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Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy*. New York: Knopf, 2013. Pp. xxi, 320. ISBN 978-0-307-59401-3.

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Why did Japan attack the United States in December 1941? Historians began asking this question soon after the fact and have not stopped since. *Japan 1941* by Eri Hotta (DPhil Oxford), a specialist in the history of Japan's international relations,<sup>1</sup> is the latest attempt to find a convincing answer.

The main difficulty lies in the consensus-building nature of prewar Japanese bureaucracies. The decision for war resulted from several months of deliberations by Japan's top leadership, including ministers of state and even the emperor, on policy proposals often written by lower level staff officers or civil servants: "It is especially difficult to assess blame when individual responsibilities were vague and diluted" (19). The buck never stopped in Tokyo—it was merely passed around until everyone agreed to accept it. As a consequence, much of the scholarship on Japan's decision to go to war concentrates on either institutions (the Imperial Navy,<sup>2</sup> the Army,<sup>3</sup> the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>4</sup> etc.) or individuals (e.g., Army General Tojo Hideki,<sup>5</sup> Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke<sup>6</sup>) in an effort to apportion responsibility. Thus, interested students and historians have had to read many more narrowly focused studies to perceive accurately just why Japan initiated the Pacific War.<sup>7</sup>

Hotta takes a different approach. On the basis of Japanese- and English-language scholarship, as well as relevant published primary materials, she reviews the year leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, giving the reader a place at the conference table where the major strategic options were debated by Japan's top brass—the prime minister, the foreign minister, the army and navy ministers, and the chiefs of the army and navy general staff. All talked tough about going to war, but, almost to a man, they did not truly desire war with the United States, which possessed at least twenty times Japan's industrial capacity. And yet, they ultimately chose war. Hotta observes that "Japan's fateful decision to go to war can best be understood as a huge national gamble" (19). But the gamble was taken only after a sequence of policy decisions had progressively narrowed Japan's options.

In the first place, by 1941, Japan's war against China (1937–45) had bogged down. Prime Minister Kono Fumimaro could not end the conflict he had helped escalate from a local skirmish outside Beijing to a full-fledged war. Hotta decries his "indecisive and impulsive" (54) leadership. Equally inept was Japan's occupation of northern French Indochina in summer 1940. This military action, initiated to aid in the war against China, backfired when the United States issued economic sanctions against Japan. Worst of all was Japan's decision in September 1940 to join fascist Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact. While Kono deserves some blame, the pact was conceived by his foreign minister, Matsuoka Yosuke, in the belief that the Americans respected only power and could be swayed by a diplomacy relying on bluff and brinkmanship. But

1. She is also the author of *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

2. See, e.g., Stephen E. Pelz, *Race to Pearl Harbor: The Failure of the Second London Naval Conference and the Onset of World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1974) and, more recently, Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2006).

3. See, e.g., Fujiwara Akira, "The Role of the Japanese Army," in *Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations, 1931–41*, ed. Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1973) 189–95.

4. See Usui Katsumi, "The Role of the Foreign Ministry," in *Pearl Harbor as History* (note 3 above) 127–48.

5. Robert J.C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1961).

6. Satoshi Hattori, *Matsuoka Gaikō: nichibei kaisen o meguru kokunai yōin to kokusai kankei* [Lost Diplomatic Gamble: Japan's attempt to gain the autarky (1939–1941)] (Tokyo: Chikura Shobo, 2012).

7. Herbert Feis's classic *The Road to Pearl Harbor: The Coming of the War between the United States and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1950) is a rare synoptic account; based on limited Japanese sources, however, it is now outdated.

Matsuoka's hopes to improve Japan's position in this way had just the opposite effect, as the United States now regarded Japan with even greater suspicion and contempt.

Despite his missteps, Matsuoka was opposed to further Japanese expansion into southern French Indochina in July 1941. Japanese leaders felt that the West might not too strongly object to a peaceful and limited occupation. Matsuoka commented that, if Japan proceeded with such a move in Indochina, it should muster the resolve to fight Britain and the United States. In the final draft of the occupation plan, Army staff officers sought to mollify Matsuoka by inserting the infamous promise that "The Empire shall not flinch from war" (131). Both his ministers and soon the emperor himself approved the plan and took one more step toward a war no one wanted.

President Franklin Roosevelt's administration reacted by freezing Japanese assets and preparing a petroleum embargo. Well aware that this was a potentially provocative move, Roosevelt proposed a plan for the neutrality of Indochina as a means to relieve tensions, essentially giving the Japanese a "do over." Hotta stresses that Roosevelt's proposal gave Konoe the chance to resolve his problem. The prime minister could have persuaded his domestic audience that Japan had effectively decolonized Indochina, while winning the approval of the military for an operation that had not caused any casualties. But, "Konoe was not up to the task" (150) and the feckless Japanese leadership was instead collectively outraged by the perceived injustice of the American embargo.

Konoe hoped to achieve a diplomatic settlement in a special summit meeting with Roosevelt, still believing he could reverse Japan's course to a war he had helped to plot. But military leaders would not agree to substantial American pre-summit demands for concessions, including Japanese troop withdrawals, and the summit never took place.

In early September, Japanese leaders obtained imperial approval to continue war preparations while making diplomatic efforts to repair relations with Washington and forestall an oil embargo. If diplomacy had not succeeded by early October, Japan would commence hostilities by the end of that month. Though shocked by this timetable for going to war, the emperor nonetheless endorsed his ministers' proposal, becoming "a metaphor for Japan, a nation that was pressured into taking an undesirable action because of some uncontrollable external forces, despite its peaceful preferences" (177).

When October arrived, Japan had made better progress with its war preparations than with its diplomatic maneuvers. Ironically, neither the Army nor the Navy brass wanted war, each service minister secretly hoping the other would admit that his branch could not defeat the United States and halt the march to war (210). None of them, however, was willing to lose face by making any such admission of weakness. To break the stalemate and provide a "clean slate" for a reexamination of Japan's foreign policy, Konoe stepped aside for a new prime minister, War Minister Tojo Hideki.

Despite his position as head of the army, Tojo, too, wanted to avoid war. He chose a navy minister who shared his views and a foreign minister, Togo Shigenori, who held a distinctly dovish position. The antiwar block seemed to have the upper hand in the new cabinet in the middle of October, since it seemed clear that "The prowar argument, no matter how it was presented, required self-delusion and false accounting to make Japan seem prepared for a drawn-out war" (222). But self-delusion persisted and an imperial resolution set the gears of war in motion. Even ministers considered to be doves supported a quick strike that, so they thought, might just give Japan a chance. Togo's was the strongest, and last, voice to call for a peaceful settlement.

Togo's ministers in Washington, Ambassador Nomura Kichisaburo and special envoy Kurusu Saburo, took up the task of negotiating a resolution of the dispute. Their American counterparts, Roosevelt and his secretary of state Cordell Hull viewed these men and their proposals warily. Sticking points were Japan's adherence to the Tripartite Pact and ongoing occupation of China and Indochina. Hull feared he might be "lynched" if he reached a deal with a Japan still allied to Nazi Germany (252). Nomura then proposed to turn back the clock to July 1941 to lessen tensions: Japan would leave southern Indochina in return for an end to the oil embargo. A cautiously optimistic Hull actually prepared a *modus vivendi* agreement based on elements of Nomura's offer. But he scrapped this compromise plan and instead presented the Japanese with

a separate proposal in what historians call the “Hull Note,” which stipulated a full Japanese withdrawal from the Chinese mainland. Nomura and Kurusu were stunned. Hull’s “outline read as if the United States were demanding an unconditional surrender without having fought and won a war with Japan” (265). Upon receiving the American proposal, Foreign Minister Togo, the last holdout, dropped his opposition to war and the Pearl Harbor attack force was ordered to proceed.

Although historians have faulted Hull for being unnecessarily harsh,<sup>8</sup> Hotta writes that “There had certainly been errors in judgment on both sides. But the errors had been induced, amplified, and spun out of control largely by the erratic and inflexible fashion in which Tokyo had been carrying out its foreign policy over many months, especially since its occupation of northern Indochina and its signing of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy” (273).

Backed into a corner of their own making through aggressive expansion and misguided diplomacy, the Japanese cabinet ministers, the Army and Navy General Staffs, and the emperor decided to risk the fate of their nation in a war against the United States and Britain rather than acknowledge their own mistakes in judgment—“Japan’s leaders must be charged with the ultimate responsibility of initiating a war that was preventable and unwinnable” (14).

Hotta enlivens a potentially dry diplomatic history by highlighting the experiences of various interesting people. The memoir of Ushiotsu Kichijiro, Hotta’s “Soldier U,” describes the life of a draftee on the battlefield in China and later preparing for Japan’s attack on Malaya. The diary of the novelist Nagai Kafu provides an elite intellectual’s commentary on the increasing militarization of Japanese society. Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku’s story introduces the ingenious mastermind behind the planning and training for the daring Pearl Harbor attack. Lending a sense of intrigue are tales of high-level espionage in the account of the life of Richard Sorge, a Russian spy based in Tokyo. Hotta also devotes two succinct and expert chapters to Japan’s historical context from the nineteenth century through the early 1930s.

The story told here is not a new one, however, as may be seen from the book’s well-mined primary and secondary sources. Omitted from Hotta’s research are a few recent studies<sup>9</sup> offering views of Japanese policymaking and policymakers before the day of infamy that would complicate the story as she tells it. But, admittedly, the sheer quantity of relevant scholarly work precludes any truly comprehensive one-volume study of the subject tackled in *Japan 1941*. Moreover, the author’s goal is not to provide a completely novel discussion, but to clarify for a popular audience the question of just why Japan went to war. In this she certainly succeeds. More importantly, by making existing scholarship and the historical record available to a wide readership in an engaging manner she has done a valuable service to the fields of Japanese history and US-Japan relations.

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8. See, e.g., Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (1985; rpt. NY: Fordham U Pr, 2005).

9. E.g., Hattori (note 6 above); Peter Mauch, *Sailor Diplomat: Nomura Kichisaburō and the Japanese-American War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011); and Tosh Minohara, “No choice but to rise’: Tōgō Shigenori and Japan’s Decision for War,” in *Tumultuous Decade: Empire, Society, and Diplomacy in 1930s Japan*, ed. Masato Kimura and Tosh Minohara (Toronto: U Toronto Pr, 2013) 258–76.