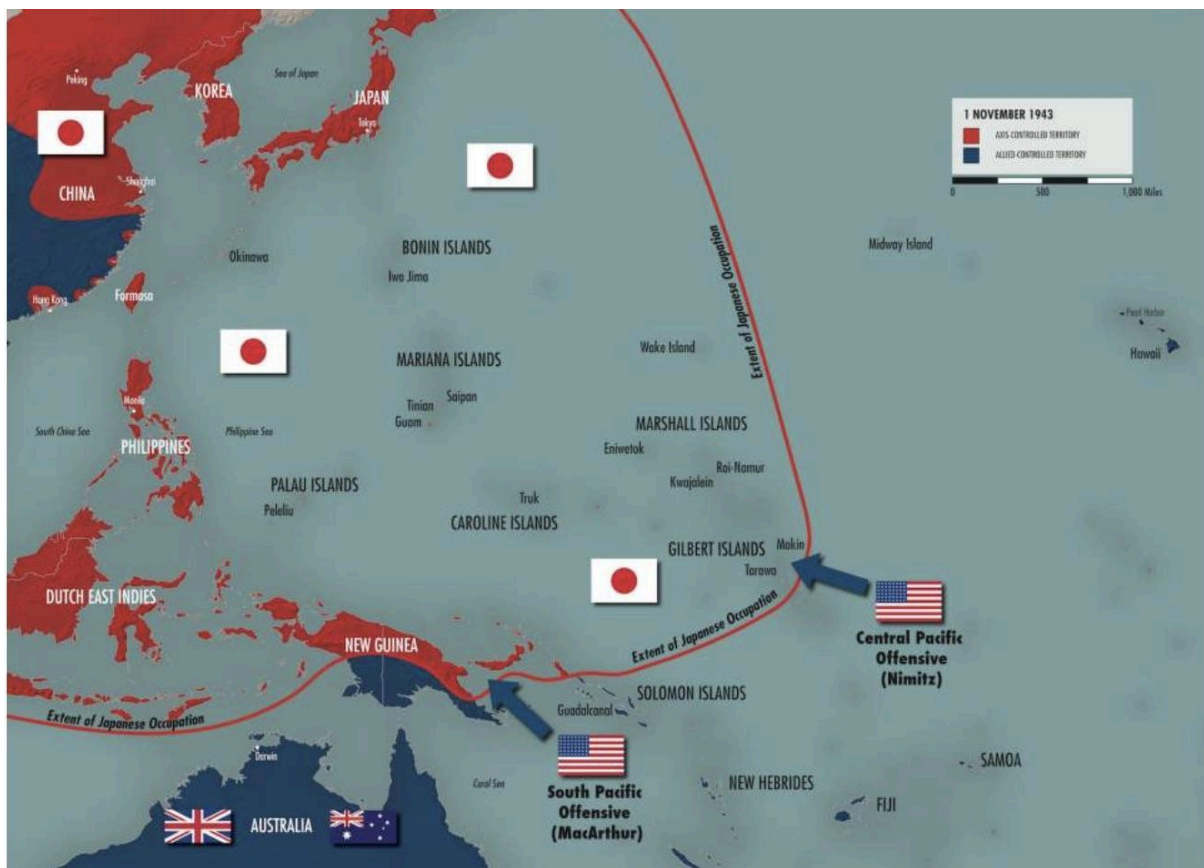


Literature Review:

The Asia-Pacific War as an Imperial and Colonial Conflict.



The US pursued a two-pronged offensive across the central and southwest Pacific to roll back the Japanese advance. (Image: The National WWII Museum;
<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/pacific-strategy-1941-1944>)

My father-in-law, Captain William Kirby Schlef of the U.S. Marines, would occasionally share his first-hand account of Guadalcanal, invariably beginning with the words, "I was in the original cast at Guadalcanal" in his Mississippian drawl. His description of the landing was vivid and tragic. His description was especially so when he spoke about the devastating effect the campaign had on the local populations; not so much on the conflict with the enemy. However, for a long time, most histories I have read of the Asia-Pacific War treated it as a straightforward military conflict, Japan versus the Allies, with strategy and (not so much) diplomacy driving everything. Earlier accounts focused on diplomatic failures, military campaigns, and what political leaders did or did not do. Most of these accounts relied almost entirely on official records, offering only scant descriptions of colonial territories while revealing very little about the lives and experiences of the people who lived there. In these accounts, colonial territories become little more than battlefields or occupied land, rather than places inhabited by people whose lives were fundamentally changed.

Looking back, I now realise that Captain Schlef's memories hinted at something those earlier histories overlooked. More recent historians have improved on this by showing that the Asia-Pacific War was about much more than armies fighting battles. It was also a struggle between rival empires for territory, resources and political influence, one that changed the lives of the people who lived under colonial rule. To me, this shift changes the way historians should approach the subject. Rather than relying solely on official archives and the views of political and military leaders, more recent studies attempt to bring the experiences of colonised and Indigenous peoples

back into the story. They also question the contradictions of Japanese claims of "liberating" Asia and examine how the war accelerated the decolonisation movements that followed 1945.

This review focuses on four themes that, to me, best explain this change in thinking. It begins by examining the traditional diplomatic and military explanations, comparing both their strengths and their weaknesses. It then looks at how more recent scholarship has reassessed Japanese expansion as an imperial project rather than just an act of wartime aggression. The review then evaluates studies that bring the experiences of colonised and Indigenous peoples back into the story. Lastly, it will look at the debate over whether the Asia-Pacific War caused decolonisation or simply accelerated changes that were already underway. I begin with the more traditional interpretation because it provides a useful benchmark against which the later historians can be compared. This analyses the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War primarily through diplomacy, military strategy and political decision-making. John Kuehn gives a good example of this approach.

Kuehn presents the origins of war largely as the consequence of political and strategic tensions generated by Japanese encroachment into China and the increasing response of Western powers. He argues that:

The USA, Great Britain and the Netherlands cut off Japan's access to oil. This event forced Japan's hand; not only did the timing for war seem ripe, with Germany advancing deep into the Soviet Union, but Japan's situation would now only grow worse with the passage of time unless she acted. Accordingly, she decided for war against all three Western powers in the late summer of 1941, under her new Prime Minister, Tojo Hideki.¹

¹ John T. Kuehn, "The War in the Pacific, 1941–1945." In John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 420–421.

Reinforcing Kuehn's argument, Peter Mauch focuses on failures in diplomacy leading up to Pearl Harbor and explores whether war might have been avoided through different policy choices.² The studies of both Kuehn and Mauch appear useful for understanding immediate causes, but they mainly focus on top-level decision-making. These historians mainly seem to rely on diplomatic correspondence and military planning documents. This might help to describe how governments understood events, but in so doing, appears to consider colonial populations only as a policy issue, with little empathy given towards what life was like for the people involved. That is a big issue that this perspective does not fully explain.

Andrew Buchanan offers a different perspective to this state-centred interpretation. He argues that the Second World War developed from wider systems of global competition and imperial restructuring rather than simply from diplomatic failures or the ambitions of individual leaders. Buchanan supports this argument by drawing on Trotsky's claim that:

the escalating European war—and the broader struggle to redivide the world's resources of which it was part—would culminate in a 'volcanic eruption of American imperialism' as Washington battled to "organize" the world'.³

This places the conflict in the wider context of capitalism, imperial power, and visions of international order. This marks a significant shift in the way historians have begun to explain the conflict. The earlier work discussed prioritised governments and military institutions. This later study looks for deeper structural causes rooted in imperial systems.

² Peter Mauch, 'The Failure of Diplomacy, 1931–1941', In John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 253–254.

³ Buchanan, 'Globalizing the Second World War', pp. 246–247.

Louise Young's study of Manchuria that was the first thing I read that made Japanese expansion feel like something more than just the aggression reflected in Buchanan's description. It was, as she describes, a three-phase scenario that "situated the sphere of influence in Manchuria within a rapidly expanding empire" and:

By the end of World War I, the empire included Taiwan, Korea, the Pacific island chains the Japanese called Nan'yo, the southern half of Sakhalin, as well as participation in the unequal treaty system in China.⁴

Young then further describes where "the Japanese-run Manchukuo government conducted a bold experiment in planned economic development and state capitalism" describing the "plan to send five million Japanese farmers to settle in the Manchurian hinterland...to create a new generation of 'continental Japanese'".⁵ I found this a much more convincing explanation of Japanese intentions than simply describing them as military aggressors.

Building on this interpretation of Japanese imperial ambitions, Daniel Hedinger discusses the placement of Japan within the broader Axis framework. He argues that the Axis powers should be understood not simply as cooperating states but as interconnected empires. To support this interpretation, he cites Stimson (1948), who wrote that "the Japanese militarists who planned and executed the Manchurian operations" were probably 'the first active aggressors of World War II'.⁶ To me, this broadens what had traditionally been a very European view of the Axis. Taken together, these historians suggest that the Asia-Pacific War formed an integral part of a wider imperial conflict. While Hedinger broadens the geographical scope of the

⁴ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p. 14.

⁵ Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, p.15.

⁶ Daniel Hedinger, 'The Imperial Nexus: The Second World War and the Axis in Global Perspective', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, p. 188.

discussion, Jeremy Yellen examines how Japan tried to justify this imperial project politically.

Yellen describes the complications appearing in East Asia by showing that Japanese leaders portrayed wartime expansion as more of a project of Asian liberation from Western colonial domination, affording “the liberation of the peoples of the Orient from the shackles of Western Europe”.⁷ This, Yellen avers is where Japan could “shape its own destiny” and become “a regional political-economic bloc over which Japan reigned supreme”.⁸ This reflects an interesting difference in emphasis. Young and Heding both emphasise the organised, systematic character of Japanese imperialism but it is Yellen who makes it clearer that this is empire building, not just fighting a war. Even so, understanding Japan's imperial ambitions is only part of the story. The more significant historiographical development has been the shift away from examining what empire-builders intended, towards investigating how imperial rule was experienced by the colonised populations who had to live under it.

What is now as becoming more significant, is the growing attention historians are giving to the people who lived under imperial rule. Earlier military histories often pushed colonised populations into the background. They were presented more as passive observers than as people who actively shaped events. This happened because historians relied mainly on military records, diplomatic correspondence and official archives. Those sources tell us what governments were doing rather than what ordinary people experienced. Chizuru Namba challenges this void. In her research of French Indochina during the war, rather than depicting Japanese authority just as a replacement of French colonial power, Namba shows the complex

⁷ Jeremy A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 4.

⁸ Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere*, p. 4.

interactions that developed among Japanese administrators, French colonial authorities, and Vietnamese officials. Instead of replacing one colonial power with another, Namba argues that authority remained contested, with all three of these authorities continually overlapping and competing.⁹

Lin Poyer gives us more on this area of concern by focussing on Indigenous experiences across the Pacific. Her work describes:

The profound transformations generated by global war: the devastation of invasion and bombing, of course, but also food shortages, forced labor, relocation, martial law, and shifts in colonial power, gender roles, religion, and family structure.¹⁰

Poyer argues that, because of these hardships, Indigenous peoples occupied positions during the war years motivated by patriotism and their own pursuits of independence as reflected well by Sir Apirana Ngata:

Māori goals were made clear in a 1943 pamphlet by statesman Sir Apirana Ngata, “The Price of Citizenship”, which emphasized that Māori support for the British cause would aid the struggle not only for social and economic equality, but also for political autonomy.¹¹

Poyer goes further by showing how other Indigenous communities were transformed across the Pacific, and where:

Governments may have interpreted battlefield heroism, military service, and other signs of loyalty as proof of assimilation, but war experiences actually increased many communities’ confidence in their own futures.¹²

Kratoska and Goto look at how Japanese occupation was experienced in Southeast Asia; early hopes of liberation quickly giving way to disappointment.

⁹ Chizuru Namba, ‘The French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese’, *Cross-Currents*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, p. 521.

¹⁰ Lin Poyer, *War at the Margins: Indigenous Experiences in World War II*, Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2022, p. 2.

¹¹ Poyer, *War at the Margins*, p. 14.

¹² Poyer, *War at the Margins*, p. 28.

Their description shows how Southeast Asian populations initially welcomed Japanese forces as potential liberators from Western colonialism, but instead:

Japan presented the conquest as liberation from Western domination and the start of a new order based on Asian solidarity, but Southeast Asians experienced it as another version of foreign rule, accompanied by a sharp decline in living standards, restrictions on civil liberties, demeaning treatment, shortages, rampant inflation and propaganda rife with blatant lies.¹³

This helps to spell out how far the Asia-Pacific War contributed to the collapse of empire and the emergence of nationalist movements. This pattern of initial hope followed by disillusionment was not unique to Southeast Asia. Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper's study of British Asia also demonstrates that in territories like Burma and Malaya, Japanese rule was initially welcomed as liberation from European colonialism but rapidly descended into exploitation and brutality that left local populations caught between competing imperial powers.¹⁴

Rana Mitter elaborates on this situation by showing that anti-imperialist nationalism also became one of the defining forces shaping post-war Asia. Mitter claims that in the aftermath of war, the politics and societies of

China, India, Southeast Asia and Japan/Korea [that] had participated in the war, albeit India as a less direct actor than the other three, were changed beyond alteration because of those wartime experiences.¹⁵

For Mitter, the war did not just expose the weaknesses of European empires; it basically changed the political awareness of colonised populations, creating nationalist movements that became irrepressible. But this interpretation is

¹³ Paul H. Kratoska and Ken'ichi Goto, 'Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941–1945', in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 533.

¹⁴ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 464.

¹⁵ Rana Mitter, 'Nationalism, Decolonization, Geopolitics and the Asian Post-war', in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 599–600.

challenged. Paul Kratoska offers a differing analysis that places decolonisation within longer-term historical processes.

While acknowledging the importance of Japanese occupation in weakening European authority, Kratoska gives a succinct description of how many post-war developments had origins in economic and political processes that were already underway during the late colonial period.¹⁶ Consequently, the war might be interpreted less as the sole cause of decolonisation than as an accelerator of wider historical processes. That difference matters. Historians broadly agree that the war transformed Asia's political landscape. But debate still remains over whether wartime experiences created entirely new political realities or simply sped up changes that were already coming. Kratoska's cautious approach is persuasive because it avoids giving too much causative weight to the war alone. Alongside this, Mitter's emphasis on nationalist mobilisation across multiple Asian societies demonstrates that the war's political consequences were deep and enduring.

The literature on the Asia-Pacific War has evolved significantly. Traditional diplomatic and military interpretations have given way to a wider range of discussions centred on empire and colonialism. Although historians broadly agree that the Asia-Pacific War transformed the political landscape of post-war Asia, they disagree over the mechanisms of that transformation. Mitter emphasises the mobilisation of anti-imperialist nationalism, whereas Kratoska argues that the war accelerated political and economic developments already underway during the late colonial period. Bayly and Harper similarly show that wartime occupation reshaped colonial authority across British Asia. Studies by Young, Hedinger, and Yellen show the

¹⁶ Kratoska, 'Singapore, Hong Kong and the End of Empire', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2006, pp. 12-13.

complexity of Japanese imperialism as colonising projects. Namba and Poyer describe why recovering local and Indigenous perspectives matters, voices often absent from official records. Taken together, these studies suggest that historians are no longer asking only why Japan went to war or how the Allies won it. Instead, they are now asking what empire meant in practice, how occupation changed everyday lives, and why those experiences shaped the political future of Asia long after the fighting ended. That represents one of the most significant shifts in the historiography of this subject.

In many ways, this historiographical shift brings us back to my father-in-law's recollection of Guadalcanal. What remained with him after the fighting was not simply the clash between armies, but the disruption experienced by the people who lived there. Looking back, I suspect my father-in-law understood something that many of the earlier histories overlooked. His memories rarely centred on strategy or famous battles. Instead, they focused on the people whose lives had been turned upside down by the conflict. The newer historiography suggests that these experiences were not simply the background to the war; they were central to understanding what the war actually was.

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