (pp. 64–65), ORANGE was eventually seen by the military and the

Roosevelt administration alike as not just a contingency exercise but as a paper rehearsal for a near-certain eventuality.

Holwitt's research thus brings to the surface a surprising fact: namely, that submarines facilitated a growing alignment between American political interests and tactical and strategic military prerogatives long before the opening of hostilities with Japan in December of 1941. Samuel Flagg Bemis, writing in 1961 and quoted by Holwitt (p. 87), sums this development up perfectly:

The motives which impelled the United States in the Second World War to resort to unrestricted submarine and air warfare against Japan ... were coolly, studiously strategic: to cut off the enemy's vital overseas trade and thereby weaken his capacity to fight and win a long war. Submarines were the only American naval instrument which could reach across the Pacific at the beginning of the conflict, and they were put promptly to this prearranged task!

Unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan, which included, eventually, even the targeting and sinking of wooden sampan fishing boats and the torpedoing of troop transports and machine-gunning of survivors trying to man lifeboats, was thus not a product of Pearl Harbor. If anything, Pearl Harbor—that is to say, the outbreak of open war between the U.S. and Japan—was the end result of long decades of both empires planning for a total war across the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean. Unrestricted submarine warfare was the lynchpin of War Plan ORANGE, which explains why it took just a few scant hours after the first bombs fell on Oahu for the American navy to carry out indiscriminate attacks on all Japanese shipping. Holwitt's book thus offers a startling inversion of the traditional American myth of Pearl Harbor having been an unexpected blow.

The great strength of *Execute Against Japan* lies in Holwitt's extensive archival research. Holwitt's historical acumen brings into crisp focus the ways in which the U.S. Naval bureaucracy shifted from adherence to a doctrine of freedom of the seas to an advocacy of the unconditional sinking of every ship flying the enemy colors, even unarmed merchantmen and privately-owned family fishing boats. As a military and institutional history, this is truly a work of extraordinary clarity, breadth, and depth. *Execute Against Japan* deserves to rank among the finest military policy studies that have come out in recent decades, and anyone with an interest in twentieth-century history in general stands to profit from Holwitt's exposition of the ways in which navies decide how, when, where, and against whom to wage war.

As a political history, though, Holwitt's book contains some loose strings that await further tidying up in future volumes. For example, one is struck throughout *Execute Against Japan* at the way in which political actors are either relegated to inconsequential sideline roles or presented so uncritically as to render them nearly agentless in their own right. Holwitt repeats several times, for instance, that the freedom of the seas doctrine that typified American naval policy during and before World War I was produced, in part, by Wilsonian "idealism." A much more skeptical view of Wilson's maneuvering is also possible, but the reader is kept waiting for Holwitt to provide some substantial evidence, beyond consensus and circumstance, for Wilson's noble high-mindedness. *A fortiori* for Franklin Roosevelt. As Japanese scholar Ezaki Michio made clear in a 2012 work on the Comintern

in the U.S. and Japan,¹ and as the Venona Files have neatly corroborated, Soviet agents were actively trying to incite a war between America and Japan in order to prevent Japan from engaging Stalin on his eastern flank. Surely Plan ORANGE did not come to embrace pitiless warfare tactics *vis-à-vis* Japan in total isolation from this high-level, pervasive, and insidious Soviet intrigue.

This diploid lacuna mars even the best historical writing on the twentieth century: the failure to admit the grave threat that world communism posed to liberal democracies between World War I and World War II (see for example, p. 48), and the assumption that Roosevelt, himself satrap of the Philippines and hegemon of the Hawaiian Islands, was working purely out of an altruistic desire to chastise the Japanese Empire for their colonial policies (pp. 124, 126). Holwitt’s research has made clear the outlines of these blank spaces, but it remains for future works to overlap the literature on American policy and the literature on the communist threat to make the portrait complete.

I hasten to add, though, that this is not a denunciation of Holwitt’s book as such. The core of Holwitt’s work—that is, his fine-grain investigation of the decision by the U.S. Navy to reverse a fundamental doctrine and order unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan—is as solid an example of sober scholarship as I have ever encountered. The political angle mentioned in my critique might have strengthened Holwitt’s main argument, but, at the same time, his ability to stick strictly within the scope of his project bespeaks a mental discipline that works greatly to his credit as scholar and historian. My critique, therefore, can also be construed as praise.

And praise the book I do. It is my great hope that this will be only the first in a long series of works by an exciting new talent. I also look forward to books by other specialists that will build on the foundation, and follow the model, that Holwitt has provided in *Execute Against Japan*.

REFERENCE

Ezaki 2012

Ezaki Michio 江崎道朗. *Kominterun to Ru-zubueruto no jigen bakudan: Semarikuru han-Nichi hōimō no shōtai o abaku* コミンテルンとルーズヴェルトの時限爆弾: 迫り来る反日包囲網の正体を暴く. Tendensha, 2012.

Reviewed by Jason Morgan

¹ See Ezaki 2012.