

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tomoko Akami. *Internationalizing the Pacific: The United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations in War and Peace, 1919-1945.* London: Routledge, 2002. 352 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-22034-7.

Reviewed by Jon Thares Davidann (Associate Professor of History, Hawaii Pacific University)
Published on H-US-Japan (November, 2002)



The repositioning of the United States recently as world hegemon (or rather, the more explicit assertion of world dominance by the United States) has led some scholars to argue that the nation (nationalism, national sovereignty, and nation-building), once considered the cornerstone of the modern world system, is now in decline along with the ideas of that great advocate of national sovereignty, Woodrow Wilson. The new American policy of preemptive self-defense would violate national sovereignty with impunity. Alongside this the American government argues that their peacekeepers must be exempt from international law, and that American secret military tribunals can be held anywhere in the world. Thus, a clear alternative to the organizing principle of the nation has appeared: a new concept of American Empire. Although, the Bush administration seeks to cloak its agenda in Wilsonian calls for democracy, self-determination, and free trade, the above policies are an indication that Wilsonianism has been converted to pure ideology without a tangible relation to policy making. It is therefore fitting that historians gaze back upon the twentieth century to discover the rise of Wilsonianism and relations between the nation and the larger world (internationalism, empire, civilization) to discern the roots of these ideas. Professor Akami has given us just such a book in her study of the Pacific in the interwar years. As Akami suggests, in that time the nation was the “regime of truth” for nationalists, internationalists, and empire-builders alike (p. 206).

Internationalizing the Pacific is an illuminating study of cross-cultural or trans-national history that has become an increasingly important field of historical studies in recent years. Akami’s book—an important and thorough examination of the role of non-official elites in

the United States and Japan, sometimes referred to as informal diplomats—ensures that the relevance of this field will continue to grow.

If Wilsonianism has acted as a kind of myth, “god” (Akami’s word) or pure ideology, then Akami’s introduction makes important distinctions clarifying what Wilsonianism was and was not. In succeeding pages she delineates the relation between Wilsonian internationalism and nationalism, which turned out to be very much a part of internationalism in the interwar period, and she argues that the kind of free market and individualistic liberalism advocated by Wilson himself was jettisoned by many of his followers in the next two decades to be replaced by the power of centralized states or statism. Akami defines colonialism and orientalism in useful ways as she paints a portrait of the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), the non-state organization that makes up the main documentary basis of her study. She makes the important point that the Japanese could maintain orientalist stereotypes as ingrained as any American attitudes concerning Asians.

The post World War I period was opened by American initiatives and leadership such that conceptions of Wilsonianism were essential to this time period. American international engagement, as Akami points out, was a departure from American continentalism embedded in the Monroe Doctrine. However, it should be noted that belief in the superiority of the American system and the need to spread American enlightenment was continuous between the continentalist and postwar internationalist approaches. These beliefs were carried into the founding of the IPR in 1925. Also influential in its founding was tension between the Americans and Japanese created by

immigration issues culminating in the Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924.

The Japanese approach to Wilsonianism was one of interest tempered by skepticism. Akami draws attention to Japanese internationalists who accommodated American leadership of the Pacific, both at large and within the IPR. But this commitment to international cooperation was balanced by nationalism at home. Akami suggests that Shidehara, the architect of Japanese accommodation in 1920s, “did not deny Japan’s national/imperial interests in China but argued for pursuing them through economic and cooperative means” (p. 62).

The situation of accommodation changed in the early 1930s to one of advocacy of regional peace mechanisms and greater Japanese leadership in Asia. Akami uses the writings of Konoe Fumimaro, Japan’s well-educated and well-traveled Prime Minister in the 1930s period, to show the shift from cooperation with the West to a go-it-alone regional leadership in Asia. Here the problem of Akami’s newly coined and very broad term “post-League internationalist,” used to identify Konoe and also other Japanese and even American internationalists, becomes apparent. For if we accept that term as it is, the distinctions that Akami herself makes between the Konoe approach in the 1930s and Japanese internationalists in the 1920s collapse. It also fails to distinguish the evolution of individual views between the 1920s-30s. The term does help the reader to see Japanese internationalists on a continuum overlapping with one another in the crucial areas of Emperor, Empire, and an increasingly state-centered approach, but this point could have been made without inventing new terminology.

In the midst of this transition from cooperative to antagonistic relations between Japan and the West, the Manchurian Incident stands out as the watershed moment. Akami’s analysis here is very sharp and offers new insights into Japanese internationalists as they struggled to reconcile their nation’s aggressive approach to Manchuria, which appealed to their patriotism, with their strong sense that Japan needed to maintain itself as a part of the Western-oriented system of nations within a framework of international law. Without Western participation in a regional framework for East Asia, Japanese internationalists feared war with the Western Powers would result. Akami follows a proposal made by Royama Masamichi in the aftermath of the Incident to place Manchuria under League of Nations control, similar to a mandate territory and under an administrative structure in which Japan would play a leading role. Takaki Yasaka and Yokota Kisaburo proffered another proposal at the

1933 Banff IPR conference that encouraged the League of Nations to set up regional legal “machinery” under which the Manchurian Incident and hundreds of other smaller disputes between the Japanese and Chinese could be negotiated. Although the full implications of this proposal are not known because it was not implemented, it is a remarkable attempt to reconcile the Manchurian situation using the international system of laws and treaties.

The militarism and statism of the Japanese government in the 1930s led them eventually to absorb the Japanese Council of the IPR (JCIPR) into a subsection the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Here again Akami points to the close connection of internationalism to the state, suggesting that cooption has been misinterpreted as failure and actually might have been welcomed. I suspect this was a difficult transition for some IPR veterans, but other IPR insiders approved heartily as evidenced by their full cooperation and even leadership of the transition.

The logical culmination of the IPR’s turn to the state, in both Japan and the United States, in the late 1930s was the American IPR’s offer of service to the U.S. government after the outbreak of the Pacific War. It was gladly received as was the help of the Japanese IPR to the Japanese government in the late 1930-40s. The American IPR placed the experts on Japan at the service the U.S. military and helped in researching the major project of defining the enemy, Japan. The JCIPR was intimately connected with Konoe’s brain trust, a group that advised him on policy between 1937-1941, in which time he served two terms as Prime Minister. That this logical outcome was at the same time an illogical refutation of what the IPR stood for in 1925 seemed to have been lost on the IPR leadership. Perhaps the truth is disclosed most fully in the close relationship between internationalism and the nation throughout this period.

The great strengths of this book are in Akami’s extensive research on and knowledge of Japanese elites, in her ability to place these and other elites within their various contexts with great skill and precision, and in her recognition that the Pacific region in the interwar period was a powerful new way to conceive of a world where Europe was in decline. The book does suffer from cumbersome definitions of interwar internationalism, liberalism, and diplomacy as well as a proliferation of acronyms. This gives the book more precision generally but tends to make the book more difficult to read. But these are minor defects against a book that is immensely useful and filled with important new ways of thinking about the subject of internationalism in the interwar period.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Jon Thares Davidann. Review of Akami, Tomoko, *Internationalizing the Pacific: The United States, Japan and the Institute of Pacific Relations in War and Peace, 1919-1945*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. November, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6882>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.