

BOOK REVIEWS

Imperial Eclipse: Japan's Strategic Thinking about Continental Asia before August 1945

Yukiko Koshiro

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As Yukiko Koshiro appropriately notes at the outset of her striking new study, the Asia-Pacific component of World War II comes with many labels, each associated with particular audiences. 'Pacific War' is the preferred term for most Americans, who focus on the fight between Japanese and American forces in the Pacific. 'Fifteen Years' War' is used by Japanese Marxists to describe a much longer series of battles begun on the Asian continent in 1931 and expanding to wider destruction through 1945. 'Greater East Asia War' is the label of choice of the Japanese right, which continues to imagine a battle for 'liberation' of Asian peoples from Western imperialism.

Koshiro's proposed alternative, 'Eurasian-Pacific War', seems calculated to benefit American audiences in particular, whose focus on the 'Pacific', she perceptively notes, has been consciously promoted since 1945 to accentuate the US role in defeating Japan and guaranteeing peace. But even Japanese audiences, who rarely view the engagement as a mere US–Japan struggle, will benefit from the 'Eurasian-Pacific' label. For Koshiro argues not merely that Japan's war extended beyond the Pacific. Rather, she

forcefully demonstrates that even as her forces spread throughout the Pacific, Japanese strategic priorities remained squarely centered on the Asian continent. This had critical implications not only for wartime planning but, more dramatically, for Japan's ultimate decision to surrender.

Central to Koshiro's vision of a 'Eurasian-Pacific War' is a novel emphasis on several centuries of Russo-Japanese ties. While we have a robust body of Japanese-language scholarship on such ties, the long history of Russo-Japanese relations rarely holds primacy of place even in Japanese analyses of the road to the Second World War. Determined to refute the American-centric accent upon the nineteenth-century 'promise' of Commodore Perry, early twentieth-century Christian missionaries and 'gift' of American peace and democracy after 1945, Koshiro offers an equally strident alternative history with Russia at the center. Long before Perry, a choice few Japanese subjects spent serious time in Russia (Denbei and Kodayu are the best known). Russian revolutionary thought attracted widespread interest in early twentieth-century Japan. And, in contrast to America's elitist missionaries, Koshiro argues, the predominantly working-class expatriate Russians in interwar Japan blended much better with the local population. The suggestion that general public sentiment leaned more toward Russia than to any other Western power in early twentieth-century Japan ignores, of course, two critical realities. British advice and support outweighed that of any other power in Japan's latter nineteenth-century modernization drive. And the First World War brought the United States, not Russia, to the center of global politics and culture.

Where Koshiro's coverage of Japanese sentiment for Russia is instructive, however, is in her conclusions about official Japanese attitudes. There may never have been overwhelming public sympathy for Russia in early twentieth-century Japan. But from her meticulous reading of published and unpublished sources of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Defense Agency, Imperial General Headquarters, Korea Governor General's Office and Army General Staff, Koshiro highlights a Japanese military establishment sophisticated in its assessments and realistic in its goals. If James Crowley long ago stressed a reasoned 'quest for autonomy' among Japanese military elites (Crowley, 1966), Koshiro accentuates measured deliberation over continental empire as central to Japanese strategic planning.

Analyses of the final year of war typically highlight Japanese desperation: anxious planning for a final allied assault, panic over possible Soviet entry into the war, and scrambling to protect the Imperial House. Koshiro

reveals, by contrast, consistent and judicious attention to the changing geopolitical map of Asia. By the end of 1944, Japanese military authorities recognized the power of the Communist Party in China and its independence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. While realizing their slipping colonial authority and the growing likelihood of their own defeat, they increasingly looked beyond defeat to the geopolitical possibilities of postwar Asia. Likely US-Soviet rivalry, in particular, seemed to carry hope for continued Japanese influence in its former colonial territories after the war.

In light of such thinking, Moscow's formal entry into the war against Japan on 9 August 1945 becomes for Koshiro the decisive thrust toward Japanese surrender. Unlike earlier emphases on Soviet belligerence (Hasegawa, 2006), Koshiro accentuates not Japanese surprise but relief on August 9. For military planners who had counted on US-Soviet rivalry to preserve Japanese authority after the war, the Potsdam Proclamation of 26 July 1945 read ominously like an American bid to assume sole responsibility for fashioning a postwar world. Only with the formal Soviet entry into the war did Japanese planners see any possibility of a check on postwar American power.

As it turns out, the American role in fashioning a new postwar Asia was larger than anyone ever anticipated in wartime Japan. And that supremacy helped generate an overwhelmingly American-centric narrative of the history of the 'Pacific War'. By accentuating the powerful continental strains of early twentieth-century Japanese policy-making, however, Koshiro adds critical depth to English-language scholarship on Japanese wartime planning. This is a must-read for all serious students of the Second World War in the Asia/Pacific.

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