



## *Pearl Harbor: Japan's Attack and America's Entry into World War II*

by Takuma Melber.

Trans. Nick Somers. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021. Pp. viii, 220. ISBN 978-1-5095-3720-4.

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Whenever I read about the Japanese government's decision to go to war in 1941, I think of Vienna in the summer of 1914. Japan and Austria-Hungary were both acknowledged members of the "Great Power" club in an era historian Paul Kennedy has called "the crisis of the middle powers." The growth of the United States and Russia/USSR created a new international landscape where the multipolar Great Power system had come under strain. The prestige and independence of the Great Powers was jeopardized by the two continental titans. To keep its standing as an independent Great Power, Vienna opted to fight rather than have the British, French, Germans, and Russians take the matter out of their hands and negotiate the fate of Serbia post-Sarajevo. The results for the Dual Monarchy were catastrophic.

Japan believed it was in a similar predicament in 1941. Its war with China was going nowhere, America was openly hostile to its ambitions, and its freedom of action was curtailed. The choice seemed stark: conform to US demands or fight to maintain its Great Power prerogatives. Historian Takuma Melber (Univ. of Heidelberg) devotes his new study, *Pearl Harbor*, to the events of 1941 through Japan's attack on Hawaii.

The first half of the book concerns the diplomatic and political machinations preceding Pearl Harbor. Melber argues convincingly that both sides wanted a peaceful settlement of their disputes, but with conditions neither found unacceptable. The Japanese felt their alliance with Germany and Italy (the Tripartite Pact) empowered them to bargain from a position of strength. But the US government, believing the alliance impeded successful negotiation, demanded the Japanese abrogate the treaty. Japanese Prime Minister Prince Fumimaro Konoe hoped the Americans could broker a second Portsmouth between Japan and China, as they had between Japan and Russia in 1905, but that kind of realpolitik was out of favor with the American public of 1941, who had been fed a steady diet of pro-Chinese news and views and mistrusted Japan. They wanted a pledge that Japan would withdraw from all China, while Japanese leaders saw their occupation as a key bargaining chip they could not relinquish without ironclad guarantees that Manchukuo would be recognized and Japan granted access to markets in China.

Prime Minister Konoe was a weak leader. He wanted peace but feared his generals, whom he needed to support his vision of a one-party state at home. He fired his bellicose Foreign Minister in June 1941 to smooth relations with the United States, then agreed to the occupation of French Indochina less than a month later, bringing down the wrath (and devastating economic sanctions) of Washington.

Japanese foreign policy lacked coherence. Facing an implacable American set of demands, finalized in the Hull Note, the Japanese government refused to make what it considered the humiliating concessions needed to appease Washington. Yet until Konoe was replaced by General Tojo, Japan really wanted to avoid war. And despite Tojo's pugnacity, negotiations in Washington in November 1941 were not a ruse; significant elements of the Japanese elite still hoped for a last-

minute reprieve, but the conditions set by the Japanese Army and the US government made this impossible. The two nations were talking past each other, and by late November 1941 war became inevitable.

The second half of the book treats the planning and execution of the attack on Pearl Harbor and its aftermath. It is a solid retelling based on modern sources, but one expects more, given the work Melber has done with Japanese-language sources. The discussion of Japanese intelligence is very good. Having followed the traffic of ships in and out of Pearl Harbor for months, the Japanese had determined that December 7 would be the best day to attack American capital ships and carriers in harbor. Vice Admiral Nagumo, commanding the carrier strike force (the Kido Butai), received intelligence reports on the American fleet as recently as three hours before the first wave of Japanese planes left their carriers. (He was told, correctly, that no fleet carriers were in port at that moment.)

As for planning, the Japanese naval staff in Tokyo rejected the initial design for an attack on Pearl Harbor. The Combined Fleet commander, Admiral Yamamoto, was only able to secure its acceptance (and the inclusion of six fleet carriers in the strike force) on 19 October 1941, by threatening to resign if his concept was rejected. The plan was passed by Yamamoto among a group of young officers, mostly fliers, before the details were hammered out and all was agreed upon. The objective was to sink enemy carriers and battleships and destroy as many American aircraft as possible to prevent an effective counterstrike against the Japanese carriers. Critical to the operation was the delivery of specially modified torpedoes that could be dropped in the shallow waters of Pearl Harbor. These were delivered on 17 November, only a couple weeks before the carrier strike force sailed.

Melber's account of the attack is solid if too succinct. At the cost of twenty-nine aircraft, the Japanese had badly damaged the US Pacific Fleet. Their initial appraisal—that they had sunk four battleships and damaged four more—was spot on. What they failed to anticipate was the enormous expenditure of time and resources the United States could and would devote to repairing ships and planes. (By contrast, the Royal Navy would likely have written off many of the ships and aircraft as total losses.) Melber's contention that the Kido Butai should have stuck around Hawaii in order to hunt for the American carriers is interesting. But he fails to explore the logistical feasibility of such a course of action, given the strike force's distance from home and its tanker support. Additionally, had Nagumo launched a third strike as Melber postulates he should have, did the Japanese have enough heavy bombs aboard their carriers to destroy American cranes and dockyards? (The 550-pound semi-armor-piercing bombs of the Val dive bombers would not have sufficed).

The book suffers from a few niggling slips: for instance, Melber writes "kerosene" (119) instead of "aviation fuel," and "fighter" (143) instead of "dive bomber," among several other errors. To be fair, this may be a function of the book's translation from the German rather than of factual errors made by the author. Overall, *Pearl Harbor* is a fine introduction to its subject, enhanced by useful additions from original Japanese sources.