



Jeremy A. Yellen. *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War.* Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 306 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-3554-7.

Reviewed by Michael Barnhart (Stony Brook University)

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2019)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Blind Men and Elephants

In his book, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*, Jeremy A. Yellen sets out to describe exactly what that sphere was during its brief life from 1940 to 1945. His findings declare that it was much like the elephant of the fable—experienced and interpreted quite differently by different actors and over different times. The result is a study based on broad and deep research and a conclusion that is persuasive, if perhaps incomplete.

The sphere was proclaimed by the colorful, energetic, and erratic Japanese minister of Foreign Affairs Matsuoka Ysuke in August 1940. Matsuoka meant it to replace the Western-imposed liberal-capitalist-imperial order that had dominated the East Asian state system inaugurated nearly a century earlier. What the sphere was is not clear. What it was in operation is not clear at all. Yellen offers an insightful survey of past interpretations. Western scholars first saw it as a thin veneer covering and justifying Japan's aggressive appropriation of resources from the sphere's member nations, barely distinguishable from the West's exploitation. Revisionists, many from Japan, argued that the sphere was just what Matsuoka claimed it to be: an overthrow of an oppressive system, a vehicle for Asian liberation. Still others saw the sphere as a nebulous but real expression of pan-Asianism, with Japan in the leading role.

Throughout his account, Yellen takes pains to point

out that, to its various interpreters, the sphere was all of these. He is particularly good at examining the evolution of these various visions of the sphere over time. As he implicitly recognizes, however, the devil was in the details. His book, perhaps in consequence, is divided into two sections, the first focused on “the imagined sphere” and the second on how various Asian collaborators, primarily in Burma and the Philippines, actually used the idea of the sphere as a means to accommodate themselves to the realities of a Japanese military occupation and to employ that idea to forward their own ends.

While Yellen tries to maintain an analytical partition between the realm of the imagined and the hard facts of accommodation, reality often bleeds through. The sphere's very origins, for example, owed much to Matsuoka's fear of German assertion of rights over the colonies of a defeated France and Holland and a Britain incapable of adequately defending its Asian possessions. His famous whirlwind trip to Europe in the spring of 1941 was intended to secure German—and Soviet—recognition of the sphere. Much of the same motivation led him to actively mediate a nascent war between Thailand and Indochina.

Matsuoka was driven by a vision, too. He saw a world dominated by the great powers, each with its own sphere. Germany and the USSR would divide Europe. Britain would retain its empire. The Western Hemisphere

would belong to the United States. Japan would have East Asia. But whatever actual sphere Matsuoka meant to build ended with his forced resignation in July 1941 and the climactic events of the following few months.

The sphere may have been symbolically orphaned thereafter, but it had plenty of uncles. Some academics tried to articulate an “organic” set of international relations in Asia. Others bemoaned these efforts as grappling with smoke. While Yellen seems sometimes reluctant to grapple with realities in Tokyo, he does offer an illuminating and insightful treatment of Prime Minister Tj Hideki’s ramrodding creation of a Greater East Asia Ministry over the furious objections of career diplomats in the Foreign Ministry. While this new ministry, created in November 1942, might have offered a useful anchor for what the sphere might have looked like on the ground, its role proved as ephemeral as Matsuoka’s original idea, as the fast deteriorating war situation for Japan relegated it largely to bystander status.

In the meantime, Japan had to do something with the territories it had seized since Pearl Harbor. That something was overwhelmingly defined by the Imperial Army. Its officers, in Tokyo or within the sphere, made no bones about their priority: to direct the use of resources toward Japan’s “total war” effort, regardless of what visions anyone else might have and through whatever means necessary. Yellen is persuasive when he argues that Tj probably meant for the Greater East Asia Ministry to centralize direction of this effort. If that indeed was Tj’s vision, it proved as imaginary as anyone else’s.

If the sphere was wisps of visions in Tokyo, however, membership in it was stark reality for the occupied. Yellen focuses on two case studies. There are fascinating parallels. Burma dwelled in the shadowland between colonial and dominion status in the British Empire. The Philippines was under American control but with a firm date set for independence, a date set aside by Japan’s victories of early 1942. Neither country boasted valuable natural resources. So both escaped the heaviest hand of Japan’s total war extractions. Both hoped to parlay the partnership status Japan might give them into greater prominence, or at least recognition, on the global stage.

Perhaps more important, leaders in both sought to

consolidate their personal standings and power under the occupation, and leaders in both countries moved quickly into collaboration. But they did so from quite different perspectives. In the Philippines, President Manuel Quezon urged collaboration upon his colleagues even as he left for the United States, so certain was he of an eventual American victory. Those less fortunate who stayed behind felt likewise, and this assumption deeply colored their experience of collaboration, a factor Yellen might have emphasized more.

Burmese leaders did not universally assume a British victory, or even hope for one. They were, to revert to visions for a moment, much more tempted by the possibility that, win or lose, Japan’s was a war that might see their liberation even at the hands of a returning Britain. They were much more energetic in attempting to enlist Japan’s aid in creating the foundations of such an independence, from training a Burmese national army (the Philippines already had one, and it had fought alongside Americans against the Japanese) to creating a national bank (though circulating a real Burmese currency proved a bridge too far).

Leaders from both attended the grand Greater East Asia Conference in November 1943 and sent representatives to its hapless follow-up in April 1945. Yellen offers detailed and illuminating portraits of these meetings and waxes long on how—or whether—they offered a rival vision to or reflection of the Wilsonian language permeating the well-known Atlantic Charter of the West and, as Yellen and contemporaries termed it, the Pacific Charter arising from the earlier conference. But it may be more relevant that while Burma praised the Pacific document, Filipinos were far more reserved, dubious that Japan would deliver or, certainly by 1945, whether it could. It was ironic that leaders from both would be dinner partners in Sugamo Prison after the war.

By then, the sphere was worse than a wisp or an illusion. The Japanese ambitions that had given rise to it had resulted in massive devastation in both Burma and the Philippines, not to mention Japan itself. It is no small irony that, after the war, Japan recreated itself as a model “pacifist power,” while Burma would come to be dominated by an army that the Co-Prosperity Sphere had done much to create.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Michael Barnhart. Review of Yellen, Jeremy A., *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2019.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54609>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.