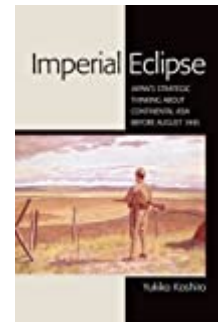


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Yukiko Koshiro. *Imperial Eclipse: Japan's Strategic Thinking about Continental Asia before August 1945.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. xvi + 311 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5180-5.



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The standard narrative of World War II recounts the irrational Japanese refusal to surrender until the use of atomic weapons and the Soviet entry into the war convinced Japanese leaders to capitulate. The historian Yukiko Koshiro challenges this narrative in her book, *Imperial Eclipse: Japan's Strategic Thinking About Continental Asia before August 1945*. Koshiro, a professor in the College of International Relations at Nihon University in Japan, argues that Japanese actions in August 1945 fit logically into an established precedent of Japanese strategic thinking about Asia, and specifically the Soviet Union. Relying on surviving Japanese wartime diplomatic documents, military reports, Imperial General Headquarters records, and popular Japanese press articles, Koshiro asserts that Japanese leaders' wartime planning for the postwar era placed a heavy emphasis on the role of the Soviet Union. By demonstrating the prominence of the Soviet Union in Japanese thinking about Asia, Koshiro reaffirms the secondary importance of the United States and the Pacific War in Japanese strategic calculations before 1944.

Koshiro claims her work helps correct a cultural and scholarly legacy that writes continental Asia out of the story of World War II in the Pacific. She points to the name "Pacific War" as an example of the focus on

the U.S.-Japan conflict at the expense of acknowledging Japan's continental imperialism. Koshiro renames the conflict the "Eurasian-Pacific War" to correct this imbalance, which she says stems from the U.S. occupation of Japan and the creation of a narrative that absolved Japanese citizens from confronting their imperial past (p. 1). While this assertion neglects a growing body of excellent scholarship on World War II in China, *Imperial Eclipse* fills an important gap in historians' understanding by questioning assumptions about Japanese strategic thinking and Japan's cultural and diplomatic attitudes towards the Soviet Union.

The book is divided into four sections, each with one to three chapters. The first section looks at the place of Russia in prewar Japanese culture and strategy and "recovers the plausibility, among Japanese government planners and the educated public ... of a postwar Japan oriented toward the Soviet Union" (p. 15). These chapters show areas of cultural contact and admiration between the Soviet Union and Japan beginning in the early 1900s. Koshiro writes, "Far from hoping to build a 'pure' Asia by excluding the West, Japan aspired to demonstrate that their Eurasian empire could fuse East and West" (p. 72). Collaboration with Russia would legitimize Japan's brand of pan-Asianism among the international commu-

nity. This belief was evident in the Japanese affinity for Russian culture, Japan's decision not to ban Russian influences, and the broad appeal of communism to Japanese workers and intellectuals.

Section 2 of the book abruptly turns to an exploration of Japanese strategic thinking about postwar China and Korea in relation to the Soviet Union. In a significant policy shift, Japan formally recognized the Chinese Communist Party in April of 1944 when it realized Chinese communists could provide an effective counterweight to American and Soviet influence in postwar China. *Imperial Eclipse* reveals similar anxieties through an examination of Japanese strategic thinking about Korea. The book highlights Japanese fears about Soviet and Chinese influences in postwar Korea even though Japanese leaders determined that Korea's value to the empire made the alternative, Korean independence, unacceptable.

The final two sections of the book deal with Japan's strategic endgame in WWII with respect to the Soviet Union, and the postwar whitewashing of Japan's colonial legacy as the result of the Cold War. Koshiro rejects the assumption that Japan was ever desperate for Soviet mediation in the Pacific War. Contrary to the belief that the Soviet invasion of Manchuria prompted a Japanese surrender because it eliminated the prospect of Soviet mediation, Koshiro asserts that the Japanese had been expecting a Soviet attack since late 1944. Instead, the invasion of Manchuria faced only token resistance because the Japanese wanted the rapid Soviet advance to spark further competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Japan's leaders recognized the Soviet-American tension and calculated possible outcomes with respect to China, Korea, and Japan's postwar future. Some intellectuals and political leaders expected to use this competition to negotiate tangible postwar benefits for Japan by surrendering at the most advantageous moment. Rather than preparing to fight a final cataclysmic battle against the United States, Imperial General Headquarters sources indicate that the Japanese military was biding its time to give Japan a favorable position in the postwar world. The postwar American occupation and subsequent Cold War suppressed Japan's colonial past, and with it, an understanding of Japan's strategic goals at the end of World War II.

This account of Japanese strategic thinking in World

War II substantially revises the accepted narrative of the conflict and further clarifies Japanese decision making during the war. It illustrates the diversity of Japanese opinions regarding the Soviet Union, questions the belief that the Japanese intended to fight a final battle against the United States, and rejects Japanese expectations of Soviet mediation in the conflict. As a result, Koshiro's reading of Japanese sources offers new insight into why Japan finally surrendered in August of 1945. *Imperial Eclipse* also reassigns agency to Japanese planners in the final two years of the war and takes a new approach to explaining the postwar political landscape of Asia. Although the author does not deal directly with the debate about the use of atomic weapons against Japan, her analysis has implications for that debate as well.

Despite its many strengths, Koshiro's argument raises some questions that she does not fully answer in the book. *Imperial Eclipse* describes the attitudes expressed in various reports, periodicals, and among intellectuals, but it cannot always suggest how much influence these ideas had on the conduct of the war and its outcome. For example, while the author convincingly demonstrates that some Japanese leaders desired a closer relationship with the Soviet Union during the war, she does not acknowledge the possibility that the Soviet-Japanese nonaggression pact may have been merely a military expedient for both countries. The suggestion that Japanese leaders did not plan to fight a final battle also contradicts well-documented military preparations and military leaders' opinions to the contrary. The difficulty of proving the influence of certain committees and individuals in a government that did not always coordinate its activities even among its various branches is one reason so few historians have given serious attention to Japanese strategic planning in the past. Such an obstacle, while an important consideration, should not diminish the overall value of Koshiro's study.

I highly recommend *Imperial Eclipse* to all serious students of World War II. Its use of Japanese sources is exemplary and helps remedy a conspicuous shortage of works focused on Japanese decision-making and the diverse perspectives present in its military and political leadership. Instructors teaching classes on the war in Asia, the end of WWII, and the beginning of the Cold War will also find this book important for its insight into the neglected Japanese view of events in Asia.

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