

Ian Nish. *Japanese Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period*. Westport and London: Praeger, 2002.  
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Reviewed by Bill Sewell (Department of History, Saint Mary's University)  
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## Japan's Interwar Dilemmas

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Ian Nish, professor emeritus of international history at the London School of Economics and Political Science, is perhaps the most well known student of Japanese foreign policy in the English-speaking world today. Although he initially specialized in Anglo-Japanese relations,[1] he has written also on a variety of other aspects of Japan's international relations.[2] Indeed, in addition to Professor Nish's articles and edited collections of documents, his *oeuvre* now includes two volumes of collected writings.[3] Deservedly, he has been honored with at least one festschrift.[4]

The work under review reprises one of Nish's earlier works, though the current monograph focuses on the latter half of that study, that is to say from 1919 to 1943.[5] Nish had little choice in selecting these dates, however, as this study is one in a series, the Praeger Studies of Foreign Policies of the Great Powers, that focuses on the interwar era.[6] This constrains Nish's focus because he cannot deal with Japan's foreign policy during the First World War at any length, something that seems requisite if one is to consider Japanese options at the Paris Peace Conference, which is where the book begins. For his part, Nish suggests that he would have preferred to define Japan's interwar era as the period stretching from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 to the beginning of war with China in 1937 (p. 1). Nish does, however, wisely push back the final date of this interwar era to include some of Japan's wartime diplomacy during the Second World War, something that allows him to discuss

the final outcome of significant long-term trends (p. 2).

The book's inclusion in a series unfortunately seems to have constrained Nish in yet another way—the study is rather short, presumably to insure readability. The book is 212 pages long, including only 182 pages of text.[7] Although this might render the book more marketable with regard to the general public, it certainly makes the task of unraveling Japan's prewar diplomacy more difficult. As Japan's prewar foreign policy was not the exclusive purview of any one group, Nish has to deal with an array of contenders vying to influence foreign policy in a limited space. This tends to make Nish's analysis rather rushed in places, perhaps making the book less useful for academic purposes. Probably most useful in a supporting role, this book would require a fair amount of supplementary readings if it were chosen as the central text for a class focusing on Japanese foreign policy. That said, it is a useful book that satisfactorily situates key issues in Japan's international relations in this era.

For example, Nish introduces his study well, pointing out not only that the road to war with the United States was not inevitable, but also that this relationship is not the only story to consider. Relations with the United States were only one facet of Japan's international attention, and a relatively unimportant one for much of the prewar period. Nish then goes on to discuss some of the materials available to scholars as well as some of the scholarly and popular debates concerning Japanese foreign policy in this era. Although brief, Nish successfully lays out, in the introduction, some of the key parameters

of which students need to be aware.

The book is organized chronologically, with three broad periods evident. Issues arising from the Paris Peace and Washington Conferences along with issues stemming from the rise of nationalism in China are considered first. This enables Nish to explore the era when Japanese policy was the most cooperative with the other powers yet witnesses the sowing of seeds for the later breakdown of this system. The second section of the book deals chiefly with Japan's international relations in an era in which economic problems dominated the landscape and Japanese participation in the international order became increasingly problematic. The last third of the book addresses issues arising from a growing number of confrontations, first with the Soviet Union, then with Nationalist China, and finally with the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. This era witnesses the Japanese retreat from internationalism in favor of a more autonomous foreign policy, though not one entirely without allies. The final chapter, examining foreign policy in what Nish has decided to call the "Asia-Pacific war," ties together a number of trends that had been long brewing.[8]

One of these trends was the gradual relegation of the Foreign Ministry to a secondary role with regard to the formation of foreign policy. This was evident already in prime minister Tanaka Giichi's bypassing of the ministry (p. 58), but became increasingly glaringly obvious when elements of the army began taking foreign policy matters into their own hands. Most famously this occurred in Manchuria in 1931 when, in Nish's words, the army "was in practice running an independent policy of its own" (p. 76), but it was also true a few years later during the Nomonhan Incident (p. 132). Nish, however, singles out the February 26, 1936, Incident because it "inflicted a major wound on the free conduct of Japan's foreign policy, and may, indeed, be described as a major turning point in it" (p. 108). Although structural change did not occur until the establishment of the Ko-Ain, which granted more explicit authority to the military with regard to developing policy for China (p. 127), the threat of violence subdued many.

The reader may question the text, though, on this issue. Given the prolonged nature of this trend, why does the February 26th Incident in particular merit the appellation of a "turning point"? In fact, in some ways it resulted in heightened government control as it assured that hotheads within the military received closer scrutiny. Moreover, if this long-term trend is so impor-

tant, why does Nish not deal more with forces outside the foreign ministry that influenced foreign policy? While to some extent Nish does discuss perceptions among other groups (chiefly the army and navy), there is little beyond that. Why is there not greater attention to internationalists like Goto Shimpei or radical activists like Kita Ikki or Okawa Shumei? Nish's discussion of non-official perceptions of the international environment is rather spotty, and the relationship between Japanese society and foreign policy remains a topic only sporadically addressed.

Another topic deserving of more sustained attention is Manchuria. Although Nish provides useful background information regarding Japanese activities there, he does not do so systematically—in fact Manchuria is not even listed in the index, though Manchukuo is. This is a shame, because Manchuria was, of course, one of the central concerns for all Japanese foreign policy makers as well as one of the issues leading to Pearl Harbor, given U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull's demand for a Japanese withdrawal from the region in 1941 (p. 162). To his credit, Nish does recognize that Manchukuo was more than a simple puppet state. In his conclusion he writes, "Manchukuo was not a failure. Despite many informed predictions to the contrary, the new government survived and made progress. It built up a highly planned economy and a state enterprise under military supervision, a partnership between soldiers and capitalists with some independence from Tokyo" (p. 178). Nish, however, does not explore Japanese motives with regard to this region very deeply and thus does not explain why the establishment of Manchukuo appealed to so many Japanese at home.[9]

Another topic that is touched upon in a somewhat scattered fashion involves the nature of the perceived Soviet threat. While Nish notes here and there some of the Japanese fears regarding the Soviet Union as well as the debate over the China Eastern Railway, there is little discussion of the development of Siberia or the role of the Communist International in China. Nish does, however, suggest that the Nomonhan debacle "probably prevented" Soviet intervention in China (p. 133). If that were indeed the case, then he would do well to provide a broader assessment of Soviet activities. Japanese perspectives of the Soviet Union need also to be made more explicit, including fears of communist agents at work in Japan.

While these comments may suggest that this monograph suffers from being too pared down, they may also

suggest that a different means of organizing the material might be more useful. That is to say, rather than approaching the subject in a more or less chronological fashion, perhaps the study of Japan's prewar international relations should be written as a series of shorter essays, each focusing on one aspect of this history. For example, instead of having individual chapters focus on definable two-, three-, or six-year periods as Nish does here, chapters examining the evolving perceptions and roles of the Japanese army and navy or the Japanese relationship with China or the Soviet Union might be in order. Although it could make tying these various aspects together somewhat difficult, clear periodization within each essay might ameliorate that. In any event, such an approach would at the least provide a more satisfactory means of tracing long-term developments.[10] While Nish has made a good effort to keep his narrative from bouncing from one topic to the next, greater continuity with regard to certain issues would make for more coherent arguments about specific issues.

Such an approach might also enable different conclusions. Nish's concluding chapter is a useful summary, but does little more. He recapitulates his periodization and suggests simplistically that geostrategic realities may have influenced divergent opinions with regard to Japan's foreign policy. He also discusses (all too) briefly the role of the Emperor. His final statements are illustrative, noting that "the general populace followed the extension of Japan's frontiers with approval and regarded progress in the foreign field with some degree of pride. Like their contemporaries in Germany, they were happy to be xenophobic and nationalistic" (p. 182). This may be true but, with the exception of a few figures, Nish does not exactly explain why this is true.

The above comments aside, there are many good aspects to this study. First, there is a wealth of information here. Second, as noted above, Nish follows a variety of important trends. Another he notes involves how foreign policy could be used for domestic purposes. Just as Hara Takashi (Kei) used relations with the United States and China to promote constitutional government (p. 28), Tojo Hideki used the Greater East Asia Conference of 1943 to promote a new "statement of national policy" while "creat[ing] a sense of moral purpose" (p. 174). In this respect Tojo did nothing new.

Outside of what might be thought of as the biggest problem with this study, that of brevity, one might also be tempted to grumble about Nish's use of vague, though stock, phrases like "Japan knew" (p. 20) or that the

endnotes, bibliography, and index are rather short.[11] Purists might also complain that there are no macrons for Japanese transliterations or romanizations of Chinese names in pinyin. One definite shortcoming is a complete absence of maps. Still, Nish does address the key issues of the day in an accessible manner and does so in a way that, on the whole, renders the study one of international relations and not an exercise in diplomatic history. For this the book provides a good if basic introduction to Japanese international relations between 1919 and 1943, and as such will serve as a useful supplement for classes addressing prewar Japanese history.

#### Notes

[1]. Probably most widely known is Ian Nish, *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908-1923* (London: Athlone, 1972), but other works bearing his name include Ian Nish, ed., *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Ian Nish, ed., *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, 2 vols. (Richmond: Japan Library, 1994, 1997); and Ian Nish and Yoichi Kibata, eds., with assistance from Tadashi Kuramatsu, *History of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1600-2000*, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

[2]. For example, see Ian Nish, "The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," in *Coalition Warfare: An Uneasy Accord*, eds. Keith Neilson and Roy A. Prete (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), pp. 125-142; *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (Addison-Wesley, 1986); and *Japan's Struggle with Internationalism: Japan, China and the League of Nations, 1931-1933* (London: Kegan Paul, 1993).

[3]. Ian Nish, *Collected Writings of Ian Nish*, 2 vols. (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001-2002).

[4]. T. G. Fraser and Peter Lowe, eds., *Conflict and Amity in East Asia: Essays in Honour of Ian Nish* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

[5]. Ian Nish, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1869-1942* (London: Routledge, 1977).

[6]. To date, this series includes: H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1940* (London: Praeger, 1997); and Benjamin D. Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941* (London: Praeger, 2001).

[7]. Each of the works cited in note 6 is listed as having 240 pages, presumably including references.

[8]. Nish prefers this term to the more commonly used terms such as the “Second World War,” the “Pacific War,” “the Great East Asian War,” or “the Greater East Asian War,” because he deems it to be a less politicized, more “neutral expression” (pp. 2-3).

[9]. In regard to this issue Nish does at least cite Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Also of interest and published in the same year as Nish’s study is Sandra Wilson, *The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931-33* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

[10]. A useful model might be Janet Hunter, *The Emergence of Modern Japan: An Introductory History since 1853* (London and New York: Longman, 1989).

[11]. Some minor annoyances in the citations suggest that the copy editing of this volume was rather minimal. For example, although Nish provides a list of abbreviations on p. xi, he adds a few more inside the end-

notes leaving it to the reader to track them down (“hereafter cited as”). One is the *Nihon gaiko nenpyo narabi ni shuyo bunsho*, which he notes on p. 185 will thereafter appear as “NGNSB.” However, in addition to mistransliterating the title, he already listed this work on p. xi as the “NGNB.” In another vein, while I think that Nish intended to cite Barbara J. Brooks, *Japan’s Imperial Diplomacy: Consuls, Treaty Ports, and War in China, 1895-1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000) on p. 22, the full citation does not appear in the bibliography. Moreover, on p. 56 it seems that Nish incorrectly cites Kenichi Goto, *Returning to Asia: Japan-Indonesian Relations, 1930-1942* (Tokyo: Ryukei Shosha, 1997) when he probably meant Harumi Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai, 1925-1931* (Basingstoke: St. Antony’s/Macmillan, 1995). Finally, there are several uses of “o cit.”—and even an “ocit.”—in the endnotes. Of course, none of these have any bearing on the content of the study, but taken together they leave the impression that the work may not have been given its due attention.

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