



Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era, by Meron Medzini

Sherzod Muminov

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Book Review

Meron Medzini, *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2016, xii+220 pp.

Thousands of studies of the Holocaust – the systematic destruction of over six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies – have seen the light of day in the past decades. Few of them, however, investigate the attitude and policies of Japan – an ally of Hitler’s Germany during the Second World War – towards the Jews. At first glance, this neglect seems unsurprising, considering the fact that before the Second World War the majority of Japanese ‘had never seen a Jew in their lives.’ Yet as Japan expanded its Asian empire, around 40,000 Jews came under its control, many of them having fled from the carnage in Europe. How did the Japanese treat Jews at the time that their German allies were implementing the Final Solution?

Meron Medzini’s *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*, originally published in Israel, sets out to answer this complex question. It is a readable overview of Japanese attitudes towards Jewish residents and migrants during the Holocaust era, although Medzini casts his net wide to survey a longer historical period since the late nineteenth century. In thirteen brief chapters, he presents a patchwork of Jewish history in Asia, documenting various episodes of mutual encounters: Jewish communities in various parts of East and Southeast

Asia, Japanese perceptions of the Jews, the impact of the ‘Jewish question’ on the German–Japanese relations during the Second World War, and Japanese policies towards Jewish migrants.

Medzini argues that while the Japanese attitudes towards Jews were ambiguous and rarely monolithic, there was little prejudice or hostility, conditioned perhaps by the scarcity of mutual interaction. Despite flashes of anti-Semitism in Japan of the early twentieth century, inspired largely by Russian immigrants and officers who first spread conspiracy theories among the Japanese readership, Jews were never seriously considered as threatening to destroy Japan. Japanese officials variously viewed Jews as a bane or blessing for their empire’s interests in Asia and the world. Taking to heart old canards about Jewish influence among the western elites, some Japanese leaders viewed their Jewish residents as potentially useful agents in mending relations with the United States and the United Kingdom. In the eyes of others, these conspiracy theories, such as the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, served to reinforce pre-conceptions about the west and its opposition to Japan’s expansion in Asia.

Yet these theories had little influence on policy when the Japanese officials had to make decisions influencing the lives of thousands of Jews, Medzini argues. Japan ‘neither went out of its way either to rescue Jews ... nor sought out and destroyed those Jews who came under its rule from 1931 to

1945.’ This is the book’s argument in one sentence; despite the lack of consensus on the Jews’ influence on the empire’s fortunes, Japanese authorities treated them similarly to other foreigners. This is an important observation, showing that in direct opposition to its Nazi ally which singled out Jews for their identity, the Japanese treated them according to their citizenship; thus Jews from the Soviet Union, which had signed a non-aggression pact with Japan, received better treatment than British or French Jews. Yet even the German Jews, deprived of their citizenship by the Nazis, were never under the threat of extermination, despite Berlin’s repeated demands that the Japanese government extend racial policies towards the Jews under its control. In fact, some Japanese citizens were instrumental in rescuing Jews from certain death, most notably the Vice Consul in Lithuania, Sugihara Chiune, who in 1940 issued over 2000 transit visas to Jews enabling them to travel to Japan on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Why did Japan defy its ally’s racially motivated policies towards Jews? First of all, claims Medzini, the Japanese leadership was loath to follow the dictates of Berlin because it took a dim view of Nazi racial theories that consigned the Japanese to a lower rung of evolutionary development than the Aryans. Race, however, was not the only reason; despite the German–Japanese alliance, there was little communication and coordination during the Second World War between Berlin and Tokyo, and German attempts to influence Japan’s policies were rarely successful. For example, *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun* documents how Tokyo ignored repeated German requests to join the war against the Soviet Union, or to build ghettos for the Jews under its control (one ghetto was built in Shanghai but Jews were treated more humanely there than in

European ghettos). The conspiracy theories might have had an unexpected side effect, too: the belief that Jews were influential in the United States and the United Kingdom might have stopped even the most anti-Semitic among the Japanese officials from harming the Jewish populations under their rule.

Even such an astute work illuminating an understudied area of history is not without minor issues. The book’s quest to cover such a complex issue in just over 200 pages inevitably dictated that breadth be favored over depth. While the bulk of the book is built on a clear-eyed dissection of facts, towards the end of the work the author indulges in a few sweeping generalizations that are not always substantiated with evidence. Writing about the Japan of the 1990s, for example, Medzini claims that ‘the thrust of anti-foreignism was to blame America, but since bashing America was not politically correct, the Jews were an easy target.’ And while the book is generally well-presented, the editors have overlooked numerous typos and inconsistencies in writing Japanese names.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not diminish the work’s value and contribution, and will not stop the readership from enjoying its findings. This overview of an important subject largely unknown in English-language scholarship will attract readers interested in the histories of the Holocaust and of Japan’s empire, as well as the related fields of international relations and the Second World War.

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Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies,
University of Cambridge
smm86@cam.ac.uk
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