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Book Reviews

Imperial Eclipse: Japan's Strategic Thinking About Continental Asia Before August 1945. By Yukiko Koshiro. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 311 pp. $39.95 (cloth).

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This is a hugely ambitious, dense and at times difficult to follow a book. Those not versed in the history of World War II will have hard time appreciating the magnitude of many of the author's claims. For the scholarly debate, however, the study is valuable as well as provocative. It openly challenges many of the conventional narratives.

Professor Koshiro challenges us to rethink how we evaluate the strategic thinking of Japan, especially in the final years of World War II. She sets out to prove that though Japanese thinking in these years is often stereotyped as panicky, desperate, and bereft of any rational planning, the opposite is the case. Drawing on a great range of primary sources, Koshiro shows that the Japanese leading circles foresaw the future domination of the CCP on mainland China, expected the Soviet entry into the war, and organized their war-end strategy around an anticipated US–Soviet rivalry. Much of the book reads as a story of their surprising strategic acumen. Koshiro's ultimate goal, however, is not to exalt the wizardly qualities of the Japanese army planners and diplomats. As the last two chapters reveal, the author is not a nationalist historian (I recommend beginning with these two chapters). Rather, she wants to emphasize that the Japanese leadership engaged in a risky and callous game of trying to play the major powers against each other, and that the Soviet factor was the centerpiece of this strategy.

Bringing the Soviet Union and the Russo-Japanese connection into the spotlight is the major objective of this book. Doing so allows Koshiro to offer new and often bold interpretations. For example, regarding Japan's decision to surrender, the author holds that the decisive factor was not the atomic bombs, but the Soviet entry on 9 August. This has been noted by other scholars, but Koshiro's interpretation differs radically from that of the "Soviet shock" school. She argues that the Japanese planners anticipated and in fact welcomed the Soviet engagement in the war. With this they hoped to augment future US–Soviet rivalry and thus retain influence in the postwar world. The same logic supposedly guided Japan's passivity in protecting Far Eastern territories such as Manchuko or Korea against a possible Soviet attack. Put differently, the Japanese planners were not fooled by Stalin; they did not naively hope for Soviet meditation, nor, as the standard narrative holds, did they wish to engage in a final battle with the United States.

In addition to her focus on the war's end, Koshiro offers a new conceptualization of World War II as a whole and Japan's role in it. Indeed, she invents a new name for the war, the "Eurasian-Pacific War." This is to amplify that the conflict always had two dimensions—the continental and the pacific front. The Soviet Union was supposedly the critical nexus that connected the two for the Japanese. In her meticulously researched chapters on Russo-Japanese relations, we learn that Japan had much deeper and more amiable relations with the Soviets than with any other Western nation prior to 1945 (particularly the Americans). The Japanese apparently even looked up to the Soviet Union at times, and hoped that their relationship would help them bridge the East–West divide. The Russian presence in the Far East was considered natural, and its citizens were part and parcel of the Japanese pan-Asian vision. For this reason, Koshiro

refutes the notion that World War II in Asia was a race war or an anti-White war. The Japanese did not struggle with Whites, she argues, but with Anglo-Saxons. However, neither was the war fought for Asian liberation. The strategic neglect of Japanese colonial territories at the dusk of Japanese empire clearly demonstrates this.

Eventually, the real problem for Koshiro is that the Soviet Union and Eurasia were completely *eclipsed* by the Pacific War narrative after 1945. This had disastrous consequences according to the author. Instead of facing up to the reality of Japan's end-of-war strategy, its disregard for the fate for Koreans and people of Manchuko, and Japan's co-responsibility for initiating the Cold War in Asia, the country engaged in historical amnesia that made postwar reconciliation very difficult. Koshiro blames the United States and Japanese political elites equally for the outcome. But she does not spare postwar Marxist and Liberal intellectuals either; they also focused too narrowly on the Sino-Chinese side of the war without giving due consideration to the Soviet Union.

I applaud the author for providing us with a fresh and hitherto missing perspective. I also agree with her argument about Japan's second leaving of Asia after 1945 and the need to move beyond the US–Japan-centric interpretations to correct this. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to embrace the work as a whole. Even taken at face value, the evidence presented does not convincingly prove many of the author's larger theses. For example, in demonstrating the depth of the Soviet–Japanese connection, she discusses the appeal of Soviet ideology. Her argument gives the impression that Soviet Communism had a great following in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s, including in the military. As evidence she mentions that 99 Japanese soldiers deserted to either the Soviet or CCP army between 1931 and 1942. I find, however, that 99 men in an army of several million proves rather the opposite. I also think that Koshiro could have as easily emphasized that, despite its appeal amongst the soldiers of the lower ranks, the Communist movement was still a fringe movement represented by a clandestine party, which never claimed more than 1,000 members in its pre-1945 existence, or that an almost hysterical anti-Communist stance shared by many influential elites and bureaucrats functioned as a powerful anti-Soviet repellent. Koshiro chooses to de-emphasize these facts in her mission to build up the Soviet–Japanese case. A similar approach in this regard to countries like Britain or Germany would yield similar results. They too, had a long-term relationship with Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and had a huge impact on its thinking.

My second criticism concerns the book's overreliance on conjecture. Again in her discussion of the Russo-Japanese relations, we learn a great deal about the Japanese interest in Russia, its people, literature, and overall culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. The implication is that this influenced the Japanese strategists' approach to the Soviet Union during the war period. But did it really? And how? In a similar vein, an observant reader will realize that Koshiro describes the thinking of only certain elements of the Japanese military and civilian leadership. She never shows how their thinking was transmitted to others and to what degree these men truly impacted the ultimate decision-making of the state.

In the final analysis, the determined effort to counteract the established narratives leads the author to overstate her arguments on too many occasions. Instead of offering a new approach that might replace the old one, she comes up with an account which itself will be challenged on many issues. I also find paradoxical that the book could be interpreted as a confirmation of one of the oldest and most commonplace narratives about the Japanese state and its behavior in the final phase of the war: a narrative of highly fragmented and decentralized leadership atop the army and the government which held many conflicting visions, understandings of reality, and strategies in a rapidly deteriorating situation. The thinking Koshiro describes was only part of this general make-up.