

**Review: “BETWEEN INCOMPTENCE AND CULPABILITY: Assessing the Diplomacy of Japan’s Foreign Ministry from Pearl Harbor to Potsdam”**

**by Seishiro Sugihara (University Press of America, Inc.)**

**Review by Date Kunishige, journalist**

**Translated by Norman Hu**

Japan and the United States were the two nations who clashed against each other on the Pacific in the Greater East Asian War (also referred to as the Pacific War); and a simplistic historical perspective has long been disseminated in the postwar period, namely the Tokyo Trial view of history, that Japan was the villain and America, the hero. Even today, many intellectuals in Japan still apply this infantile good-versus-evil historical viewpoint to the complex international politics of the time. Propaganda promulgated by GHQ in the post-war period had an enormous influence upon the Japanese people.

In the United States, it would be no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming majority of Americans view the war through the prism of "the Allied camp of democracies" versus "the Axis camp of fascist powers" to grasp the broader framework of the entire Second World War, not just the war between Japan and the United States. The United States, who led the Allies, had an uncomplicated viewpoint, that it had prosecuted a just war, and was fighting the evils of Japanese Militarism, German Nazism, and Italian Fascism. This historical perspective which favors the victors established a paradigm based on certain stereotypes that brooks no rebuttal or objections.

However, if we closely examine in greater detail the actual situation in each country with respect to international relations, both before and after the Second World War, a different sort of truth emerges. Even those who accept the construct that "the Allies" were synonymous with the "democratic camp", would find it hard not to question whether "the Communist Soviet Union, and the warlord regime of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang" really belonged amongst the democracies.

There's no doubt that the Second World War was instigated by Hitler

and Nazi Germany. So why did the Soviet Union, a purported member of the "democratic camp", sign a non-aggression pact with Hitler, and agree to invade and then partition Poland, in accordance with a secret protocol to that pact? Wasn't the Katyn Forest Massacre a Soviet operation? Wasn't it the Soviet Union who was expelled from the League of Nations for prosecuting a war against Finland? Wasn't it the Chiang Kai-shek regime, and in fact not Japan, who carried out elaborate preparations to prosecute a war (namely, the China Incident of 1937)?

This simplistic and flawed historical view, namely that "The Allies" = "The democratic camp" = "The heroes", should soon collapse.

To take things a step further, was the United States, the pivotal force behind the Allies, really one of "the heroes"?

It is true that, when the Japanese Navy's Task Force launched its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese side fired the first shot which led to the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States. So it is easy to accept the construct that "Japan is the villain, America is the hero"; and in reality, this historical perspective has been promulgated as an accepted truth.

However it became clear immediately after the war that the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was not necessarily a "sneak attack", even though initially it had been portrayed as such both at home and abroad by the United States. Although not an explicit declaration of war, the notice to terminate negotiations with the United States was intended as a de facto signal for war; subsequent research has revealed that it was delivered after the start of the attack on Pearl Harbor due to professional negligence on the part of diplomatic staff at the Japanese embassy in Washington.

At the Far East Military Tribunal (also known as the Tokyo Trial) held immediately after the war, from the very beginning the U.S. abandoned its intention to look into Japan's surprise attack, despite apparently having the intention to pursue it initially. Was it because it wanted to avoid the emergence of serious and troubling domestic problems had it been

revealed that U.S. intelligence agencies were able to decode Japanese diplomatic codes, and that the Roosevelt administration had known of Japanese intentions for war yet allowed the attack on Pearl Harbor which led to the deaths of over 2,000 American sailors?

The next point of contention is whether it was Japan or the United States who made more of an effort to avoid the rush to war. In the judgment of the Tokyo trial, the majority ruling of the judges was that Japanese politicians and senior military officers, determined as Class A war criminals, were part of a "conspiracy" whose ambitions were the invasion of Asia, who laid out plans for war, and who plunged the nation headlong into war. In other words, they employed trite associations to presume that Japan most likely did the same as Nazi Germany who actually had planned and then prosecuted its war.

However, by not examining the actual activities of Japanese politicians and the military at the time, this judgment is ridiculous. From the very beginning there never was any "conspiracy" to invade Asia. What the evidence shows is that Japan's politicians and high-ranking military personnel at the time were embroiled in political battles and internal fights, and many of these politicians and military, the so-called conspiracists, didn't even know each other. As confrontation between Japan and the United States increased, the threat of an outbreak of war loomed, and anxiety grew deeper amongst government and military leaders at the time; with the exception of some radical elements who advocated war, these leaders seriously explored the option of whether war could be avoided by somehow negotiating an agreement between Japan and the United States.

In the United States, what was the Roosevelt administration's approach? Did it seriously explore how to avoid war?

This is the theme that the author Sugihara Seishiro tries to shed light on in his book "BETWEEN INCOMPETENCE AND CULPABILITY: Assessing the Diplomacy of Japan's Foreign Ministry from Pearl Harbor to Potsdam". He tracks down and painstakingly

examines various research materials both here and abroad. As a dedicated historian, Sugihara has devoted his life to researching this theme.

The conclusion Sugihara has drawn is that "Roosevelt's efforts to avoid war between Japan and the United States were merely gestures intended for show, and what he truly wanted was war."

Sugihara's grasp of the historical materials is profound. By reading between the lines of materials that have survived in public archives and collections of personal documents, and citing broadly from the published works of American historians, Sugihara has carefully pieced together the actions of the American government while taking into account the complicated time line. By so doing, he has gradually revealed an historical truth that has long been concealed. It is precisely like reading a detective story full of intrigue, except these are actual modern historical events brimming with real life thrills.

Roosevelt was aware of signs of a possible surprise attack on Hawaii by the Japanese Navy, but deliberately ignored them. By fully exploiting the delay caused by the professional negligence of personnel at the Japanese embassy in Washington regarding the notice terminating negotiations, with true cunning Roosevelt fanned the American people's feelings of hostility towards the enemy and heightened their fighting spirit by coining the expressions "sneak attack" and "Remember Pearl Harbor!"

Sugihara is a native of Hiroshima. There are no "what ifs" in history, but this book is filled with a strong sense of indignation: What if the notice terminating negotiations hadn't been delayed; what if the American people's desire for revenge hadn't been fanned beyond what was necessary, and had not as a result, and contrary to international law, led to the tragic atomic bomb attacks on the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki towards the end of the war?

Moreover, what about the structure of Japan's Foreign Ministry after the war, which hid the responsibility of the two ministry officials

responsible for the delay in delivering the notice terminating negotiations, and allowed them to go unpunished. And unbelievably, Prime Minister and acting Foreign Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who was part of an old-boy network of diplomats that included these two officials, appointed them to the position of deputy foreign minister, the highest bureaucratic posts within the ministry. Shigeru Yoshida has a solid reputation as a great statesman and the driving force behind Japan's post-war reconstruction, but I wonder how the late Yoshida would answer these accusations by Sugihara.

It appears that Japan's Foreign Ministry has placed this book on a list of banned books "never to be read." Perhaps the reason why Sugihara has been able to examine the irresponsibility of the Japanese bureaucratic system, of which the Foreign Ministry is representative, in such penetrating depth is because he has no connection with the Foreign Ministry, and is an historian who initially trained in the field of pedagogical studies. Sugihara published books and articles on the "Fundamental Law of Education" (legislation in 1947 which established the fundamentals of postwar education in Japan, later completely revised in 2006), and from this research went on to look into the history of educational reforms under the postwar Occupation. From there he developed an interest in the war between Japan and the United States, which in turn led to his research in the outbreak of the Japan-U.S. war and the Foreign Ministry. But for those with a desire to know the truth about the history of this time, and contrary to the Foreign Ministry's damning assessment, this book is surely "required reading".