



Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior

John Man

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The first major pop history of the Japanese stealth assassins, John Man's *Ninja* is a meticulously researched, entertaining blend of mythology, anthropology, travelogue, and history of the legendary shadow warriors.

Spies, assassins, saboteurs, and secret agents, Ninja have become the subject of countless legends that continue to enthrall us in modern movies, video games, and comics—and their arts are still practiced in our time by dedicated acolytes who study the ancient techniques.

Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior, by British historian John Man, is as colorful and intriguing as the warriors it so vividly brings to life.

Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior Details

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Author : John Man

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From Reader Review Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior for online ebook

Ben says

Ninja reads less like a "1000 Year" history and more like an extended Esquire article. Not necessarily a bad thing - it's a moderately interesting, breezy book. But if you're looking for a comprehensive history of the concept of ninjas dating from feudal Japan to the present, look elsewhere. As a good case in point, one sentence begins as follows: "To cram four centuries into a sentence..."

So what is covered by the rest of the 300 pages? Some anecdotes about famous Japanese warriors, rulers, aspiring unifiers, samurai, shogun, and assassins; some "ninja wisdom" akin to the seven secrets of highly successful ninjas; and some extended discussions in the last few chapters about how James Bond brought ninja into the pop culture in the 1960's and how one Japanese "ninja" continued to fight WWII in the jungles of Manila until 1972.

Joe says

Pretty good book. The author has a tendency to conflate any military action involving the Japanese and deception into being "ninja-like" but it definitely covered the history of the Koga/Iga region well. He does capture the chaos and shifting allegiances of feudal Japan, although he tries to push the idea that ninja regions were Athenian democracies pretty hard.

So, long and short, I'm skeptical about a lot of it, but it's a ripping read.

Stephanie says

(Originally posted on my blog, Misprinted Pages.)

[Note: I want your questions about real-life ninjas! Please include them in the comments here or on my blog, and I'll try to pass them on to author John Man to answer.]

Our idea of the quintessential ninja is a little short of historical reality. In fact, what does the average person really know besides that they dress in all black and are masters of stealth and assassination techniques? They didn't use magic, they couldn't walk on water, and their primary goal was not to kill or be killed.

John Man's new book *Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior* traces this order through history — from the first proto-ninjas to the true ninjas' rising prevalence in Iga and Kōga in Japan and their fall and final years. Much of the foundation of ninjutsu (the way of life) came from Chinese origins, and the ninja were more concerned with survival than their flashier counterparts, the samurai, who chose self-sacrifice and would commit seppuku, or suicide by disembowelment, rather than face defeat. A ninja's objective involved gathering information and relaying it back to his employer, where it could be of use — and that couldn't happen if ninjas charged in on enemy territory, prepared to die.

Black wasn't even the necessary go-to color for a ninja. Brown worked just fine, too, and dark blue was preferable under moonlight.

They weren't sell-outs who took any job as long as the price suited them. Ninjas believed in a cause. Many doubled as samurai (and vice versa), but they did more than sneak into castles night after night. They were farmers who built up other expertise, such as medicine. When peace took hold and their occupation was in danger of vanishing completely, that's when they opened their teachings to the world and started writing them down.

Some of the most fascinating aspects of Man's book regard the myths and legends — the stories and rumored ninja tricks and equipment — which he analyzes and debunks. For example, he examines the falsity of how ninjas could tell time by looking at the eyes of a cat, dispels the belief that ninjas could walk on water with special shoes called “water spiders,” and picks apart the tale of the resourceful ninja dwarf Ukifune Jinnai.

The best part is saved for last: the story of the “last of the ninjas,” Onoda Hiroo, who survived in the jungle for 30 years, believing World War II hadn't ended.

Ninja is quite the meandering history book, however. Sometimes the writing is utterly engrossing, and you can't pull away from the page. Other times, you'll find yourself needing a timeline or a sidenote that reminds you how certain sections are relevant to ninja history. That's usually when the book strays from Man's unique and compelling interview reporting — a first-hand investigation complete with observations and honest reflections as the author learns from his visits and conversations with sources — and turns into a textbook. Ninja switches back and forth between being an amazing reference, perfect for pop-culture enthusiasts who want an accessible dose of history, to a dry academic read.

Bottom line: I greatly enjoyed my time with Ninja, but it's not as much of a direct feed on ninjas as I expected. It can be fun, but it digresses too much into battle stories and other historical developments that the author only loosely connects back to the subject at hand. Readers will likely feel lost at times.

What I liked: The emphasis on first-hand reporting, discrediting (or recounting) myths and legends, and the in-depth profile of Onoda Hiroo.

What I wasn't expecting: A lot of talk of “ninjas” who weren't really ninjas.

Grade: C+

This book was provided by the publisher for honest review.

Charles Ames says

Ninjas were originally a community of farmer-warriors in Medieval Central Japan who banded together in order to maintain their independence from neighboring warlords. Over time they became so effective at infiltration, information gathering, survival, and guerrilla warfare that they became the most sought-after mercenaries in later efforts to unify Japan.

The author takes care to contrast the doggedly practical, survive-at-all-cost ethos of these Ninja with the comparatively symbolic, die-with-honor way of their Samurai contemporaries. Faced with certain defeat, a Samurai would commit suicide in order to avoid dishonorable capture or death at the hands of his enemy,

whereas the Ninja would escape, evade, or even endure capture in order to complete his mission.

Most surprising, the author credits Ian Fleming with resurrecting the Ninja as a popular image, both directly by including masked, sword-wielding (i.e. mythical) Ninjas in early James Bond books and movies, and indirectly by casting Bond himself as a Western version of the historical Ninja.

Indeed, reading the descriptions of what is known about actual Ninja training and conduct, I couldn't help but picture Jason Bourne -- professional, pragmatic, supremely skilled, chameleon-like, silent, deadly. Apparently, the Ninja were the original secret agents.

Rebecca says

Like all history books that pull out one aspect of history to talk about, I think you could get more out of it if you are familiar with the general history of the time and place. But it isn't really necessary. It is interesting to see how and why the ninja came about. Everyone has heard of ninjas and knows the myths but to me the real history is actually more interesting even if it doesn't make for as action packed a movie as the stories. I liked learning about how they were farmers and how they had their own code to live by. There is some general information and some very interesting stories about specific ninja actions. It starts at the very beginning, before the word ninja was used, right up to the present where you can see how people are trying to keep the ninja traditions alive. There were parts that I was less interested in because he starts talking about his own personal journey or the James Bond ninja connection. And sometimes it does go a little vague because the history just isn't known. There were also times when I wasn't sure we were talking about ninjas anymore because I was having trouble following the line that connected the story being related back to the subject at hand. I found the book interesting in general but there were times when I felt a little lost trying to put the stories in some sort of historical context because there were just so many names and so much time involved.

Lauren Albert says

I hovered between a 2 and a 3 on this. I found him glib and sometimes condescending towards his subject. He also meandered into personal anecdotes related to his travels and research. As in the book I read on the Samurai recently, I felt the subject got short shrift.

Cameron Meiswinkel says

The multitude of names and places was a tad confusing. It took me a year to read "Ninja" so I will admit that my opinion may have differed if I had read it all in one sitting. Having said that, the book really shines when it details the beginnings of ninja culture. The "How to be a ninja" sections were great, as well as the chapters about the civil war.

Megan says

An easy to read brief history of Ninjas. The author switches between history text and researcher's travelogue occasionally which makes certain parts of the ninja story more real (ie the old guy in Japan with an attic full

of old armor) and relieves the Japanese history newbie from to many names from Japanese history. Some of the more interesting parts are the modern legacy of the ninja (there is even a chapter on James Bond).

David says

I have little to add to reviews already written by Stephanie, Charles Ames and Michael.

I found it particularly interesting to learn about the Sugendo religious sect and the extremes of their training, members of which trained along side some aspiring ninjas. Also intriguing was the historical information about the Medieval Japanese proto-democracies of Iga and Koga, the ninja homelands. I felt a little disappointed to read that the lineage of Master Masaaki Hatsumi may not be 100% genuine. Finally, I would agree with many other reviewers that the outstanding chapter in this book is the story of survival of Onoda Hiroo, the man perhaps the most deserving of the title "the last ninja".

A.j. says

Excellent history of the Ninja, but I think the author may have bitten off more than he could chew with this book. Trying to tie the growth of the ninja clans into the other threads of feudal Japanese history with little to no background info on the history of the shogun and the samurai makes for a VERY confusing read for anyone not already familiar with Japan. If you have read anything else regarding the period, then Ninja is an excellent companion piece. If not, the sheer number of names and places can be very overwhelming...an appendix of famous names and clans would have been very helpful.

Bill Chamis says

It made me laugh just saying the title in that English-dubbed ninja voice. The author, however, is not interested in the "myth" of the ninja except as a cultural artifact. Although the author relies on secondary research and interviews with descendants of some of the ninja families, he seems to know his stuff (hard to say, of course, as I am no expert), and he writes well. The best section was a chapter at the end about the Japanese soldier who hid out in the Philippines after WWII over and didn't come out until the 1970s.

Mike Stolfi says

O.K., so it's an academic approach to learning some of the truths to a secretive society. I liked the debunking, but if you're a fan of the group you're ego won't get much stroking for being a fan. If you're familiar with the topic there's not that much to get lost on, there's some conjecture but the thing to keep in mind is that he's mostly doing historical research & groups evolve/mutate/change over time & having studied Taejitsu I'll say what is now may not have been then & vice versa. It wasn't a bad book.

Popzara Press says

John Man's Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior will likely disappoint those looking for a proper history of one of Japan's most famous cultural exports, as there's simply too much conjecture with the subject matter to consider it reliable. Despite the premise of demystifying what the term 'ninja' has become in western culture, Man freely uses it as an adjective, applying it to subjects that might not qualify - James Bond gets an inordinate amount of attention here. While there's plenty of interesting bits here for those interested in Japanese history, even this too often comes across like a superficial documentary on cable television; one can almost hear the voice-over narration and sound effects added to still pictures already. Those expecting an exhaustive and meticulously researched account on the subject may want to look elsewhere.

Ninja: 1,000 Years of the Shadow Warrior Review on Popzara

Lionkhan-sama says

Really enjoyed reading this book.

It opened my eyes dramatically to what Japan has witnessed over the past few centuries.
Japanese history is absolutely CRAZY! (not in a good way unfortunately)

This book provided incredible insight, into an extremely controversial topic.
I am eager to now read more on the subject and subjects similar to this one.

Michael says

This book is a good "beginner book" on ninjas. It hits certain key points throughout the history of ninjas and helps you better understand myth vs. fact. I guess what sticks out to me though is when the author talks about his travels in Japan to try and understand the history behind ninjas the subject of the book becomes more about him and less about the topic he is writing about. Don't get me wrong, it's not that it totally destroys the book, but I could have done without some of the ramblings and commentary he has about the people he is talking to for information in Japan.
