

The German and Japanese Empires

Great Power Competition and the World Wars in Trans-Imperial Perspective

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Introduction

On January 18, 1942, Germany, Japan and Italy divided up the world.¹ They did so along the 70th meridian east. As far as the expansive Eurasian landmass was concerned, the two Axis powers Japan and Germany set up what they envisioned to become two large imperial blocs. In the months that followed, their territorial expansions reached their highpoints, whereas Italy lost its empire. From then on, the Axis never got closer to realizing its dream of a new imperial world order.

This chapter discusses how Germany and Japan reached this point by focusing on the shared imperial history of the two powers. To be sure, Italy was the third party of the Axis alliance, with far-reaching imperial aims in the Mediterranean and Africa.² While its important role in the history of the alliance is far too often neglected, the framing and the limited scope of this chapter, however, did not allow a systematic treatment of the Italian dimension, even if occasional references are made to it. A more fully developed trans-imperial and entangled history of all three Axis powers is required in the future.³

But even for the Japanese and German cases alone, neither a connected history of their empires nor a systematic comparison between them exists, even though the literature occasionally pointed to the similarities of their projects of empire-building.⁴ Yet, from a comparative perspective, a set of striking similarities and parallels emerge: seen from the year 1942, both the German and Japanese empires were as megalomaniacal as they were short-lived. As both were wartime bubbles, it is difficult to assess their ultimate goals and the shape they would have taken. However, despite all their inconsistency and ephemerality, one thing is certain—in

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² Mallett 2003; Kallis 2003; Gooch 2007; Martin 2016.

³ Hedinger 2017.

⁴ Geyer 2004, 82–83. One exception is the comparative chapter on the Japanese and German wartime empires, by Gann 1996.