



# **The Battle over Peleliu: Islander, Japanese, and American Memories of War (War, Memory, and Culture)**

*Stephen C. Murray*

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The expansionist Japanese empire annexed the inhabited archipelago of Palau in 1914. The airbase built on Peleliu Island became a target for attack by the United States in World War II. *The Battle over Peleliu* offers an ethnographic study of how Palau and Peleliu were transformed by warring great powers and further explores how their conflict is remembered differently by the three peoples who shared that experience.

Author Stephen C. Murray uses oral histories from Peleliu's elders to reconstruct the island's prewar way of life, offering a fascinating explanation of the role of land and place in island culture. To Palauans, history is conceived geographically, not chronologically. Land and landmarks are both the substance of history and the mnemonic triggers that recall the past. Murray then offers a detailed account of the 1944 US invasion against entrenched Japanese forces on Peleliu, a seventy-four-day campaign that razed villages, farms, ancestral cemeteries, beaches, and forests, and with them, many of the key nodes of memory and identity.

Murray also explores how Islanders' memories of the battle as shattering their way of life differ radically from the ways Japanese and Americans remember the engagement in their histories, memoirs, fiction, monuments, and tours of Peleliu. Determination to retrieve the remains of 11,000 Japanese soldiers from the caves of Peleliu has driven high-profile civic groups from across the Japanese political spectrum to the island. Contemporary Japan continues to debate pacifist, right-wing apologist, and other interpretations of its aggression in Asia and the Pacific. These disputes are exported to Peleliu, and subtly frame how Japanese commemoration portrays the battle in stone and ritual. Americans, victors in the battle, return to the archipelago in far fewer numbers. For them, the conflict remains controversial but is most often submerged into the narrative of "the good war."

*The Battle over Peleliu* is a study of public memory, and the ways three peoples swept up in conflict struggle to create a common understanding of the tragedy they share.

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