"We'll have a war all of our very own," W. H. Auden promised Christopher Isherwood as they sailed for Hong Kong in January, 1938, to write a book about Japan's invasion of China. Whereas the Spanish Civil War was, as Isherwood later wrote, "already crowded with star literary observers," hardly anyone in the West seemed to be paying attention to the Guernicas of the Second Sino-Japanese War—including the rape and massacre of tens of thousands of civilians by Japanese soldiers in Nanjing. Auden, in his sonnet sequence "In Time of War" (1939), wrote, "Maps can really point to places/Where life is evil now./Nanking, Dachau." In Wuhan, China's besieged wartime capital, Isherwood intuited that "hidden here are all the clues which would enable an expert, if he could only find them, to predict the events of the next fifty years."

Auden and Isherwood were bemused by the complacency among Asia's European overlords, such as the formidably named head of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Sir Vande-leur Molyneux Grayburn. As they reported to William Empson, who had spent the previous year teaching English in China, Grayburn, when asked for his opinion of the war, said, "Well, it's just the natives fighting."

An American plane drops ammunition for Chinese troops in October, 1944.

AUDEN AND ISHERWOOD turned out to be geopolitically cannier than the banker in Hong Kong. The Japanese—stalemated in China and crippled by American sanctions—succumbed to the militarist logic of escalation. After attacking the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, they overran the East and Southeast Asian empires of Britain, France, and the Netherlands in a matter of weeks. In 1943, Grayburn was among the tens of thousands of Europeans in Asia who died in brutal Japanese captivity.

Japan's actions against the United States brought America into the war, much to the relief of Winston Churchill. Meanwhile, much to the relief of Roosevelt and Stalin, the war in China continued to pin down most of the Japanese Army—more than half a million soldiers scattered across a vast country. This made it possible for Allied forces to fight the Axis powers on European and Asian fronts simultaneously, but it also meant that China, then a weak and under-resourced country, was completely ravaged. As many as twenty million Chinese people were killed, a hundred million were made homeless, and China's rudimentary infrastructure—roads, railways, and factories—was destroyed. The eventual outcome of what Isherwood called "one of the world's decisive battlegrounds" was the strengthening of Mao's Communists and the rise, after decades of chaos, of an assertive China, which is now re-drawing the world's geopolitical and economic map.

And yet we haven't moved very far from thinking of the Second Sino-Japanese War as a squabble between the natives. Conventional histories of the Second World War remain focused on the European theatre from 1939 and the Pacific one from December, 1941. Although Iris Chang's best-selling book "The Rape of Nanking" (1997) raised awareness of the intensity of Chinese suffering, the full scope of the war—for instance, the immense sacrifices made by the Chinese in 1944 during Ichigō, the Japanese army's biggest-ever offensive—remains generally obscure to Anglophone readers. Popular notions of Japan's treachery on the "day of infamy" and its brutality during the war...
do little to explain the country's urge to be an imperial force, its sense of racial humiliation by Western powers, and the need it felt, as a resource-poor nation with a growing population, to acquire Lebensraum.

Japan and China cherish their historical myths, many of which have recently helped politicians mobilize nationalist passions. In one influential Japanese version of history, Japan sought to bring peace to Asia, but was pushed into war by arrogant and devious Western countries and then victimized by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Official Chinese histories have depicted the Japanese as savages beaten back by Mao's brave Communists. In fact, Mao spent these years in Yenan, the Communists' base, in rural central China, catching up on his reading and composing the stringent rules of Maoist realism. The brunt of the Japanese assault was borne by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists—Mao's enemies in the Chinese Civil War. (The civil war had been raging since 1927; the two sides reluctantly united against the Japanese, and then fought for another four years after the Japanese surrender, in 1945. By then, the Nationalists' long fight against the superior Japanese forces had weakened them, insuring Mao's ultimate victory.)

How can the history of a global conflagration be rescued from national narcissisms and delusions? One answer in recent years has been provided by narratives that unearth tangled motivations and dilemmas on all sides, and that attempt to synthesize the many sociopolitical changes that war, economic expansion, and nationalism unleash. In the past decade, two pathbreaking volumes—"Forgotten Armies" and "Forgotten Wars," by the Cambridge historians Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper—have recounted how European empires were destroyed, and contemporary Asian nation-states forged, by Japanese invasions and occupations. Now two new books—Rana Mitter's "Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and Eri Hotta's "Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy" (Knopf)—offer different perspectives.

Mitter presents the Second Sino-Japanese War and the first stage of the civil war between Mao and Chiang as prequels to the Second World War. He goes on to demonstrate that Japane...
the export—by force, if necessary—of colonial wealth and resources to the industrial metropolis, and the transfer to the colonies of peasants and factory workers disenfranchised by the industrializing economy. Mass culture helped drum up support for the imperial project. Like the Britain of Beaverbrook and Kipling, Japan in the early twentieth century was a jingoistic nation, subduing weaker countries with the help of populist politicians and sensationalist journalism. By the end of the First World War, the fledgling Japanese Empire consisted of Taiwan, Korea, and the southern half of Sakhalin. Its influence had also replaced that of Russia in the commodity-rich region of Manchuria, in northeastern China.

China was easy prey. Since the 1911 revolution, which ended the dynastic system, it had lacked effective central institutions and had been weakened by warlordism. However, Japan's emergence came just as old-style imperialists were being challenged by Asians eager for national self-determination. Japan, through incursions on Chinese territory during and after the First World War, inadvertently catalyzed the nationalist movement in China. Ordinary Chinese had previously had a feeble sense of national identity, and many Chinese thinkers and leaders despaired of mobilizing them in the task of restoring the country's greatness.

Chinese nationalists received help from the Soviet Communists. Lenin and Trotsky saw nationalist revolts against the West in Asia as crucial to the survival of their revolution. In 1924, Soviet advisers helped to set up a military academy near Guangzhou, which soon produced an Army under the supervision of Chiang Kai-shek. Both Chiang's Nationalists and the Communists modelled their parties along Bolshevik lines, and initially they formed an alliance. Among the first targets of radicalized Chinese workers and students in 1925 were Japanese commercial interests in China. In 1926, when Chiang and his Communist allies set out to unify China, the Soviet-backed Army terrified Japanese colonialists.

The Japanese were relieved when, in April, 1927, Chiang turned against the Communists, killing thousands of them with the help of his friends in Shanghai's mafia; the slaughter marked the beginning of the civil war. Starting in 1931, the Japanese used various pretexts to bring all of Manchuria under military occupation and to open it to settlers from the Japanese countryside.

The annexation of Manchuria was greeted with international outrage, a reaction that, to Japan's leaders, seemed hypocritical. Britain, after all, had an empire on which the sun never set, and the United States, which had taken land from Mexico and the Native Americans, had divided Colombia to create the state of Panama. Yet both of them denounced Japan, a small, densely populated country, for taking Manchuria from China and developing it into a buffer against Communism. In 1933, at a League of Nations conference in Geneva, the Japanese representative abandoned his prepared text and walked out, shouting at the Western delegates, "Read your history! ... Would the American people agree to such control of the Panama Canal Zone? Would the British permit it over Egypt?"

The Japanese believed that they were excluded from the club of imperial nations on racial grounds. In 1919, at the Paris Peace Conference, Japan had put forward a proposal to guarantee racial equality at the League of Nations, but Woodrow Wilson overturned it in the face of majority support. That same year, Prince Konoe Fumimaro, who became Prime Minister in 1937, visited America, and the racism he witnessed convinced him that Britain and America would never treat Japan as an equal. "That the white people—and the Anglo-Saxon race in particular—generally abhor colored people is an apparent fact, so blatantly observable in the U.S. treatment of its black people," he wrote. The Japanese, as Hotta observes, were model students of Western imperial ways, but they could not "change the color of their skin."

By the mid-thirties, Chiang had subdug the Communists in the countryside through a series of scorched-earth campaigns. Mao was forced to retreat to the political backwater of Yan'an with his radically diminished troops, in what he later mythologized as...
the Long March. Chiang started to put in place an infrastructure for a modern society and economy. He converted to Christianity, and courted the United States with the help of his Wellesley-educated wife, Song Meiling. He had keen supporters among influential American Sinophiles, such as Henry Luce, whose parents had been missionaries in China. The Chinese, in Luce’s view, were free-market-loving Americans in the making. Mitter calls this the “fundamental misconception at the heart of much of the American thinking about China.”

In any case, puff pieces in Time did not alleviate Chiang’s vulnerability before the Japanese. They took advantage of the civil war to keep nibbling on Chinese territory from their base in Manchuria. Public sentiment overwhelmingly favored a truce between the Communists and the Nationalists, the better to take on the invaders, and Stalin helped broker an agreement, reasoning that a united China would save him the trouble of fighting Japan himself. Chiang despised the Japanese, calling them “dwarf bandits” (an imperial epithet), but he hesitated to attack, and the Communists taunted him as an appeaser.

In July, 1937, Japan launched a full-scale assault on China. Chiang decided to make a stand in Shanghai, since North China was already substantially under Japanese control. He began to speak of a “war of resistance to the end.” But, as Mitter explains, he had always known that he did not have enough military strength to fight the Japanese, who overran one city after another, forcing Chiang to relocate his military command to Wuhan, and the administration to the remote city of Chongqing.

Years of indoctrination about Japan’s superior status and its mission in Asia made the invaders see the Chinese as less than human. In Nanjing, Japanese soldiers used civilians for sword practice, and tied them together in groups of a hundred, then set fire to them. This “uninterrupted spree of murder, rape, and robbery,” as Mitter calls it, presaged a 1941 policy known as the Three Alls—“kill all, burn all, loot all.” Occasional Chinese military successes were quickly offset by disasters, often self-inflicted. Chiang, in a futile attempt to stop the Japanese advance on Wuhan, breached the dikes of the Yellow River. The flood inundated more than thirteen million acres of central China, killed half a million of Chiang’s countrymen, and made refugees of up to five million. Mitter rates this as an atrocity greater than any perpetrated by the Japanese.

Mitter’s book reflects a shift in Chinese historiography from a Cold War preoccupation with revolutions and ideologies to a close examination of the crucible of war in which modern China was forged. He describes how Chiang’s makeshift government in Chongqing began to formulate notions of citizenship by creating a system of identity cards. The mobilizing of the citizenry for war led to a push to involve women in public life, and ordinary people came to expect more of their rulers. An ambitious new territorial conception of China sprang up, which included minorities like the Tibetans and the Uighurs.

Mitter also shows how both the Nationalists and the Communists “recognized and accepted the use of terror as part of the mechanism of control.” Together, they created the foundations of China’s authoritarian system. In Yan’an in 1942, Mao launched a “Rectification Movement”; the campaign, which used torture to bring people in line with “Mao Zedong Thought,” became, as Mitter writes, a “blueprint” for the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, the Communists developed “genuine instruments of mass mobilization,” such as land reform and efficient administration. Their military engagement mostly consisted of guerrilla skirmishes, and their exemption from conventional battles with the Japanese enabled them to boost their military strength several times over.

European powers, unwilling to antagonize Japan, offered China little or no help. William Empson wrote of his suspicion “that we want both parties to weaken each other.” Stalin sent some pilots to Chiang, and a retired U.S. Air
Force officer named Claire Lee Chennault was recruited to train "China's still minimal air force." The eruption of war in Europe increased Chiang's isolation, and a non-aggression pact between Japan and the Soviet Union, in 1941, deprived him of Soviet support. At Japanese insistence, Britain closed the Burma Road, which had enabled supplies from Rangoon to reach China's troops. The United States was just as reluctant to get involved in Asia as it was to join the war against Hitler in Europe. Henry Luce's magazines urged vigorous support for Chiang, to no avail, until the attack on Pearl Harbor changed everything.

In "Japan 1941," Eri Hotta argues that there was nothing inevitable about the Pearl Harbor attack, which she describes as a "huge national gamble." She scrupulously details the negotiations and squabbles among Japanese military and civilian leaders, against a backdrop of dauntingly complex domestic and international maneuverings. Japan in the thirties was undergoing a severe social and economic crisis, as a result both of the Great Depression and of the drain in resources caused by the war in China.

Japan's leaders regarded revolutionary Communism as their biggest enemy. Their desire for protection against the Soviet Union was behind both Japan's pact with Nazi Germany, in 1936, and its entry, in 1940, into the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, which established the Axis. The pact drew strong disapproval from commanders in the Japanese Navy, a redoubt of Anglophiles and Americanophiles. The leadership was keen not to antagonize America. But the Roosevelt Administration, drawing a lesson from Europe's failure to stop Hitler's incremental aggressions during the nineteen-thirties, saw Japanese expansionism as a force that had to be contained. Roosevelt was unnerved by Japan's pacts with Germany and by its occupation, in 1940, of the strategically important northern half of French Indochina, which supplied much of America's rubber and tin.

In July, 1941, the Japanese military advanced into the southern half of French Indochina, and the United States responded by freezing all Japanese assets and embargoing the sale of petroleum. The Dutch, who sold Sumatran oil to the Japanese, followed suit. Without oil, Japan's war in China would be lost, and Tokyo calculated that it had two years or less before its supplies ran out. The options were to negotiate with America for the resumption of supplies or to occupy the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), a region rich in oil and rubber. The latter course would be impossible given the American Navy's presence in the Pacific. The Japanese Navy's chief of staff, Nagano Osami, reluctantly warned Emperor Hirohito that a preemptive attack on the U.S. was the only option. "Could we expect a big victory?" Hirohito asked. "I am uncertain as to any victory," Nagano replied, provoking the Emperor to say, "What a reckless war that would be."

Hoping to avoid war, Japanese leaders entered into months of intense talks with the United States. But, convinced of their Manifest Destiny in Asia, they wouldn't agree to Washington's demand for a withdrawal from mainland China, which would amount to admitting defeat in a war that had exacted a huge price. The failure to reach agreement with the U.S. gave the militarist faction of Japan's leadership greater sway, and there were angry outbursts in the Japanese press about "five centuries of white invasion" of Asia. As late as August, 1941, Prime Minister Konoe still hoped to pull off a last-minute grand bargain with Roosevelt at a summit meeting. The meeting never took place.

The war planners in Japan had greater momentum than the peace-makers, and Roosevelt's own stance hardened after he learned of Japanese troop movements in the South Seas. The Americans demanded Japan's withdrawal from mainland Asia, and Japanese leaders plunged deeper into what Hotta calls "suicidal fatalism." It seemed that the only option was to inflict so much damage on the U.S. Navy that it would be unable to retaliate, and then to move fast to seize the oil fields of Southeast Asia. Many Japanese feared America's response, and realized that they could be, as Churchill said, "ground to powder."
September, 1941, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku warned his superiors that "a war with so little chance of success should not be fought." Yamamoto nonetheless went on to design the attack on Pearl Harbor, though he remained skeptical of the prevailing hope that Japan might just overcome the odds, thanks to the indomitable spirit of its fighting men.

When Chiang heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor, he reportedly put on a record and danced. His war had become part of the Second World War, and he wrote to Roosevelt, committing China to a new "common battle." He was soon made an Allied commander-in-chief, and an American general, Joseph Stilwell, became his chief of staff. A "four-year duel" ensued between Chiang and Stilwell, who was nicknamed Vinegar Joe for his caustic comments. Stilwell thought that Chiang, whom he called the Peanut, was excessively cautious as well as corrupt. (To wartime Americans he was known as Cash My-Check.)

Mitter takes a much more sympathetic view. In his revisionist analysis, American and British demands that Chiang should go on the offensive were disingenuous. Britain and America never had any intention of putting serious resources into rescuing China. "The great reason for backing China," William Empson wrote, "is only that Japan must not be too strong." The other Allied powers had no compunction about depleting Chiang's limited resources as he confronted famine in one part of China and Japan's depredations in another. American and British promises of military aid often didn't come through, and Mitter details the various occasions on which "Chiang was repeatedly forced to deploy his troops in ways that served Allied geostrategic interests but undermined China's own aims." In 1945, at Yalta, F.D.R. secretly handed various privileges in Manchuria to Stalin. Chiang's diary entries repeatedly denounced American diplomacy, which "really has no center, no policy, no morals" and, he wrote, regarded China merely "as meat on the chopping board."

The final, desperate phase of Japan's offensive in China piled more suffering on the Chinese and decimated Chiang's Army. Chinese blood continued to flow after the Japanese surrender, in 1945, as civil war resumed between the Nationalists, now drastically enfeebled, and the more robust Communists. Still, the hated foreign imperialists, Westerners as well as Japanese, had finally lost their power, exercised freely for more than a century, to bully a proud people. The war, while utterly devastating, helped China achieve nationhood and sovereignty. As Mao proclaimed in 1949, shortly after driving Chiang out of China, to Taiwan, "We have stood up." But a "strong China," Empson suspected in 1938, "might be the same kind of thing" as a strong Japan. Indeed China's rise, from mid-century to the present, has had disturbing echoes of Japan's, though its victims have been Chinese rather than other Asians. Mao's obsession with building up national strength, and his own power, inflicted one calamity after another on the Chinese. Breaking with Mao, Deng Xiaoping claimed, "If we do not develop, then we will be bullied." The new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping—whether speaking of the "China Dream," or launching a new "rectification" campaign—upholds the same imperatives of national unity, strength, and pride while restricting political freedoms. Fearful of domestic unrest, Chinese leaders seem to be adopting Japan's formula of authoritarianism and jingoism. And, to complete the symmetry, anti-Japanese passions in China have begun to fuel nationalism in Japan, which is threatening to revise its pacifist constitution. Decades after the animosities of the Second World War became history in Germany, Britain, and France, they have come dangerously alive in Asia.