

[Hinnershitz on Short, 'Uniquely Okinawan: Determining Identity during the U.S. Wartime Occupation'](#)

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Courtney A. Short. *Uniquely Okinawan: Determining Identity during the U.S. Wartime Occupation.* World War II: The Global, Human, and Ethical Dimension Series. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. 272 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-8232-8838-0](#); \$30.00 (paper), [ISBN](#)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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Courtney A. Short's *Uniquely Okinawan: Determining Identity during the U.S. Wartime Occupation* offers a policy-oriented view of the United States' military occupation of the Japanese prefecture during and after World War II. This is a departure from existing scholarship in which authors focus on the cultural aspects of this moment or the lingering economic impact of neoliberal ideas that accompanied the American presence in Okinawa. Short's focus on "the occupation of Okinawa from the wartime planning stages in late 1944 and early 1945 through the end of the US Navy's responsibility for occupation in 1946" allows for an examination of "the contact between a besieged civilian population and the US military rather than the contact between two combatant militaries" (p. 17). Most important for Short is the impact of the army's, marines', and navy's considerations of race and ethnicity on determining whether or not Okinawans were enemies or friends and, subsequently, the nature of the American occupation. Short frames her book as a corrective to the narrative that the racism of military leaders and soldiers led to brutal violence perpetrated against the Japanese by American forces. Instead, she argues that the military used "complex, educated, sophisticated, mindful consideration of identity, race, and ethnicity during planning and execution of the mission." The architects of occupation "acknowledged culture and ethnicity from a stance of balanced evaluation meant to inform objective military decisions; they did not use impassioned racist sentiments to drive action and provide an excuse for wanton violence" (p. 13). There is also an argument that Okinawans used their ambiguous ethnic and political heritage as traditionally Japanese but "uniquely Okinawan" to shape a new, pro-American identity to build beneficial relationships with their American occupiers. There are multiple arguments in Short's ambitious reexamination of Okinawan occupation, with the strongest contribution being the author's refashioning of occupation as military policy informed by cultural practices and ideas.

Uniquely Okinawan is difficult to summarize because it covers so much ground, but Short uses different stages of military planning and occupation to thematically and chronologically organize her book. The first two chapters offer comparisons between the army's and the marines' approaches to developing and implementing occupation plans. As shown in chapter 1, Pacific commander general Simon Bolivar Buckner and his colleagues "carefully considered practical military matters in their decision making" (p. 22). Intelligence did not provide a clear answer to the question of Okinawan

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countenance, but it did demonstrate a level of concern for understanding the Okinawans' culture and history, particularly the island's legacy of Japanese colonization. In contrast, chapter 2 charts the marine corps' strategy, which, based on interactions with Okinawans at Saipan, leaned more toward suspicion that Okinawans were loyal to the Japanese enemy. Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the contrasting relationships among generations of Okinawans to the Japanese, which influenced later relations between Okinawans and American military units during the Battle of Okinawa (which is the focus of chapter 4).

The remaining chapters follow the American occupation and the role of the Okinawans within this process. Short devotes chapter 5 to examining the rise of a "new" Okinawan identity—one that demonstrated "the malleability of race and ethnicity" during the war as well as the "deliberate choice" of the Okinawan people to shift toward accommodating ("appeasing" could be another word to use here considering the context) the Americans and loosening their cultural and historic ties to the Japanese (p. 61). The Japanese soldiers' own brutality shattered the Okinawans' devotion to the emperor and created opportunities for reassessing Japanese descriptions of Americans as demons and monsters. In turn, each branch of the US military at Okinawa also adjusted (to some degree) their own preconceived notions of the Okinawans. Doing so contributed to a well-executed occupation that left more energy and resources to follow through with combat planning. Short explains in chapter 6 that although soldiers still held the idea that Okinawans were culturally prone to "filthy" habits and poor hygiene (rather than accepting that their plight was a product of war) and "viewed the population as uncivilized, primitive, and unintelligent," the army's mission of removing civilians from the battlefield resulted in more direct interactions between the military government units and Okinawans (p. 78). A new level of cultural understanding prompted the army to slowly abandon the strict regulations in camps for more congenial relationships with the civilians. While chapter 7 describes the evolution of an Okinawan "identity for survival" that was "ingratiating" to the troops and pro-American, chapter 8 uncovers the marines' continued treatment of Okinawans as potential enemies, a belief that stemmed from numerous attacks on marine camps by pro-Japanese Okinawans (p. 91). The final two chapters situate the reader within the last days of military occupation when the Okinawans cooperated with the navy to gain some control of their own government, ending in a unique political and social Okinawan identity and, as Short notes in the conclusion, a successful operation. This success depended on consideration of racial and ethnic identities and evolving policy that incorporated changing personal interactions between soldiers and Okinawans.

Short's strength is her emphasis on military policy and *Uniquely Okinawan* will occupy a unique place in the historiography of Pacific military and social history. Her ability to blend these two subfields makes her work a fascinating case study. Short convincingly argues that the military's process of using intelligence on the cultural and ethnic history of the Okinawans represented a careful approach to occupation that could be useful in "provid[ing] an example for effective military government programs now and in the future" (p. 161). She defines a successful occupation program as one that expeditiously transfers military governance to locals, allowing the occupied people a level of authority in creating political and social programs. As Short explains, "military and government officials need to understand the historic foundation of ethnic traditions and loyalties yet also appreciate the contested nature of ethnicity and identity" (p. 160). A "military government ... flexible in its cultural analysis allowed for [a] successful transition from a wartime occupation to an

occupation of a defeated country” (p. 158). An underlying theme of the book is how to differentiate the treatment of prisoners of war from that of occupied civilians, something that military units—particularly the marines—struggled with. Additionally, Short highlights problems with cooperation in joint occupation operations which offer valuable lessons for future military planning.

Short’s sources are also a useful body of evidence for anyone interested in these topics. Numerous bulletins and reports, including the Army Civil Affairs Schools’ three-hundred-page *Ryukyu Handbook* for officers “slated for assignment in the Pacific,” add color to a bureaucratic process (p. 28). What stands out is the complexity of these materials, where authors did in fact undertake extensive research into the ethnic and cultural history of the Okinawans, but in many cases still relied on stereotypes of “inferiority.” More robust discussions of these sources would contextualize Short’s analysis of the roles of ethnicity and race in occupation.

The emphasis on the military’s use of race, ethnicity, and culture to inform decisions about occupation is a promising element of *Uniquely Okinawan* but one that raises more questions than answers. Short makes clear in her introduction that her study of occupation is responding to a number of works (including John Dower’s *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific* [1987]) that credit the particularly brutal actions of American soldiers against Japanese during combat in the Pacific to racism. As opposed to these emotional instances of race-informed actions, “military planners [of occupation] acknowledged culture and ethnicity from a stance of balanced evaluation meant to inform objective military decisions; they did not use impassioned racist sentiments to drive action and provide an excuse for wanton violence.” The military leaders’ “complex, educated, sophisticated, mindful consideration of identity, race, and ethnicity during planning and execution of the mission” is the focus of Short’s work, and the reports she references provide a window into the attempts of the officers to understand the unique place of Okinawans in comparison to Japanese (p. 13). But without a clear explanation in the introduction of what concepts like “race,” “culture,” and the more ambiguous “ethnicity” meant during World War II (and more specifically for the military), it is difficult for Short to make a convincing case. For example, despite careful analysis of Okinawan cultural and racial identity, military planners clung to (racist) preconceived notions of Okinawans, and the “destitute state of the Okinawans invoked a paternalistic, racially driven feeling of superiority” among soldiers who read the *Ryukyu Handbook* (p. 78). Did it matter that soldiers and planners still held these ideas, even if they did not contribute to racial violence during occupation? A thorough discussion of the implications of racial superiority would make for a more nuanced understanding of how race functioned in this particular operation.

The lingering racialized identities Americans bestowed on the Okinawans also contributes to a point in need of clarification: Okinawan agency in shaping their own identity. There are certainly instances of Okinawans successfully advocating for self-governance, but these appear to be the result of shifting top-down policies among the different military units. Furthermore, the necessity of survival during war had an impact on the future of Okinawan identity. Short’s statement that the Okinawans “became pawns” in the larger scheme of occupation indicates that a more parsed discussion of how and why the Okinawans worked within the system (and worked around the military’s racially informed decisions) would make for a stronger argument on the role of Okinawans in determining their own trajectory and identity (p. 123).

Despite the need for some more clarification in certain areas, *Uniquely Okinawan* is essential reading for anyone studying military-civilian relationships and policy during World War II. If read alongside Dayna Barnes's *Architects of Occupation: American Experts and Planning for Post-War Japan* (2017), a detailed description of the occupation of Okinawa is readily available to scholars of all levels and backgrounds. But *Uniquely Okinawan* stands alone as a fascinating study that could be easily integrated into graduate-level and professional military education courses.

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