Japanese forces invaded Southeast Asia in December 1941, rapidly conquering the Philippines and Malaya, then moving on to drive the British out of Burma and to seize the thinly defended Netherlands Indies. The effort left Japan with overextended supply lines and stretched its military capacity to a degree that was ultimately unsustainable, but the Japanese would hold on to most of their gains for more than three years.

For the Allies, the war against Japan was part of a larger conflict they called World War II. For the Japanese it was the Greater East Asia War, a name the Americans would change by fiat to the Pacific War during the postwar occupation of Japan. Each side accused the other of seeking regional domination and each dressed its struggle in lofty sentiments: the Allies avowedly fought to defend freedom against fascist tyranny and promote the self-determination of peoples, the Japanese to liberate Asia from an exploitative Western domination and seek autonomy and independence for all nations. These principles were embodied in the Atlantic Charter (1941) and the Greater East Asia Declaration (1943) respectively. However, it is easy to identify less noble motives—the Allied desire to restore an international political and economic order that clearly served their interests, for example, and Japan’s determination to have assured access to the markets and raw materials of China and Southeast Asia.

Although the war was a conflict between the Allied Powers and Japan, much of the fighting took place in Southeast Asia and the islands of the South Pacific. On the face of it, neither protagonist offered
significant benefits to the people of these regions. The Allies spoke of democracy, but Western freedoms had been withheld under colonial regimes, and the former colonies were excluded from the Atlantic Charter’s promise of self-determination. The British War Cabinet was explicit about this point, declaring that the charter was “directed to the nations of Europe whom we hoped to free from Nazi tyranny, and was not intended to deal with the internal affairs of the British Empire.” Japan spoke of independence and equality and co-prosperity, but people living in Japanese-controlled areas experienced independence under close Japanese supervision, officials who displayed a clear sense of racial superiority, and severely degraded living conditions.

People in Southeast Asia welcomed the end of the war but did not want a return to the prewar status quo, and the first years after the war in fact brought enormous changes. The Western powers that had governed colonies in the region for many decades or, in the case of the Dutch, for several centuries, returned only briefly after Japan’s surrender, and with their departure a new political order took shape. By 1950 independent governments held power in most of Southeast Asia, and the expulsion of the West appeared to herald a new era.

What, though, did Japan contribute to this process? Was Japan’s war effort only a catalyst, facilitating or accelerating changes that were already underway, or did Japanese rule in some basic way alter the circumstances of the people of the region, or their mentality, and in so doing create a historical watershed? Further, what was the nature of the Japan that emerged from the crucible of war and the American occupation? Were the cruelty, the militarism, and the xenophobia on display during the 1930s and 1940s inherent and ineradicable features of Japanese culture, or a strange aberration arising from economic depression and war? Was postwar Japan truly a changed place, or did the occasional outbursts of wartime rhetoric and the country’s highly publicized controversies over textbook accounts of the war indicate that the old aggressive, chauvinistic Japan was simply hiding behind a new mask? Considered responses to these questions required a knowledge of Japan during the 1930s and
1940s that went beyond the simplifications of popular history, or the clichés uttered by people continuing to fight old battles, and that knowledge was lacking. An enormous literature in English and other Western languages detailed the activities of the Allied powers during the war years but did little to answer these questions. A corresponding literature existed in Japan, including a 104-volume official history of the Pacific War and a huge number of memoirs and scholarly studies, but few outside Japan knew what these publications contained, and accounts presenting the Allied viewpoint did not take notice of what was being said in Japan.2

Across Asia interest in the war rapidly diminished after look to Japan and the war as a model or a source of inspiration but rather to their own prewar pasts and their success in postwar conflicts. Incidentally, the same conflicts gave wartime collaborators an opportunity to set aside their past activities and establish patriotic credentials, a process made easier by the decision of the United States to position Japan as a bulwark of capitalism and anticommunism, thus creating ambiguities in popular views of wartime cooperation with Japan. Communist attacks on nationalist governments in 1948 further tainted the moral authority associated with an anti-Japanese stance during the occupation, for in much of Southeast Asia the communists had been at the heart of the wartime resistance.

Following its own postwar occupation, Japan underwent a phenomenal recovery and emerged as a major economic power in East and Southeast Asia, the region it had once attempted to dominate by force. Wartime subjects of the Japanese Empire did not always welcome the country’s new incarnation, but generations were coming to maturity for whom the war was an episode in the lives of parents or grandparents. They had little or no personal animosity toward Japan, a country they knew through an incongruous mixture of lurid war stories, accounts in school textbooks, television shows, a brightly colored and very appealing pop culture, encounters with Japanese tourists, and smoothly functioning and attractive consumer products.

In Japan and in some Southeast Asian countries, politicians treat the war as a matter already resolved by treaties, a dead issue that need
not be revisited. Yet the war does not go away. It emerges in the form of incautious or perhaps calculated remarks by political figures and in public observances, films and television serials, novels and popular histories, and school textbooks. It lingers, too, in subcurrents of memory, for terrible things happened between 1941 and 1945, including the deaths of large numbers of people drawn into a war that was not of their own making. Those who survived spent nearly four years living in a world laced with fear and endured severe deprivations, including shortages of food, medicine, and clothing, while many lost their jobs, their homes, and most of their possessions.

In Southeast Asia there are people who feel that Japan never offered an adequate apology for its actions, or sufficient compensation, and over the years the discovery of fresh evidence of Japanese misdeeds—such as mass graves or information about forced prostitution—has produced hostile reactions that show the war has not been forgotten or forgiven. In Japan a vocal right-wing minority continues to press the view that the war was a principled act of self-sacrifice to achieve honorable goals—in Southeast Asia the liberation of the region from Western control. The idea that the war can be justified in this fashion is a persistent and somewhat pernicious feature of Japanese politics. The present volume rebuts such claims by looking at Japan’s relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, and argues that the case can only be made if negative features of the occupation are disregarded, and if no consideration is given to local political activity within the occupied territories.

It has often been suggested that Japan has concealed information about wartime activities, and that Japanese understandings of the war are simply a refusal to face unpalatable truths. Henry Frei, a Swiss scholar of Japanese history, disagrees: “where early Japanese histories remembered the victories, recent reminiscences now talk about war guilt as well.” Basing his remarks on a detailed study of Japanese accounts of the Malayan campaign, he writes, “the former general staff recalls mainly the fame, soldiers remember the fighting, intellectuals today debate the killings, and social science recommends an interdisciplinary approach to promote objectivity in the recording
of Japan’s Malayan past.” Surveys conducted in Japan during the 1980s support the idea that there is a general awareness in Japan of the actions that have generated widespread condemnation, and people expressed considerable remorse for the wartime behavior of Japanese forces; more than 80 percent of those responding to a government questionnaire agreed with the proposition, “We must reflect on the shameful discrimination, persecution, and massacres against the Koreans and Chinese.” At the same time, however, substantial numbers of respondents felt that the war may have been unavoidable, and that it had a positive outcome for the countries of Southeast Asia that were liberated from Western colonial rule.

Some Japanese argue that the country has gone too far in the direction of self-criticism and even self-denigration. Chapter 12 quotes a war veteran named Fusayama Takao, who complains that an “apologetic diplomacy” has given rise to a belief that it is only necessary to criticize Japan to receive offers of money. As Fusayama’s comment suggests, the war has to some extent become entangled with present-day issues. In Southeast Asia, politicians making statements about subjects such as race relations, defense, and international alliances have used it as a convenient analogy in order to avoid openly referring to sensitive matters. For example, a pacifist Japan without offensive military capabilities posed little danger to postwar Southeast Asia, but Japan’s earlier aggression provided a justification for military build-ups directed against possible threats from neighboring countries.

Over time a substantial disjuncture has developed between remembered images of the occupation and current realities. The second half of the twentieth century all but obliterated the wartime world across much of Asia, and memoirs written about the 1930s and 1940s portray alien landscapes, with streets and buildings, people and societies, and ideas that appear unrelated to the contemporary situation. In Singapore the municipal building where Japan surrendered still stands alongside the broad playing field known locally as the Padang, but the urban landscape surrounding it has changed beyond all recognition, and the same is true of most of the other cities where
Japanese military administrations once held sway. In Japan the fire-bombed urban areas have been rebuilt, and the country itself, once noted for its military prowess and thought control, has become a place profoundly opposed to war, where freedom of speech and the right to criticize government officials are used and treasured. By the end of the twentieth century, Japan was an ally and major trading partner of the countries of Southeast Asia, and Japanese tourists were ubiquitous and welcome throughout the region.

The people of Southeast Asia now largely base their awareness of the war and occupation on taught versions of events rather than the memories of participants. There are few general histories of the war years that deal extensively with Southeast Asian affairs, but local understandings of the period can be found in memoirs and in the collections of various national archives and oral history programs. However, few people read these materials, and what is known of the war comes primarily from school textbooks, supplemented by occasional television shows and other public presentations. As a rule, textbooks used in the region offer a brief overview of Japan’s rapid economic expansion dating back to the late nineteenth century and discuss the rise of militarism and an aggressive nationalism, the country’s need for oil, and the invasion and conquest of Southeast Asia. For the occupation, they record Japan’s policy of granting independence to Burma and the Philippines while retaining possession of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian archipelago, the cruel treatment meted out to local people, the horrors associated with labor conscription, hardships arising from deteriorating economic and physical conditions, anti-Japanese movements, and the emperor’s eventual capitulation. Japan’s wartime claim to have liberated Southeast Asia from colonial rule receives scant attention, and the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere is not taken seriously. Whether these Japanese initiatives deserve fuller treatment is debatable, and the present volume suggests they do not, but the lack of discussion of Japan’s impact on the region is remarkable, as is the absence of references to the ideological conflict between a state-centered totalitarianism and democratic institutions emphasizing individual liberties.
The issue that most concerns writers of Southeast Asian textbooks is independence, and nationalism is generally reduced to this objective, a simplification that gives a peculiar twist to accounts of the war and occupation. In driving out the Western colonial powers the Japanese accomplished one of the primary objectives of local nationalist leaders, but they disappointed local nationalists by failing to hand over power immediately. The military administrations moved local civil servants into senior positions, created local military forces, and put local people through various training programs designed to develop skills and build character, policies that had lasting consequences—for example, in shaping patterns of local-level organization and the ethos and structure of the region’s military forces. School textbooks say little about the role of Japan in the winning of independence and nation building, and trace the origins of the institutions and political thinking that characterized postwar Southeast Asia to local and Western colonial sources, perhaps with a slight contribution from Japan. One Malaysian textbook puts the matter this way: in Malaya the Japanese occupation “heightened the struggle for national awareness, as also happened in other Southeast Asian countries.”

It is difficult to find clear and reasonably unbiased accounts of the war years. Both the Japanese and the Allies made extensive use of false propaganda before and during the conflict and built on this foundation after 1945. During the 1930s the Japanese operated newspapers in various parts of Southeast Asia and distributed news bulletins in English, Chinese, and Japanese through the Eastern News Agency (Tōhō Tsūshin Sha), established in 1938. During the occupation newspapers were little more than propaganda organs for the Japanese. K. R. Menon, a journalist with the wartime Indo shimbunsha in Singapore, later said, “It’s all the same old stuff. . . . Praising the Japanese, you know, and praising their war efforts and running down the British and Americans. There was nothing interesting there, you see that.” For their part, the Allies made use of “black” propaganda, statements known to be false that were designed to discredit Japan. A report on the activities of the Oriental Mission of
Britain’s Special Operations Executive contains the following statement: “Through an agreement reached with a world-wide news organization it was possible for us to release news presented from ‘our point of view’ and to release rumors on an international basis. Some seventy-two newspapers in British and Allied countries were secretly influenced. . . . it was one of our most efficient anti-Japanese weapons.” The Oriental Mission also distributed feature films, documentaries, and photographs through normal commercial channels. “These pictures—mainly fakes, presented British and anti-Japanese propaganda in a most acceptable form.”8 The lies and distortions employed by both sides continue to taint accounts of the war period.

The struggle to shape understandings of the war continued after the conflict ended. A statement by the Japanese governor of Penang on 20 August 1945, almost a week after the surrender, illustrates the tone of Japan’s postwar propaganda. He asserted that the war was fought for the benefit of Asia as a whole, a point that remains a staple of those who seek to justify Japanese aggression: “Since Nippon declared war against the United States of America and Great Britain for the purpose of self-preservation and stabilizing East Asia, Nippon had carried on the war very bravely in order to liberate all races in East Asia, for nearly four years.” The same issue of the newspaper stated that the emperor chose to end the war because of America’s use of the atomic bomb, an act that attracted criticism from “all countries in the world.” Had the war continued, “the devastation suffered by all innocent peoples in Greater East Asia under the occupation of the Nippon Army and Navy as well as Nippon subjects themselves will surpass all imagination, and accordingly all human civilization shall be destroyed at last.” The emperor’s action was a sign of his benevolence, “which is always presented toward the peace of the world and the happiness of all races.”9 This interpretation of the conflict has been hotly contested in postwar Japan, but still appears in right-wing publications. In Southeast Asia, and in occupied Japan, the Allies moved quickly and effectively to eradicate Japanese propaganda and perpetuate their own version of what happened before and during the war. The accounts of events found
in schoolbooks and other sources in Southeast Asia draw heavily on this Allied story of the war, augmented by local details, and pay little attention to Japanese explanations.

In Southeast Asia younger generations have grown up knowing little about the war years, and the same is true in Japan. The *Japan Times* published a letter in May 1999 that said, “the Japanese never considered the Southeast Asians as human beings. They were considered inferiors, so the Japanese are reluctant to apologize.” When a Japanese reader showed this statement to a Malaysian friend studying in Japan, he was gratified by the response: “This is bunkum. She doesn’t know the truth of World War II in Malaysia.” He continued, “I had thought that the Japanese army killed many Malaysians in wartime, but my friend said that Japanese didn’t commit atrocities in Malaysia. They only fought the British soldiers, and Chinese guerrillas who cooperated with the British. In addition, he told me that the Japanese soldiers who were in Indonesia made a great contribution to the independence of Indonesia from the Netherlands after World War II. . . . I felt encouraged by my friend’s considerate remarks.” He concluded, “Westerners are inclined to bash Japanese for their war crimes,” but the original letter “bashes Japan and uses it as a scapegoat” through ignorance of history, promoting a categorical view that “has something in common with a brainwashed education.” These remarks generated several replies, but none by people who appeared to know much about the war. One had “traveled and worked extensively in Southeast Asia” and had found that Indonesians hold views of Japan and its wartime activities that are “decidedly equivocal and usually strongly dependent on age.” Another said the comments revealed a “dangerous confidence” that came “from knowing little and guessing the rest,” while the last word went to a man who said Japan had no need to apologize because “all is permissible” in military conflict. None of the correspondents mentioned the mass killings of Chinese carried out by the Japanese in Malaya, or the use of forced labor, or the torture of victims of all races by the military police, incidents that are well attested, even if the exact number of victims remains highly contentious.
The present volume makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the period, or of Japan’s relations with Southeast Asia as a whole. Rather, it offers insights into relations between Japan and Southeast Asia at various levels and at different times between the 1930s and the postwar era. The author says little about the large issues that drove the conflict—Japan’s need for natural resources and outlets for trade, the struggle to control large parts of East and Southeast Asia, and the clash of ideologies—but focuses instead on individuals, looking at the ideas that motivated them, the goals they hoped to achieve, and the success or failure that attended their efforts. The essays discuss famous figures of the period, including Tōjō Hideki, Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta, Ba Maw, and Jose P. Laurel, but also consider the lives and activities of Southeast Asian students in Japan before and during the war, and of ordinary Japanese in Southeast Asia. The author is often critical of the Japanese, highlighting hypocrisy and betrayals on the part of various officials, overly ambitious plans, failures to understand or respect the peoples and cultures of Southeast Asia, and racial arrogance, but he also shows something of the thinking that lay behind Japanese actions as well as the relentless logic of the situation.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first explores Japan’s growing interest in Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s and its involvement with the region during the war. The Meiji Restoration had produced an enthusiasm for things Western and a lack of regard for things Asian, but the two decades that preceded the war were characterized by a “return to Asia.”12 To some extent this movement was directed toward traditional areas of Japanese concern in China and northeast Asia, but Southeast Asia was beginning to attract attention in a variety of quarters, both civilian and military. For businessmen Southeast Asian markets became increasingly significant when trade slowed in other parts of the world during the Depression of the 1930s. The Indonesian archipelago (the prewar Netherlands East Indies) in particular offered a large and populous region where Japanese goods sold more cheaply than competing imports from the West. Military interest in the region
began with the navy, which saw the South China Sea and the water-oriented world of archipelagic Southeast Asia as a natural field of endeavor and the mandated territories under Japanese control in the South Pacific as a logical point of entry. For the army, the mainland portion of Southeast Asia became significant in the latter part of the decade, when the colonial territories of Southeast Asia provided a conduit through which China obtained supplies to wage its fight against occupying Japanese forces. Toward the end of the 1930s oil was a major concern; Japan’s aggression in China and then in French Indochina led the Western powers to curtail Japan’s access to this crucial commodity, and the Indonesian archipelago possessed vulnerable oil fields that became Japan’s primary target when its forces moved into the region at the end of 1941. The outbreak of war increased the importance of the region, and chapters dealing with Tōjō Hideki and with wartime Southeast Asian elites explore how this situation developed.

The second section of the book focuses on various aspects of Japan’s relations with the Indonesian archipelago. Two chapters examine the experiences of Southeast Asian students in Japan and particularly those from Indonesia, who were attracted by the ideological ferment taking place within Japanese society and struggled to relate what they were experiencing in East Asia to the situation in their homeland. The other two chapters explore tensions between Japan and Indonesian partisans in the early days of Indonesia’s postwar struggle for independence and the dilemma faced by individual Japanese when Japan withdrew promised support for Indonesian nationalism, and Japanese forces came into conflict with local partisans.

The final section concerns Japan’s relations with postwar Southeast Asia, looking at decolonization and the shaping of a new regional order. Two chapters consider Japan’s evolving relations with Malaya and Indonesia and how the legacy of war affected these ties. A third chapter explores efforts to create an Asia-Pacific regional organization to replace the colonial networks that provided a political and economic infrastructure for the territories of Southeast Asia before independence. The concluding chapter returns to the theme
of the first, examining Japanese attitudes toward Southeast Asia and the war period in the second half of the twentieth century, when Japan’s image of its own past, as found in films and other public presentations as well as school textbooks, was strongly disputed.

The present volume draws on three sets of understandings of the war and occupation, those of the Japanese, the Allied powers, and the countries of Southeast Asia. The research is formidable and the scholarship very solid. For readers who do not know Japanese, the collection provides the added service of opening a window into Japanese thinking on these matters, both at the time and subsequently. It can be difficult even to raise the question of a Japanese perspective on the war, for the suggestion that prevailing understandings are incorrect seems in the West to be slightly subversive, while in Japan it can suggest sympathy with right-wing causes or trigger right-wing hostility. For this reason, the publication of these articles is an act of personal courage and integrity, even though they are not written in a partisan spirit and provide balanced and nuanced judgments that do not conform to the prejudices of either side.

The world might be a better place if people would truly put wars behind them, but they do not. Grievances and a sense of injustice linger, and death and destruction on the scale of the Pacific War take on a mythic quality. The war was a saga of pain, suffering, and death that violated basic moral and ethical principles, and the realization that there never can be an adequate accounting hangs like a dark cloud over the middle years of the twentieth century. It helps to understand these events in terms of the actions of ordinary people, on both sides, and not as a conflict fought against the enemy caricatured in propaganda and national mythology. This book goes some way toward achieving that goal.