



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 Lee Eysturliid (Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy)

Published on H-Empire (April, 2021)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Professor Yellen's book on the intellectual political foundations of Japan's so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere is a welcome addition to a rather short list of literature, especially in English, on Japan's empire in the Second World War. Yellen sets out to correct the generally held view of the Sphere as an integral and well-thought-out part of Japanese grand strategy for the war. It now turns out that this was not the case, but rather that Japanese leadership—military, political, and intellectual—held various visions of the concept in the years leading up to the expanded war in the Pacific. These competing visions, and the lack of apparent will to ruthlessly make it happen, mean it was never an ideology but more an addition to Japan's "total war" effort. Having established the underlying arguments for the Sphere in Japanese thinking, Yellen explores the Sphere's impact during and immediately after the war in two imperial targets, the Philippines and Burma. Both had independence movements before the war and both made active use of the Co-Prosperity Sphere for national ends.

The study is not a military history; there is little of the actual war in the book. There is also little of the nuts-and-bolts that concerned imperial government except in the contact between Japanese and colonial governments or individuals. It is

also not a study of the daily lives of people at the time and in different states. Of great service is Yellen's focus on the interplay of early twentieth-century thinking on the place of states within the international structure and how a state, in this case Japan, created or justified a reality of expansion within the propagandistic context of a pan-Asian war of "liberation." Throughout the study Yellen introduces the numerous Japanese leaders who announced the Co-Prosperity Sphere as a combined effort to remove the physical and intellectual domination of the West (including the United States) while apparently replacing it with a more liberating, pan-Japanese focus.

Perhaps the greatest Japanese architect involved in creating the Co-Prosperity Sphere was the foreign minister Matsuoka Yōsuke, who may have actually coined the phrase. Two factors come into play. Matsuoka appears, at least in part, to have been keen to draw the Germans into alliance (the Tripartite Pact) for support but more importantly to preempt the Germans from claiming British and French colonial possessions before Japan could. Added to this was his belief that the post-World War I international order was at an end, and a more realistic system of regional powers was emerging. In this new vision of a world based on a few powerful states dominating the world's

several regions, Japan would control China and Southeast Asia. The idea of the Sphere as a resource supply, to secure Japan's "self-existence and self-defense," was a creation of the military. It should also be noted that Germany's relatively cool reaction to the early success of the Japanese against the British, especially at Singapore, upset Nazi notions of "racial" hierarchy, in that a "yellow race" had achieved victory.

As late as mid-1941 numerous Japanese organizations were debating the structure and actual intent of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. The ominously titled the Total War Research Institute researched the topic in its title to determine what would be needed in such a conflict. In January 1942, they created a document that would initially establish the Sphere, while the other groups from the Naval Intelligence Division and the National Policy Research Association created competing plans. Despite the evident, if not emerging, realities that a war with the United States must bring, bickering over what the Sphere meant and how to manage it continued. Even the newly centralized authority under Prime Minister Tōjō did little to give focus. However, Anglo-American imperialism was to be replaced with the lofty Japanese concept of *hakkō ichiu*, or "universal brotherhood." This recasting of "Japanism" failed to grab the populations of occupied territories that had been granted little autonomy and were being tapped for resources.

Similar problems of focus existed in both the Philippines and Burma. Neither of these colonial states had the ability to assert itself in the new situation. However, the Philippines had something like a promise from the United States for independence in the near future, while Burma did not, and where Filipino politicians were generally a more cautious group, some of the Burmese leaders were willing to fight. This said, the conquest by the Japanese in 1942 had leaders in both states maneuvering to become what Yellen calls "Patriotic Collaborators." They were to be participants at the Greater East Asian Conference in November of 1943, in

Tokyo. With the war effort going poorly, Japan changed tack and looked to treat the forty-plus states at the meeting as nominally independent, albeit under the guidance of a benevolent hand. Later, the Joint Declaration attempted to do the same thing by adopting the phrase "abolish racial discrimination," which the military balked at but other government leaders cynically saw as necessary to win over "public sentiment" within the Sphere.

As Yellen correctly points out in his excellent conclusion, the "Co-Prosperity Sphere witnessed conflict, contradictory visions and processes" (p. 210). This ideal never really provided a reason why non-Japanese peoples would want a place in the new order as lesser partners in a Japan-centric economic system. Yellen's notion that Hitler never answered this question for the German empire either is too benign. Hitler did not need an answer; he had a solution, and that was the extermination or displacement of peoples and their wholesale replacement by German colonists. The Japanese never envisioned a Pacific peopled by themselves. Written in an engaging if at times instructional style, the book at hand is singular in its ability to introduce the reader to the ideas and failures of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. It is reasonable in length and eminently readable; it has been exhaustively researched and makes clear that the author is well versed in the Japanese historiography. The reviewer strongly recommends this book to anyone that teaches or has a strong interest in the Second World War, especially in the Pacific, as well as the intellectual nature of empire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

Citation: Lee Eysturlid. Review of Yellen, Jeremy A. *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. April, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55164>



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