Japan's World War II-era rhetoric about a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” leveraged the long-standing frustrations and hardships endured in the Asia-Pacific region at the hands of mostly European colonial powers, thus persuading many people to welcome Japanese invasion as a step away from subservience and toward what they imagined as prosperity and, implicitly, freedom. Various colonial systems of the British, French, Dutch (and to an extent the United States in the then-protectorate Philippine archipelago) inadvertently prepared much of the populations in question to initially welcome Japanese conquerors with high hopes. Ethan Mark traces the work of Japan’s “Java propaganda squad” and its interactions with leading Indonesian independence figures from the Japanese army's arrival in Java in March 1942 until the last months of World War II.

Mark provides rich detail about these dynamics, particularly for the first two years of Japan's military occupation. Japanese soldiers were cheered in early 1942 by the enthusiastic response of many Javanese, although this was soon tempered by the discovery that the ejection of Dutch colonial authorities was popularly interpreted as a license to loot. The year saw the rise and decline of the “Three-A” movement that aimed to galvanize Indonesian support for Japan's tutelage and war effort. The movement successfully garnered the support of many anti-Dutch notables and also of vulnerable populations such as ethnic Chinese merchants who hoped that participation would mitigate the dangers they faced at the hands of Japanese military government. However, the movement fizzled as it became obvious that the encouragement of Japanese personnel in the propaganda squad did not reflect interest by Japanese decision-makers in the region. Japan's kenpetai police proved quite willing to arrest and interrogate ethnic Chinese and others, without reference to their previous involvement in the pro-Japan Three-A morale campaign.

Having been imprisoned and exiled by pre-war Dutch authorities because of his politics, Sukarno was a charismatic hero across Indonesia. Japanese occupation officials came to view the co-opting of Sukarno as a promising tool for extracting support and cooperation from the islanders. Sukarno, who embraced the Japanese and accepted co-prosperity propaganda seemingly at face value, became boxed in by the worsening conditions in the islands and the increasing brutality of occupation policies as the war continued. Having exuberantly endorsed Japan and explicitly tied his vision of Indonesia's future to the Axis, Sukarno's postwar standing as a political leader depended on a bold reinvention. Mark explores Sukarno's careful postwar efforts to retrospectively re-create
his wartime posture as having been one of tactical cooperation with Japanese occupiers; in his memoirs, Sukarno depicted himself as imbued with a profound ability to anticipate Japanese policy and the outcome of World War II, although his contemporary statements and actions reflect Sukarno's strong wartime adhesion to Japan being followed by a scramble to reinvent events in order to maintain control over the independence movement. This theme of political use of massaged memory is an important factor in Mark's insightful study.

For Mark, October 1943 constituted an inflection point in Japan's extractive policies and the erosion of Indonesian cooperation and sympathy with Japan in the war. The period from 1944 through 1945 is examined in less detail than the preceding two years, but the analysis here nonetheless considers the political costs of the mounting demands made on Indonesians and how Japan's military and civilian authorities' disinterest in learning or respecting Javanese customs and norms counteracted whatever good will that the propaganda squad might have garnered. Many of the squad's original personnel had departed by the end of 1943 and were replaced by people who had to encounter Indonesia and its culture from scratch themselves.

Japan's co-prosperity propaganda became thoroughly discredited by war's end, as Tokyo worked to extract all the natural wealth and human labor it could muster for the sake of its own war efforts. In Indonesia, and throughout Southeast Asia, rapacious use of foreign labor, policies seemingly designed to magnify famine, and killing sprees against targeted populations like the Chinese all undermined phrases about an Asia for the Asians. But the book concludes by pointing to the enduring draw that “mutual cooperation” conceptions in politics in Asia had for decades after World War II, beyond the contexts of their rhetorical use by World War II-era Japan. In countries like Indonesia, where the devastation and privations were suffered unevenly by different ethnic and sociopolitical groups, a real impetus existed following the war and in the independence era for political leaders to obscure the different levels of loss and to instead draw stark if less than accurate generalizations in order to create a shared sense of national experience.
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