J-STAGE Advance Publication: 2025.04.18

Japan Review Early Access

Review Essay

From War's End to Empire's End: Recent Trends in the Framing of Japan's History Issue

Philip SEATON*

Gary J. Bass. *Judgment at Tokyo: World War II on Trial and the Making of Modern Asia*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2023, 912 pages.

Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov, eds. *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: Deimperialization, Postwar Legitimation and Imperial Afterlife*. Routledge, 2017, 348 pages.

Svetlana Paichadze and Jonathan Bull, eds. *End of Empire Migrants in East Asia: Repatriates, Returnees and Finding Home*. Routledge, 2023, 288 pages.

Eveline Buchheim and Jennifer Coates, eds. *War Memory and East Asian Conflicts, 1930–1945*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 269 pages.

The year 2025 marks the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Memories of the conflict are in the final stages of transition from the living memory of the war generation to the cultural memory of postwar generations. When Japan marks its cluster of war-related anniversaries each year in August, the rhetoric of the war's end (*shūsen* 終戦) and the postwar (*sengo* 戦後) continues to dominate media coverage of the commemorations. This indicates that memories and historical consciousness (*rekishi ninshiki* 歴史認識) of the immediate pre-1945 years are narrated in the public sphere using primarily the framework of war and terms such as victory, defeat, attack, defense, aggression, victims, perpetrators, battles, and tactics.

However, defeat in 1945 also marked the end of the Empire of Japan (*Dai Nippon teikoku* 大日本帝国). This indicates a second possible framework for memories and historical consciousness of the period, albeit with a different set of keywords: colonialism, expansion, annexation, repression, colonial rule, imperial subjects, settlers, and so on. The two frames overlap because warfare is a fundamental tool of imperialism. In Japan's case, however, the war frame is in the foreground, and the imperial frame in the background. Even so, the imperial context of Japan's wars has long been an issue in Japanese scholarship. Nationalists in Japan promote the "liberation of Asia" thesis (*Ajia kaihōron* アジア解放論), namely that Japan

* Philip Seaton is a Professor at the Institute of Japan Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. He researches Japanese war memories and tourism induced by popular culture (contents tourism); for further details, see www.philipseaton.net.

fought a just war to rid Asia of Western imperialism. On the progressive wing of Japanese war debates, scholars discuss colonial responsibility alongside war responsibility as central themes within the "history issue" (*rekishi mondai* 歴史問題) in East Asia. Colonial responsibility covers not only the legacies of Japan's colonization of territories such as Taiwan and Korea after 1895, but also legacies in Yaun Mosir (Hokkaido) and Ryūkyū (Okinawa), whose annexations shortly after the Meiji Restoration were effectively legitimized in perpetuity by the postwar settlement.

In English-language scholarship on the Second World War in Asia over the past decade, there has been a notable paradigm shift toward recognition of the conflict as fundamentally rooted in imperialism. Scholars are taking ever more flexible approaches to periodization. The war is not something that ends neatly in 1945 from a clear starting point of 1931 (Manchurian Incident), 1937 (China War), 1939 (European War), or 1941 (Pacific War). These important moments are situated within longer imperial processes. An example is S. C. M. Paine's *The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949*, which unites discussion of China's internal conflicts with broader global conflict.[1] While narrow national histories still dominate domestic mass-market publishing in many of the combatant countries, leading scholars are increasingly using the imperial lens to seek new interpretations. For example, in his 2021 book *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War 1931–1945*, Richard Overy, one of Britain's most distinguished war historians, unambiguously shifted the focus of his work from European nations to global empires. He also adopts the time period 1931–1945, which is widely used by progressive historians in Japan to mark the Manchurian Incident as the beginning of a fifteen-year war of aggression.[2]

Central to this trend are the voices of formerly colonized peoples, which have steadily grown louder within global historiography. For people across Asia, the Second World War was a period of concentrated military violence within the longer experience of colonial violence, as indicated in this Filipino history textbook:

> The Second World War was the result of the advanced capitalist countries' drive to modify their territorial division of the world. On the one hand were the "Axis Powers" composed of Germany, Japan and Italy, while on the other hand, the US, England and others were called the "Allied Powers." As Pope Pius XII said, World War II was a "war of the giants." . . . The Filipinos were dragged into this war and many lives were lost, mainly because the Philippines was a U.S. colony.[3]

The more that such voices have been raised and heard, the more that scholars in former colonizer countries have needed to address them as part of any comprehensive history of the conflict.

This review essay discusses four recent books about Japan in the aftermath of 1945, all of which contribute to this paradigm shift from "war's end" to "end of empire." The first, *Judgment at Tokyo* by Gary J. Bass, is a narrative history on a grand scale of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (hereafter IMTFE, or Tokyo Trial) aimed at both the

1 Paine 2012.
2 Overy 2021.
3 Oliveros et al. 2007, p. 185.

academic and armchair historian. The other three books are archetypal scholarly edited volumes stemming from group research projects: *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia* (Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov), *End of Empire Migrants in East Asia* (Svetlana Paichadze and Jonathan Bull), and *War Memory and East Asian Conflicts, 1930–1945* (Eveline Buchheim and Jennifer Coates).

The three edited volumes are roughly the same combined length as Bass's book. They have a total of 905 pages in forty-three chapters compared to the 912 pages in thirty-five chapters of *Judgment at Tokyo*. Narrative history on a grand scale and edited volumes have completely different styles and functions. Yet all four books make valuable contributions in their own ways and deserve praise as professional jobs well done. This review essay situates the books' contributions to the aforementioned paradigm shift: war's end to end of empire. I start with *Judgment at Tokyo*, with a particular focus on how Bass develops the imperial context of the IMTFE through his spotlight on Asian voices. In the next section, rather than treating the edited volumes separately I identify key themes in the case study chapters across all three volumes and, where appropriate, connect them back to *Judgment at Tokyo.* I conclude with some thoughts regarding the implications of reframing Japanese memories, responsibility, and historical consciousness as end of empire rather than war's end issues.

Judgment at Tokyo

Judgment at Tokyo is well-researched scholarship, but rather than academic, the writing style is almost cinematic. Much of the fine detail is surplus to requirements for making an academic argument. Instead, in the "great men of history" writing tradition, *Judgment at Tokyo* brings the trial to life with vivid depictions of the main protagonists. For example, this passage describes the moments before the executions of the seven defendants who were sentenced to death:

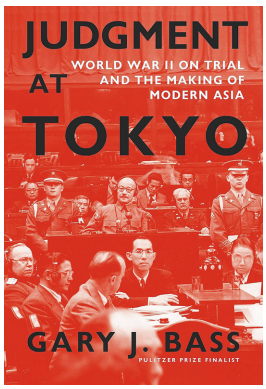
> There for seven minutes they received improvised Buddhist last rites with incense. They bowed their heads and closed their eyes. The priest offered cookies but the old men had taken out their dentures; only Matsui munched a soft biscuit. They drank wine from full paper cups with their manacled hands. Tojo was pleased that, as requested, he had gotten at least one drink. (p. 626)

Inviting the reader to witness the trial almost through the lens of a camera is a key characteristic of Bass's book in contrast to other books on the IMTFE.

There have been multiple approaches to Tokyo Trial scholarship, which are worth outlining in some detail as a way of contextualizing Bass's contribution. The first are annotated anthologies of the trial transcripts and related archival materials. As scholarly interest in the trial increased, the primary sources became available in published collections, most notably those edited by R. John Pritchard.[4] Much of the impetus for Pritchard's work came from the debates initiated by Richard Minear's 1971 book *Victors' Justice*, the first book on the trial in English.

Minear's work epitomizes the second approach, namely critical discussion of the legal

4 See Minear 2001, p. ix. A new edition of Pritchard's compilation was published by Edwin Mellen Press in 2024.



process. While Minear was careful to distinguish criticizing the trial (which he did) and exonerating the defendants (which he did not), the mantra of faulty "victors' justice" has been used frequently by Japanese nationalists. The third approach, therefore, is Japanese nationalist polemic using the procedural flaws of the trial to proclaim the defendants and Japan not guilty. An example available in English translation is *The Tokyo Trials and the Truth of "Pal's Judgment"* by Watanabe Shōichi (渡部昇一).[5]

The fourth approach is acceptance of the judgments. This is the official Japanese government position adopted at the San Francisco Peace Treaty, although the explanation on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website exudes obvious reluctance: "The Government of Japan believes that it is in no position to raise any objections regarding this judgment."[6] Going one step further, Tim Maga suggests as the "basic thesis" of his 2001 book, also titled *Judgment at Tokyo*, that "there might have been good intentions behind the Tokyo Trials and that they might even have done good work."[7] This view is compatible with Japan's former adversaries who believe that Japan should do more to address war responsibility issues.

This debate about the validity and meanings of the trial has led to a secondary literature that discusses interpretations of the IMTFE. In *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial*, Yuma Totani has seven thematic chapters of trial history before deconstructing post-trial debates in her final three chapters: "The First Trial Analysts," "Pal's Dissent and Its Repercussions," and "Conclusions: Beyond Victors' Justice." The discussion covers nationalist lionization of Pal's dissenting judgment, the varying receptions of Minear's work in Japan, and key contributions by Japanese scholars on the progressive side of Japanese war debates, such as Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎, Awaya Kentarō 粟屋憲太郎, and Yoshida Yutaka 吉田裕.[8] Meanwhile in *The History Problem*, Hiro Saito identifies the trial, its verdicts, and its flaws as fundamental to the incompatible worldviews of nationalists and cosmopolitans in Japan: "Both use the Tokyo Trial as a reference point to articulate their commemorative positions," he argues.[9] He calls the trial "essentially a nationalist commemoration on the part of the Allied powers" and argues that "a critical reassessment of the Tokyo Trial is the key to challenging nationalist commemorations and resolving the history problem."[10]

This brief (and far from comprehensive) overview reveals just how politicized Tokyo Trial research has become. Where does Bass's *Judgment at Tokyo* fit into this literature? He addresses his positionality in the "Introduction." The following statement indicates a desire to rise above the debate: "This book is meant to allow readers to make up their own minds about how the trial worked and what it meant" (p. 13). The reality, however, is that Japanese war debates are an archetypal "culture war" in which participation inevitably means taking a

5 Watanabe 2009.
6 MOFA 2021.
7 Maga 2001, p. ix.
8 Totani 2008, pp. 190–245.
9 Saito 2017, p. 129.
10 Saito 2017, p. 153.

stand. In this statement, Bass's position sounds close to the action advocated by Saito:

> [T]he Tokyo Trial—warped and skewed as it was—stands out as a crucial lost opportunity to put relations between Japan and its neighbors on a more normal footing, encouraging deeper reflection among Japanese while giving the victims a greater sense of redress, thereby setting East Asia's future on a more hopeful track. (p. 13)

On a methodological level, Bass joins the paradigm shift toward seeing the Second World War within an imperial framework. He identifies three "core concerns": "a clash of armies," "a clash of empires," and "a clash of ideals." His stated mission is "Widening the story to encompass not just Americans and Japanese but the rest of Asia" (p. 14). This necessitates engagement with the imperial responsibility of not just Japan, but the United States, Britain, and the other powers.

Bass makes good on his stated mission primarily, but not exclusively, through long biographical sections about the Chinese, Filipino, and Indian judges. Chapter 7, "When the Emperor Violates the Law," introduces Chinese judge Mei Ruao and Japanese war actions in China, especially the Nanjing atrocity. We also learn of Mei's postwar fate in chapter 33, "The Inescapable Purge of Comrade Mei." Chapter 12, "The First Conquest," introduces Filipino judge Delfin Jaranilla and his experiences on the Bataan Death March. Indian judge Radhabinod Pal has been lionized by nationalists in Japan, but Bass paints a complicated portrait of him in chapter 29, "I am Wholly Dissenting," and chapter 32, "A Silent Prayer."

The following quotation from Pal's dissenting judgment is especially famous, and has assumed almost the status of scripture for Japanese nationalists (see figure 1):

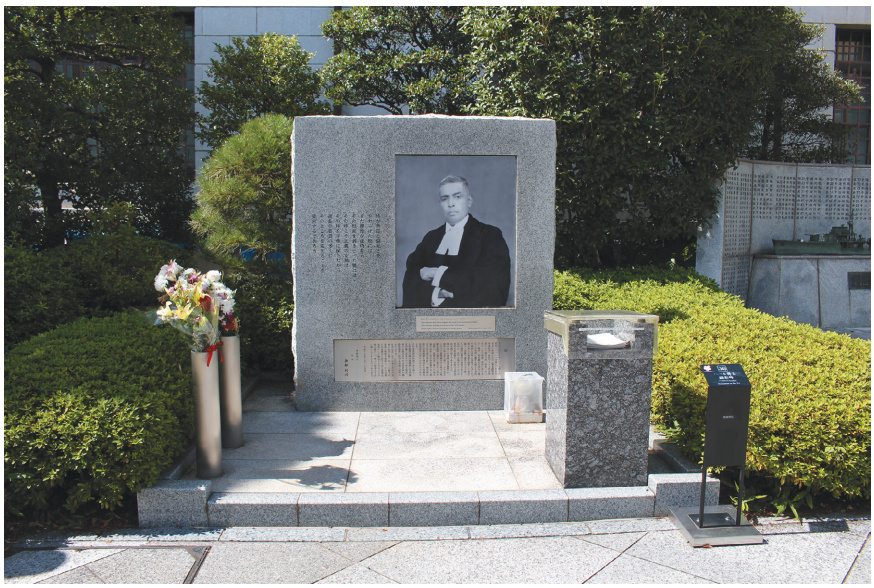


Figure 1. The famous sentence in Judge Radhabinod Pal's dissenting judgment on a monument at Yasukuni Shrine 靖國神社. Photographed by the author.

> When time shall have softened passion and prejudice, when Reason shall have stripped the mask from misrepresentation, then justice, holding evenly her scales, will require much of past censure and praise to change places. (p. 603)

In the context of the paradigm shift from war's end to end of empire, Pal's words seem to assume prescient qualities. The paradigm shift involves reckonings with imperial pasts by all the powers, and not just Japan. However, Bass provides important context that undermines the idealistic portrayal of Pal by Japanese nationalists. First, there was the shocked reaction in India, especially from Jawaharlal Nehru, when people learned the content of his dissenting judgment. It seemed to be exonerating imperialism and aggressive war at a time when Indians had just achieved independence and were struggling with its bloody aftermath. And second, Pal's own clouded view of history was based on doubting the testimony of survivors both of the Nanjing atrocity and the Holocaust, a stance verging on atrocity denialism (pp. 582, 637).

Ultimately, Pal became a useful icon for nationalists and milked his fame on multiple trips to Japan in the postwar. He was an early version of a familiar actor in Japanese war debates: the foreigner who is rewarded handsomely for championing Japanese nationalist causes, albeit at the cost of his/her international reputation. Bass's measured biographies of Pal and the other protagonists clarify how the trial verdicts were intertwined with the personal and national baggage the judges brought with them to the trial. Focusing on the people and not just the processes pays great dividends for deepening our understanding of IMTFE.

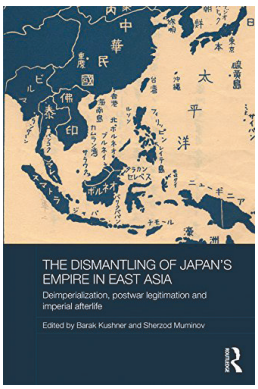
To summarize, Bass's main contribution to the Tokyo Trial literature relates to the second of his three concerns: identifying the Second World War in Asia as a "clash of empires" in line with the recent trend in scholarship. He writes:

> While Nuremberg concentrated on aggression against sovereign states in the core of Europe, Tokyo had to contend with attacks on colonized lands in Asia. Much of Japan's war effort had been directed against British, French, Dutch, and American colonies, which looked less like a clear-cut case of foreign conquest and more like a clash of empire against empire. (p. 18)

As a result he goes further than most previous accounts in detailing acts of colonial aggression and war crimes committed in Asia by the Allied *empires* (pp. 19–20 and elsewhere). This complicates simplistic, feel-good narratives in Allied countries that flow naturally from depicting the Second World War as a clash of righteous democratic vs evil fascist *nations*. Employing the imperial frame and criticizing the trial procedures is certainly not equivalent to denigrating the fight against Nazism and Japanese militarism, and neither does it exonerate Japan of war and imperial responsibility (although Japanese nationalists try to make this case). However, employing the imperial frame does require acknowledgement that Japan was not the only power invading, exploiting, and committing colonial violence against the peoples of Asia.

The Three Edited Volumes

The paradigm shift from war's end to end of empire appears to a greater or lesser extent throughout the three edited volumes. Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov's volume *The*



Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: Deimperialization, Postwar Legitimation and Imperial Afterlife makes the paradigm shift explicit from the front cover: there is a three-to-one usage (see the added underlines above) of empire vs war in the title. In the "Introduction," Kushner writes:

> In the seventy years since the end of World War II, we still have scant scholarship that investigates the way in which the Japanese empire dissolved and the significance of this event for the region as a whole. In Japan and elsewhere, the war is not forgotten. However, the history of Japan's empire is obscured. (p. 2)

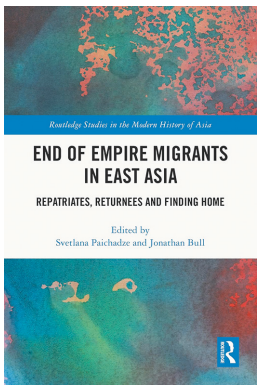
The sixteen chapters address these perceived gaps under the section headings "The New Postwar Order: Meaning and Significance," "War Criminals, POWs, and the Imperial Breakdown," "Diplomacy, Law, and the End of Empire," and "Media and the Imperial Aftermath"; and the "Comparative Epilogue" considers the oft-made Germany-Japan comparison. Kushner notes the groundbreaking nature of the research about the immediate postwar by Richard Frank, Lori Watt, Mariko Tamanoi, John Dower, and others, but that "the impact of the downfall of empire on the region with Japan at the center, while a theme in their various works, was not central to their findings" (p. 5). Kushner attempts to rectify this. He presents us with a keyword, deimperialization, that encapsulates his mission: to understand Japan's loss of empire as a long, complicated, and transnational process triggered by defeat in war in 1945.

The choice of lexicon for key concepts has long been recognized by linguists and political activists as vital when framing an argument. In this respect, Svetlana Paichadze and Jonathan Bull make the judicious decision to call their volume *End of Empire Migrants in East Asia: Repatriates, Returnees and Finding Home*. From the outset, the imperial frame is crystal clear. This is reinforced in Paichadze and Bull's "Introduction": "The collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945 resulted in severing these colonial ties and one of the largest mass movements of people in the twentieth century" (p. 3). They also identify the reasons for the "empire to nation" paradigm shift that occurred in the immediate postwar:

> After the end of the Second World War, in Japan, the formation of a nation-state based on a principle of monoethnicity began. This principle was created through normative acts (the legal basis) and a particular discourse, *Nihonjinron* (philosophy of the uniqueness of Japan, Japanese people and Japanese culture). (p. 3)

After the editors' introduction, the fourteen chapters divide into four parts: "Repatriation in Historiography, Political Discourse and the History of Indigenous Peoples," "Finding 'home' in the Former Japanese Empire," "Repatriation Policy and Returning Home in the 1950s–1960s," and "Repatriation and Integration: Life after *hikiage*."

The word "migration" is significant for the book's title, as it is in the title of Araragi Shinzō's chapter in Kushner and Muminov's volume: "The Collapse of the Japanese Empire and the Great Migrations." The term "repatriation" has a narrower meaning and



subtly reinforces the national frame: patria means country. Migration, by contrast, evokes large-scale movements of people for diverse reasons in various directions. Paichadze and Bull's book is effectively a book-length version, replete with personal testimonies and life histories, of Araragi's chapter-length historical overview. Kushner and Muminov's volume contains one other chapter that could easily have fitted into Paichadze and Bull's book: Park Jung Jin's essay on Japanese engineers stranded in North Korea.[11] In terms of their themes and approaches to migration, both volumes and their component chapters are completely in synch.

In contrast to the fairly even geographical spread across the chapters in Kushner and Muminov's volume, there is a clear focus on Japan's northern border regions in Paichadze and Bull's book. Four of the chapters are penned by people who contributed to Paichadze's previous research project on Karafuto 樺太/Sakhalin.[12] The chapters by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Kim Yehbohn Lacey, and Takefumi Hirai also point north. However, the focus on indigenous peoples in Paichadze and Jeffry Gayman's chapter "Border, Indigenous Peoples, Self-Identification" highlights a danger of national historical frames when discussing essentially imperial history: the risk of silencing people who were left without (and still do not have) their own state as a result of imperialism. The Ainu, Uilta, and Nivkh peoples were caught between the expanding Russian and Japanese empires from the late nineteenth century, when the empires negotiated their borders without any consideration for indigenous populations. Paichadze and Gayman tell indigenous peoples' stories sensitively with extensive use of their own testimonies. The chapter clarifies the effects on self-identification and social activities caused by "the two biggest problems for Indigenous people on Sakhalin Island—division by the border and the problem of displacement to another country with no possibility of return to their motherland."[13]

The main Soviet connection in Kushner and Muminov's volume, meanwhile, is in Sherzod Muminov's chapter "Prejudice, Punishment, and Propaganda." It explains the rationale for the internment of six hundred thousand Japanese by the Soviet Union after the war, but the latter part of this chapter deals with the Khabarovsk trial of 1949. This connects back to themes in Bass's book on the Tokyo Trial. Both Bass and Muminov note Soviet dissatisfaction with the IMTFE, and particularly with the failure of the Tokyo Trial to indict perpetrators of vivisection from Japan's infamous Unit 731 because the researchers had useful data that could be traded secretly for amnesties (Bass, p. 387). If anything, the Khabarovsk trial was even more arbitrary victors' justice than the Tokyo Trial, and Muminov notes that defendants were tried "according to an article in its own domestic penal code that had no jurisdiction in terms of international law."[14] The process might have been woefully flawed, but the defendants were unquestionably guilty of heinous crimes. These brief references to

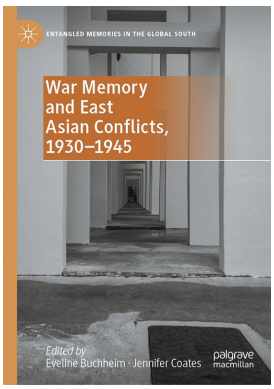
11 Park 2017.

12 They are Svetlana Paichadze, Jonathan Bull, Yulia Din, and Mooam Hyun. Full disclosure: I was the second editor for that volume; see Paichadze and Seaton 2015.

13 Paichadze and Gayman 2023, p. 251.

14 Muminov 2017, pp. 154–158, 159.

Soviet trials in both books ultimately highlight a key concern about the Tokyo Trial, one to which we will return in the conclusion: What do we learn about the trials by asking who was *not* tried?



The third of the edited volumes is the one that, superficially at least, adheres most closely to a national framework: Eveline Buchheim and Jennifer Coates's *War Memory and East Asian Conflicts, 1930–1945*. However, this volume also addresses directly the trend toward a focus on empire and transnational scholarship. In their "Introduction," Buchheim and Coates write:

> We sketch a series of shifting engagements with war memory across, between, and among nations, including China and Indonesia, their neighbours, and antagonists. . . . In developing a shifting paradigm for understanding engagement with war memory, wherein memory actors toggle between historical moments and their associated global and national positionings, the chapters in this volume, when taken together, caution against any easy categorisation of national experiences and attitudes . . . (p. 3)

The disciplinary approaches by the chapter authors cluster within memory, media, cultural, and tourism studies, and by engaging memories in the "global south" (that is, former colonies) the imperial angle also shines through. The ten chapters are grouped into four parts: "Narrating War Memory," "Localizing War Memory," "Exhibiting War Memory," and "Visualising War Memory."

The first part contains two chapters about the POW experience, both of which connect on multiple levels to the Kushner and Muminov volume and to Bass's book (although less so to Paichadze and Bull, which is mainly about civilian experiences). Ernestine Hoegen's chapter about the Kamioka POW camp in Honshu forms an interesting contrast with Sarah Kovner's account of life in the POW camps in the Korean Peninsula. Hoegen notes that 14 percent of the total camp population perished in captivity at Kamioka, which is lower than the average across the empire of 27 percent.[15] Kovner, meanwhile, asks "How do we explain why so many POWs were able to sit out the war in relative safety?" in response to the data that only 2.7 percent of Commonwealth troops died at the Keijō and Jinsen camps.[16] Clearly there were considerable differences between the camps across the Japanese Empire, from the notorious Thai-Burma Railroad to the relative safely of the Korean Peninsula. It is also striking that while Korean guards were disproportionately tried as B/C class war criminals after the war for POW abuse, the camps in Korea seem to have been the safest. All such insights suggest the potential for further transnational research that compares divergent experiences of similar type (for example, being a POW) across the Asian theater.

Other chapters reveal the complex intertwining of war and imperial responsibility issues affecting the Allies. The Japanese treatment of POWs is notorious, including transportation

15 Hoegen 2023, p. 19.
16 Kovner 2017, p. 118.

in "hell-ships."[17] Kaori Akiyama's study of Allied hell-ships based on the testimonies of Okinawans transported to Hawai'i shows the story in reverse.[18] In particular, she focuses on the *hadaka-gumi* 裸組, who were kept naked for the entirety of their transport. Although they were a small proportion of the total number transported, such treatment clearly could have resulted in serious consequences at war crimes trials if perpetrated by the Japanese. And Franziska Seraphim's discussion of the "carceral geographies" of Japanese taken into captivity by the Allies after Japan's surrender contains a most telling observation: "All main prisons used to incarcerate (convicted) war criminals across Asia were of colonial origin and had been built in the preceding half century to discipline and contain local, ethnic resistance to colonial and imperial rule."[19] The more that the imperial connections are seen in war history, the more complicated discussions of justice and responsibility become from an Allied perspective.

Finally, the volumes give insights into how and why narratives of colonial expansion could become disconnected from, and ultimately marginalized within, memories of national war victimhood. Caroline Drieënhuizen writes concerning exhibitions about the Dutch war experience in the Dutch East Indies that were put on thirty years after the war:

> The wartime experiences in Indonesia were more and more isolated and set apart from the Dutch national narrative of the Second World War. And when these memories were integrated in this national narrative, the war in Indonesia between 1942 and 1945 was considered separately from the morally and politically sensitive Indonesian Revolution of 1945 and 1949, although historically, the two were inextricably linked.[20]

Similar issues emerge in Sandra Wilson's chapter, "The Shifting Politics of Guilt," which shows how Japanese war criminals, who were initially shunned in post-defeat Japan, garnered more sympathy in the press and public mind as the occupation came to an end.[21] Perceptions shifted from seeing them as guilty agents of empire to seeing them as victimized Japanese longing to return home. Self-identification as an active agent of imperial expansion always mitigates against calling oneself a victim because somewhere there must have been colonized people who were oppressed by your colonizer actions. To cast oneself as a victim, national and individual frames work the best.[22]

Conclusions: Implications of the Imperial Frame

All four books discussed in this review essay have, to a greater or lesser extent, discussed the Second World War in Asia as an imperial conflict. This trend has been gathering pace over the past decade. In a nutshell, the war pitted the Empire of Japan against the Allied forces of the American Empire, British Empire, Dutch Empire, and Soviet Union (Russian Empire).

17 For example, they are discussed briefly by Kovner (2017, p. 107).
18 Akiyama 2023.
19 Seraphim 2017, p. 134.
20 Drieënhuizen 2023, p. 172.
21 Wilson 2017.
22 It has not been possible to discuss all the themes across the forty-three chapters of the edited volumes. I selected those parts that speak most to the national and imperial frames of war history, and the paradigm shift toward the latter that is taking place. Regrettably, engagement with the equally admirable chapters on topics such as media, cinema, and tourism must be saved for another occasion.

The people of Korea, Taiwan, and other Japanese colonies participated in the war as imperial subjects, whether as soldiers or laborers, and whether voluntarily or against their will. China, a disintegrating former empire, sustained massive loss of life in an invasion by Japan that was sandwiched between two periods of brutal civil war. The main battlegrounds of the Pacific War were colonies, from Hawai'i in 1941 to Karafuto in late August 1945.[23] Historians may say "Japan" as a shorthand for "Empire of Japan," or "Britain" for "the British Empire." But this shorthand cannot change the fact that it was a war between entities that openly called themselves empires at the time.

Japan's surrender in August 1945 marked both the end of the war, and the beginning of "deimperialization," a process that is arguably still incomplete given the ongoing historical issues affecting the first peoples colonized by Japan in the modern era: Ainu and Ryukyuans. Deimperialization was accompanied by considerable imperial amnesia. The conversion from the multiethnic Empire of Japan (albeit with ethnic Japanese atop a clear racial hierarchy) to the "monoethnic" nation-state of post-1945 Japan was driven by government policies relating to commemoration, repatriation, residency rights, pensions, and other measures that explicitly recategorized wartime imperial subjects into either ethnic Japanese or foreign nationals in the postwar. *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 discourse about the special characteristics of the Japanese reinforced this national frame within public consciousness. War memories in Japan developed a particular pattern: a pervasive sense of victimhood alongside deep-rooted divisions regarding Japanese war responsibility.[24] This domestic culture war spilled over into a diplomatic issue and became known as the "history issue" (or "history problem") as former colonies and enemies took ever more interest in Japan's domestic war debates, particularly from the 1980s.[25] Koreans and Chinese could find common cause criticizing Japan's perceived inability to face the past, even though one was a former colony whose inhabitants lived/fought during the war years as imperial subjects, and the other was a former adversary that resisted Japanese invasion. In diplomatic circles and news media, war issues became framed as "Japan vs South Korea" and "Japan vs China," despite the considerable internal ideological divisions and transnational common interests in all three nations.

In the White imperial powers, too, there was imperial amnesia. Asian nations gained independence from the late 1940s to 1960s, despite the protracted efforts in some places to maintain postwar colonial rule, such as Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The Soviet Union collapsed after 1991, but Russian imperialism never really died: the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is its most recent chapter. Broadly speaking, the loss of empire triggered a slide into nationally-framed war memories. In any case, the imperial frame was uncomfortable in Allied nations because it generated issues of colonial responsibility, whereas the national frame was ideal for crafting dominant narratives of a "good war" against the evils of fascism. National frames were also more suited to victimhood narratives. Furthermore, imperial responsibility issues could be marginalized because, unlike Japan, the White powers faced relatively few direct calls for redress from their former colonies. On the whole, liberated

23 At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, Hawai'i was a self-governing U.S. territory, that is, a settler colony, whose white immigrants had overthrown the Hawai'ian monarchy in 1893. Eighteen years after Pearl Harbor, the colonial subjugation of Hawai'i was completed when the United States annexed it as the fiftieth state in 1959, despite the protests of native Hawai'ians. For Karafuto, see Paichadze and Seaton 2015.

24 See Seaton 2007.

25 See Saito 2017.

peoples turned their energies to development as independent states. Often they were unable to escape completely the colonial-era power relations, and the priority of developing constructive relationships with former colonizers outweighed that of pursuing justice. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the frames of capitalism vs communism, democracy vs authoritarianism, or victim vs aggressor mapped back easily onto the Allied nations vs Axis nations frame of the Second World War. This was the context for imperial amnesia.

However, the collapse of the Cold War order, the passing of the war generation, and the emergence of former colonies in Asia as significant regional powers have created the conditions for a new metanarrative. War memories and commemoration must always be understood within the contemporary political context. Mass media discourse, with its often explicitly national target audience, has not caught up with the academic trend yet. But the direction within more globally- and transnationally-minded scholarship is clear. With Asian voices becoming ever louder within the global debate, the imperial frame is making a comeback.

This is partly a matter of simple historical reality. Japan was an empire at the time. Britain was an empire at the time. They fought in Malaya in 1941–1942 because as the aspiring and incumbent colonial powers they both coveted Malaya's natural resources. The imperial context is self-evidently true. But another reason is that within fields like Japanese Studies there is growing skepticism regarding the national frame in general. The trend in area studies is toward the transnational.[26] Making the country, the nation, or the culture the fundamental unit of analysis can easily pull the discussion toward homogenization and stereotyping. On war issues, it can result in crude generalizations about what "the Japanese" did, or what they think about the war. By contrast, the imperial frame presupposes diversity and contestation from the outset. Empires are by definition complex, multiethnic entities with identifiable power structures and diverse actors across broad geographical areas. Making the empire the fundamental framework of analysis, therefore, automatically places issues of diversity and contestation center stage. It helps pull the analysis toward complicated gray zones rather than simplistic black-and-white contrasts.

The recent paradigm shift from national frame to imperial frame will not necessarily be welcomed by those who prefer simple narratives, particularly those that paint one's own national tribe in a favorable light. Furthermore, there might be polemical concerns about using the imperial frame. Some might worry about it being a concession to Japanese nationalists. After all, it undermines the "good war" narrative by focusing attention on the colonial responsibility of the Allied powers as well as the war responsibility of the Empire of Japan. Conversely, it might be argued that if the Allied powers were to acknowledge their various responsibilities more it would make it easier for Japanese to do the same for their history. My own experiences in Japanese university classrooms teaching this topic for twenty years incline me toward this viewpoint. Overall, however, it should be the historical reality—as best it can be deduced from the available historical evidence—that wins the day, not polemical considerations. The Second World War in Asia was fought between empires, all of which were built over extended periods of aggression, exploitation, and racism against the peoples of Asia. Everything else stems from this fundamental historical reality.

Ultimately, Radhabinod Pal was right in the most famous sentence of his dissenting

26 See Ogawa and Seaton 2020.

judgment. There is a certain amount of "censure and praise changing places" as a result of the imperial frame becoming more dominant within academic discourse. Where Pal was wrong, however, was in his judgment of "not guilty." The defendants at the Tokyo Trial were perhaps not guilty on a legal technicality, but not in any moral or historical sense. The Japanese empire left a swathe of devastation across Asia, and upended the lives of millions of people, a sample of whose stories are detailed in the trial proceedings recounted by Bass and the chapter case studies of the three edited volumes. Those on trial at the IMTFE undoubtedly bore heavy responsibility. Ultimately, the most important question about the trial is, "Who was not tried, and why?" If justice had truly "held even its scales," and all those who had violated existing international law during the war had been prosecuted, then there would have been countless others found guilty alongside Japan's A, B, and C class war criminals. All these issues can be seen more clearly through the lens of imperial history, which gives voice to colonized Asians, and not just those from the colonizer-combatant powers. In that the four volumes reviewed in this essay admirably present such voices, and thereby demonstrate clearly the complexities of imperial collapse post-1945 from both colonizer and colonized perspectives, they are all valuable contributions to literature on the fall of the Empire of Japan and its legacies.

REFERENCES

Akiyama 2023

Kaori Akiyama. "Beyond the 'Hell-Ship' Experience: Former Okinawan POWs Visit Hawai'i after 72 Years." In Buchheim and Coates 2023, pp. 39–59.

Drieënhuizen 2023

Caroline Drieënhuizen. "Exhibitions and Their Afterlives: Dutch Exhibitions of the Second World War in Indonesia, 1946–2000." In Buchheim and Coates 2023, pp. 159–183.

Hoegen 2023

Ernestine Hoegen. "National Narratives and Individual Agency: Negotiating Power Relations in Kamioka POW Camp." In Buchheim and Coates 2023, pp. 17–37.

Kovner 2017

Sarah Kovner. "Allied POWs in Korea: Life and Death During the Pacific War." In Kushner and Muminov 2017, pp. 107–124.

Maga 2001

Tim Maga. *Judgment at Tokyo: The Japanese War Crimes Trials*. University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

Minear 2001

Richard H. Minear. *Victors' Justice: The Tokyo War Crimes Trial*. Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Press, (1971) 2001.

MOFA 2021

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "History Issues Q&A." MOFA website: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q_a/faq16.html.

Muminov 2017
Sherzod Muminov. "Prejudice, Punishment, and Propaganda: Post-Imperial Japan and the Soviet Versions of History and Justice in East Asia, 1945–1956." In Kushner and Muminov 2017, pp. 146–164.
Ogawa and Seaton 2020
Akihiro Ogawa and Philip Seaton, eds. *New Frontiers in Japanese Studies*. Routledge, 2020.
Oliveros et al. 2007
Reynaldo D. Oliveros, Ma. Concepcion M. Galvez, Yolanda R. Estrella, and John Paul Andaquig. *Philippine History and Government*. IBON Books, 2007.
Overy 2021
Richard Overy. *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War 1931–1945*. Allen Lane, 2021.
Paichadze and Gayman 2023
Svetlana Paichadze and Jeffry Gayman. "Border, Indigenous Peoples, Self-Identification: Contested Memory as Seen in the Social Activities of Ainu, Uilta and Nivkh." In Paichadze and Bull 2023, pp. 251–269.
Paichadze and Seaton 2015
Svetlana Paichadze and Philip A. Seaton, eds. *Voices from the Shifting Russo-Japanese Border: Karafuto/Sakhalin*. Routledge, 2015.
Paine 2012
S. C. M. Paine. *The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
Park 2017
Park Jung Jin. "North Korean Nation Building and Japanese Imperialism: People's Nation, People's Diplomacy, and Japanese Technicians." Translated by Sherzod Muminov. In Kushner and Muminov 2017, pp. 199–219.
Saito 2017
Hiro Saito. *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2017.
Seaton 2007
Philip A. Seaton. *Japan's Contested War Memories: The "Memory Rifts" in Historical Consciousness of World War II*. Routledge, 2007.
Seraphim 2017
Franziska Seraphim. "Carceral Geographies of Japan's Vanishing Empire: War Criminals' Prisons in Asia." In Kushner and Muminov 2017, pp. 125–145.
Totani 2008
Yuma Totani. *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial: The Pursuit of Justice in the Wake of World War II*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2008.
Watanabe 2009
Watanabe Shōichi. *The Tokyo Trials and the Truth of "Pal's Judgment."* Translated by the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact. Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, 2009. http://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/63_S4.pdf.
Wilson 2017
Sandra Wilson. "The Shifting Politics of Guilt: The Campaign for the Release of Japanese War Criminals." In Kushner and Muminov 2017, pp. 87–106.