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The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War

By Jeremy A. Yellen

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History, often said to have been written by the winners, has not been kind to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere (GEACPS)—Japan’s effort to “use our power to create the world’s new order” in the words of then-Prime Minister Konoe in 1940 (3). With the West in apparent decline, and American and British dominance in jeopardy, Japan’s imperial dreams expanded to centrality in international affairs: beginning with the liberation of the peoples of the Orient from the shackles of Western Europe and ridding the region of “the white race bloc” (4). By 1941, the GEACPS dominated discourse and became the sphere’s central goal until Japan’s final defeat four years later.

For this impressive analytical history of the period, author Jeremy Yellenan—assistant professor of Japanese studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong—conducted extensive archival research in Japan, Burma, the Philippines, Britain, and the United States. He sees the GEACPS as a sincere attempt to envision a new political order for the region during a time of global crisis. Although highly oppressive and domineering, the GEACPS had the active cooperation of nationalist elites across the region—“patriotic collaborators” whose motives, liberation from the colonialism of Great Britain (India and Burma) and the United States (the Philippines)—were quite different from those of Japan (20).

Yellen’s research shows Japan’s fear the Nazi regime would expand into Asia was key to its decision to sign on to the Tripartite Pact with Italy and Germany. As Germany gained ascendancy over much of Europe, influential members of Japan’s foreign policy establishment began to suspect Berlin would seek to control the French and Dutch colonies in East Asia. Forming an alliance with Germany was a way to preclude this, with the pact not simply an agreement among fascist-leaning states. This choice explains the apparent contradiction between Japan entering into an alliance with two Western states even as it sponsored a regional order based on anti-Westernism.

Another surprise to emerge from Yellen’s research was how little thought Japan had given to the operation of the new empire. Critics pointed out the only difference was that Japan would be the ruler rather than the West. Only after Pearl Harbor, and more than a year after Konoe announced the creation of the GEACPS, was there an attempt to consider how the new empire should be constructed.

In early 1942, an investigative committee was created and charged with developing a 10-year plan for greater East Asia. Although there was consensus that Japan would stand at the apex of this imagined community, major differences of opinion existed on which component

parts were to be protectorates, which were to be directly controlled by Japan, and the degree to which they should be free to interact directly with each other to meet their national needs as opposed to going through Tokyo. Yellen observes there was the naïve expectation Japan, without first winning the hearts and minds of the occupied territories, could create a subservient relationship.

The bulk of Yellen's analysis focuses on Burma and the Philippines. Each country had received a degree of political autonomy from its colonizers and both were able to maintain a degree of independence within the GEACPS since policy makers in Tokyo saw no long-term benefit to direct colonial control of either. Elites in each country wanted independence, and while the Burmese actively accommodated Japanese forces to ensure liberation from the British Empire, the Filipinos envisioned themselves in partnership with a caretaker regime: cooperating to secure gains from Japan or, should the United States return, a grant of independence they saw as inevitable.

Meanwhile, the elites made use of their limited independence to begin state building. In Burma, the Japanese military helped create a defense establishment, even introducing its rigorous training standards to the Burma National Army. As Japan suffered reverses on the battlefield, its demands on its colonies grew, even as by 1943 it was ready to promise full independence. This proved insufficient, since the territories could see which way the battlefield wind was blowing. The Philippine government resisted pressure to declare war on the United States, and the Burmese military—in a stunning defeat for Japanese efforts—revolted against Japan and courted aid from its former British overlords.

In an improbable twist of fate at war's end, the nationalist elites found themselves in Sugamo Prison, along with Class A war criminals such as former Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki. Isolated from them, the erstwhile collaborators held spirited conversations—in English, their only common language—about who was more understanding, generous, and democratic, the Americans or the British (206).

Military officers will find much to ponder in this well-written book—how idealism can come athwart reality and even the best-laid plans can go astray, how allies may prove illusory, and how victory does not mean peace. Treaties were hardly signed when the Cold War turned areas of decolonization into theaters of conflict between liberal democratic and communist power blocs.