

*World War II and Southeast Asia: Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation*, by Gregg Huff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xxx + 523. ISBN:978110709993333.

Japanese leaders looked to Southeast Asia for solutions to several problems that they faced as the 1940s began. In China, they faced the continued resistance of the Nationalist forces in the Chinese interior, supported by America and supplied via Indochina and Burma. At home they faced shortages of food and war materials. To China's north they faced a rearmed Soviet Union which had just successfully defended its Eastern border. To China's south lay the colonial territories temporarily separated from the British, French, and Dutch metropolises by the German occupation of Western Europe. The opportunity to launch a war of conquest in the south seemed to solve all these problems at a stroke.

What happened next is the subject of *World War II and Southeast Asia*. Gregg Huff, a senior research fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, tackles the task on an encyclopaedic scale. His book, many years in the making, covers the wartime fates of Burma, Malaya (including Singapore), Thailand, Indonesia, Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and the Philippines, based on archives in a dozen countries, supplemented by a vast array of official and secondary publications.

The book is organized thematically with ten chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter provides historical and economic background. Further chapters cover the administrative structures and methods of Japanese colonization, how occupation was paid for, the dismal trends of production and trade across the region, studies of each production sector, the organization of consumption, the spread of rural famine, the concentration of displaced people in towns, and the cruel exploitation of local labour and prisoners of war for construction and women for military brothers. Concluding, the book sets out the terrible costs of the Japanese imperial venture and the reasons for its failure.

Each chapter combines an overview with close attention to each country. An epilogue describes the long shadow of the war in postwar history and weighs each country's lost opportunities. The text is preceded by a detailed chronology. An appendix lists sources of economic data for each country.

For reasons of space I will select only a few highlights. I learned that in Southeast Asia Japan's leaders bit off more than they could chew. The general intention was to detach the region from Western influences and speedily reconfigure it to Japan's needs, but detailed preparation was entirely lacking. During the war Japan did indeed draw a net surplus of resources from the region, and the surpluses were large relative to the occupied economies in size – up to one tenth of Thailand's GDP and more

than that from Indochina and Indonesia (at prewar prices, useful because extraction relied partly on skewing the wartime exchange rates) (p. 90). But the gain to the metropolis was tiny – never more than one per cent of Japan’s wartime GDP (from figures on p. 376).

Some resources proved more important than others: it was Indonesian bauxite, for example, that kept Japan in the air war. Overall, however, the match between the Japanese and Southeast Asian economies was poor. The region produced enough oil for Japan, too much tin, far too much rubber, and too little rice. No matter what happened, food would be a problem. The cultural fit was also poor: most citizens of the region had no wish to serve the enterprise of the Japanese master race. In practice, the idea of integrating the region into a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere fell at the first hurdle. Japan began the war with insufficient shipping capacity to exploit its new colonies, and what capacity it had was whittled away by Allied naval and air power, so that Japan was never able to realize more than a fraction of the potential gains. The famines of the war’s closing stage, most appalling in Indonesia and Indochina, were caused only in part by ruthless extraction. Other causes were the self-sufficiency forced on each territory and the incidental destruction of most export industries. Finally, Japan could not withstand the crushing weight of the Allied economies, once mobilized.

Thus Japan was defeated in Southeast Asia by the same forces that defeated it at home: economic disintegration brought about by Allied air and naval superiority.

There is a great deal more to be admired in this book. It is serious, original, and well-conceived. Its unusual scope leads to many unexpected insights. My one criticism is that more use could have been made of appendices to set out the raw data and associated technical discussion. These would have unburdened the text of detail unwanted by more general readers, while adding value for quantitatively minded historians.

To conclude, *World War II and Southeast Asia* is superb scholarship. It is a worthy companion to *Occupied Economies* by Hein Klemann and Sergey Kurdryashov (published by Berg in 2012), which deals with Europe under German occupation.