World War II

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World War II began in earnest on July 7, 1937, when Japanese and Chinese soldiers skirmished near the so-called Marco Polo Bridge in the suburbs of Beijing. Although the Japanese invasion of China which began that summer was not planned aggression by the Japanese army, which saw the Soviet Union as its primary enemy, saw little value in conquering China. The second Sino-Japanese War was a conflict waiting to happen. Because of the 1901 Boxer Protocol, each of the nations that had diplomatic representation in Beijing, including Japan, were allowed to station troops there to guard their legations, and these Japanese troops carried out periodic maneuvers in the outskirts of the Chinese capital. It was Japanese troops of this mission who clashed with troops of the local warlord, Song Zheyuan. Song, who was a quasi-independent regional leader and paid only nominal obeisance to the Nationalist Government in Nanjing, and the local Japanese commander quickly negotiated a ceasefire to avoid all-out war, but each was overruled, one by Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro in Tokyo, and the other by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in Nanjing.

Invasion of China

In August, the Japanese committed to a full-scale invasion of China, largely because they overestimated their own fighting skill and esprit while they underrated the tenacity of their enemy. The army's leaders believed that Chinese soldiers would be no match for the troops of the Japanese Imperial Army, guided by their Yamato damashii, that is, the soldiers' spiritual connection with their semi-divine emperor. In September 1937, Japanese troops moved south and west from Beijing. One force attacked down the Tianjin-Nanjing road; another along the Beijing-Wuhan railroad; and a third contingent moved west toward the Great Wall. The first two faced traditional-style enemy resistance but moved quickly, covering three or four hundred miles within four months.

But the Western thrust met strong resistance from the Eighth Route Army commanded by Zhu De of the Chinese Communist Party, a kind of resistance that should have prepared the Japanese generals for the next eight years of warfare in China. Zhu avoided positional battles with the Japanese, who had tanks, artillery and airplanes. His troops marched at night using local people as guides, struck small, isolated groups of Japanese troops, and immediately withdrew. He made no attempt to hold his positions, thus avoiding counterattacks by Japanese airplanes. Even when the Japanese finally

broke through the Eighth Route Army's resistance, they did not destroy the army. It escaped into the interstices to regroup and prepare to fight again.

Even confrontational resistance was not a complete failure for the Chinese, although the Japanese won most of the battles. The Chinese fought bravely, and at Tai'erhzhuang in April 1938, they actually surrounded two Japanese divisions, although ultimately they withdrew and let the Japanese escape. In mid-May 1938, after the Japanese reached Suzhou, Chiang took the dramatic step of destroying the Yellow River dikes where the river merged with the Huai River. While this step temporarily slowed the Japanese advance, it also destroyed four thousand villages and their crops. Because of this defensive step, two million people were made homeless, and hundreds of thousands suffered severely from famine and disease.

Atrocities in Nanjing

To aid the troops moving south toward Nanjing and Wuhan, in late August 1937, the Japanese made another landing near Shanghai. The Chinese troops defending Shanghai fought bravely, and in spite of the Japanese army's superiority in airplanes, tanks and artillery, the defenders held out for three months. But after the Japanese outflanked Shanghai by landing 30,000 men to its south, the port city fell, and the Japanese army raced to the Chinese capital of Nanjing, which collapsed after only a few days of fighting, on December 13, 1937.

After the fall of Nanjing, Japanese soldiers carried out one of the most brutal atrocities in the history of warfare. In January of 1938, Japanese soldiers conducted an orgy of looting, arson, rape, torture, and murder, in which between 42,000 and 400,000 people were killed, and many, many more were maimed or otherwise wounded. The Rape of Nanjing, as this incident has been named, is a highly contentious aspect of Chinese, Japanese, and other nations' memory of World War II even today, and the wide discrepancy in the number of dead (low in the accounting of some Japanese writers, high in that of other Japanese and most Chinese ones) is an indication of the fervor of the debate both within Japan and internationally. But whether the number of dead is "merely" 42,000 or much higher, there is no doubt that a large number of people suffered horribly in Nanjing in the winter of 1937-1938. Similar atrocities occurred in other parts of China on a smaller scale throughout the years of the invasion.

While the magnitude of the Rape of Nanjing is controversial, the reasons for its occurrence are also contested. While some argue that the Japanese commanders ordered the orgy to weaken Chinese resistance to the invasion (General Matsui Iwane, the commander in Nanjing in 1937-1938, was tried at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunals, found guilty, and executed in 1948), there is no direct evidence to support this

conclusion. Written orders to rape, loot, and murder have not been found. Other interpretations are as follows: the Japanese soldiers, led to believe they would easily conquer China, were frustrated by the slowness of their advance, and took it out on the citizens of China's capital. The atrocities represented a kind of transfer of aggression; Japanese peasant-soldiers, brutalized by their own landlords and officers, took out their frustrations on the Chinese. Japanese soldiers, endlessly bombarded with the idea that they, the subjects of a divine emperor, were by nature superior to Chinese, looked on their enemy as less than human and thus easy to treat bestially.

Japan's Control of China

The Japanese, despite occasional setbacks or slowdowns, had conquered most of northern and eastern China by autumn of 1938. The last urban centers, Wuhan, up the Yangtze River from Nanjing, and Guangzhou, near Hong Kong, fell to the Japanese in October 1938. The Nationalist government moved its capital to Chongqing, one thousand miles west of Shanghai and Nanjing, safely outside the Japanese area of conquest, but also far from the center of the war of resistance against the aggressors. Moreover, with Shanghai and Guangzhou, China's major treaty ports gone, the Chinese government's only contact with the United States and Great Britain was through Southeast Asia. When the Japanese took Hainan Island, close to the coast of Indochina, in February 1939, China was even more isolated from its potential allies.

By the end of 1938, Japan seemed to have all of northern and central and much of southern China under its control, at least on the map. But from then until the end of the war in the summer of 1945, the Japanese were never able to control China completely. The Japanese army had miscalculated: it had taken on a war it did not have the capability to win. While the Japanese army was better equipped and trained than the Chinese, it was never large enough to control a country the size of China; an army of one million soldiers at its peak could not control a country of three hundred million, especially as the Japanese atrocities, many of them conducted as counterinsurgency operations, transformed Chinese peasants into Chinese nationalists. Guerrilla warfare tactics, a la Zhu De, prevented the Japanese from controlling China.

The Japanese found they could control the points and lines, that is, the cities and railroads, but little in between. The Japanese would carry out an effective counterinsurgency operation in one area and drive the guerrillas out, only to have new insurgencies break out and the guerrillas reappear elsewhere. In the end, the Japanese, in spite of its superior army, could not control China. Over five hundred thousand Japanese soldiers died in China. With all due respect to the fighting ability of the American, British, Australian, and Indian soldiers and sailors, China's resistance played a major role in Japan's defeat in 1945.

Japan Became Isolated

Japan's invasion of China in 1937 isolated it diplomatically from the United States and Great Britain. Although trade continued, the two primary Western governments were enraged by Japan's actions. The Japanese particularly angered the British, the dominant economic and industrial power in Shanghai, by their attack on that city. But neither the United States nor Great Britain came to China's support. Anglo-America, in the depths of an economic depression, did not have money or military power to lend China, and President Roosevelt in the United States faced a powerful isolationist movement that opposed any U.S. involvement, even indirect, in the war. In fact, the best Chinese divisions in resisting the Japanese in 1937 were trained by German officers. While Chiang Kai-shek hoped for Anglo-American support, it never came. The Sino-Japanese War was a stalemate from 1938 until the Pacific War broke out in December 1941, with Chiang primarily fighting the Chinese Communists, whom he feared more than the Japanese.

In Tokyo, the Japanese army's leaders, frustrated over the impasse as they had expected an easy victory, debated how to end the war in China. General Ishiwara Kanji, who had opposed the invasion of China in the summer of 1937, reiterated his realistic argument of the previous year, that China was too large to conquer, had little to offer Japan in the way of raw materials (excluding northeast China, which the Japanese army, under Ishiwara's leadership, had already seized in 1931-1932), and that his own army, by invading and brutalizing China, had galvanized Chinese nationalism, making it even more difficult to subdue. Most of the other army brass, however, rejected Ishiwara's analysis and, although he was once considered the brightest man in the army, he was transferred to a minor post, then retired in 1941, prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. His fellow officers continued to believe in the invincibility of the Imperial Army, the myth that they had invaded China in a "holy war" to liberate it from Western imperialism, and that the reason for China's successful resistance was British and American support for Chiang Kai-shek, support which was in fact non-existent.

In the late 1930s, the military gradually took control of the Japanese government, spent money with no idea of where it was coming from, and began to look around for new areas to incorporate into its imperialist domain. By 1938 through 1940, the area the military eyed most consistently was Southeast Asia. Why? First, the army conducted the China war, and the navy wanted a piece of the action. An invasion of American, French, British, and Dutch colonies to the south would give it an ample stage for operations. Second, Japan was seeking an end to the war in China, and given the army's view that it was British and American support that kept Chiang fighting, it saw Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Burma as obvious targets.

Third, in 1939, war broke out in Europe, and by the summer of 1940, Germany had conquered Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, and much of France. The rest was organized into the Vichy regime, under the leadership of Marshal Petain, which collaborated with the Nazis. This meant that French Indochina, that is, present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, was the territory of a regime friendly to Japan. Fourth, the German blitzkrieg victories of 1940 strengthened the hands of the fascist faction in Japan. In July, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro ordered his foreign minister, Matsuoka Yosuke, to begin negotiations with Germany and Italy for a three-nation pact, and in September the Tripartite Pact was signed in Berlin. The treaty recognized the "new order" in Europe and Asia, that is, the leadership of the three signatory nations in their respective parts of the world, and also obligated the other two powers to enter a war against any major nation if that nation were to enter the war. Because in autumn of 1940, the United States was the only power not yet involved in the war, it was clear to all three Axis nations whom the alliance targeted. The victories of Japan's new German ally emboldened the Japanese military to act decisively.

Pacific War

In the same month that Japan signed its treaty with Germany and Italy, Japanese army moved into northern Indochina, into the colony of its French "ally." This action motivated the United States to begin incrementally embargoing the export of goods to Japan. In the summer of 1941, as Japan moved into southern Indochina, the United States, together with its British and Dutch allies, froze Japanese assets in the United States and placed a strict embargo on the export of oil to Japan. Since the United States was the primary source of petroleum that fueled Japan's ships and airplanes, Japan was in a desperate situation. While the United States took these steps to force the Japanese to compromise, the leaders of the imperial army and navy, looking at the world from their own hard-line position, felt that they were forced into a corner, and that compromise was not an option. In spite of the relative strength of the U.S. economy and British economies (the U.S. was over five times, and the British twice as large as the Japanese economy in 1941), the only choice for Japan's leaders, from their perspective, was war. The war began on December 7, 1941 (December 8, Tokyo time), when the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor. It is almost certain that the fuel that moved the attacking fleet and powered the attacking planes came from Texas and Oklahoma.

The war between the United States and its allies and Japan can be divided into four phases: first, Japan's initial overwhelming success from December 7, 1941 until the summer of 1942. During this time, Japan not only crippled the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, but also conquered the American colony in the Philippines, the British colonies in Malaya, Burma, and Singapore, the Dutch colonies in Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Celebes, and the other islands that now comprise Indonesia, most of the immense

island of New Guinea, and a variety of other south and central Pacific islands. In fact, Japan, in these approximately seven months of running wild, conquered far more territory than in their wildest projections prior to the start of the war.

The second phase can best be called "deadlock in the Pacific," from the time of the Battle of Coral Sea in May 1942, when the Japanese were forced to abandon their plan to seize Port Moresby in southeastern New Guinea to threaten American supply lines to Australia, and of the Battle of Midway in June 1942, when the Japanese carelessly lost four aircraft carriers and hundreds of planes and skilled pilots, until the American counterattack began in earnest with the landing on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands (present-day Kiribati) in November 1943.

The counterattack was made possible by the immense industrial capacity of the United States. In the two years leading up to the Marine Corps' landing on Tarawa, factories in cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Baltimore produced tons of steel and thousands of airplanes, ships, rifles, artillery, and other weapons of war. In the same period, the army and navy trained thousands of soldiers, sailors, and pilots.

With the landing on Tarawa, the third phase, the allied counterattack, began in earnest. Two American commands, one in the southwest Pacific under the command of General Douglas MacArthur, and the other in the central Pacific under Admiral Chester Nimitz, approached Japan in a giant pincer movement. MacArthur's fleet and troops moved up the Solomon, Bismarck, Admiralty and Molucca Islands and along the coast of New Guinea until landing in the Philippines in October 1944. Nimitz's fleet and marines moved from the Gilbert Islands to the Marshall Islands, and finally in the summer of 1944 to the Mariana Islands. Both MacArthur's and Nimitz's forces used the renowned "island hopping" technique. Naval forces would enter into the area of a Japanese-occupied island chain, carry out naval and air bombardments of all the islands in the group, and then send troops ashore onto a few of the islands. Once these islands were taken, naval engineers would go ashore and build airfields, from which land-based planes could establish control of the skies throughout the archipelago. The American forces would not bother to invade the other Japanese-controlled islands in the chain, since the troops there, without air or sea support, were at the mercy of the American planes. These Japanese troops were completely isolated and unable to play any further role in the war. After an island chain was pacified, the fleet and troops would move on to the next archipelago and repeat the process. When the Japanese finally surrendered in August 1945, small garrisons of starving Japanese soldiers were found on islands across the central and southern Pacific.

The landings on Saipan and Guam in the Marianas in June 1944 were preceded by the Battle of the Philippine Sea, and the American "return" to the Philippines in October by

the Battle of Leyte Gulf, during which the last vestiges of Japanese naval and naval air capacity (except for suicide attacks) were eliminated. By mid-July 1944, it was so clear to Tokyo's decision-makers that Japan was losing the war that they forced General Tojo Hideki, Japan's prime and army minister since before the attack on Pearl Harbor, to resign to take responsibility for Japan's continual defeats. And yet, the war continued for another year until Japan finally surrendered, reinforcing the dictum that wars are easier to begin than to end. Tojo's successor, naively believing that the Soviet Union, not yet in the war, would use its influence to broker a deal with the United States, determined to fight on. Stalin, understanding that joining the war on the allied side would bring the U.S.S.R. more benefits than a negotiated end to the war (which was unacceptable to the allies anyway), sat on the Japanese peace feeler. Thus, in the spring of 1945, the final, bloody battles of phase three, the allied landings on Iwo Jima (Jp. Iō jima) in February and on Okinawa in April, took place. It was in this final stage of the war that the Japanese introduced their final weapon of desperation, the kamikaze special attack force, a group of young pilots who were willing to use their planes as bombs to attack British and American ships. Nearly two thousand of these suicide planes sank thirty allied ships and damaged several hundred more. Fortunately for Japan and for its enemies, Japan surrendered before the final stages of phase three, the planned allied invasions of Kyūshū in November 1945 and of north of Tokyo in the spring of 1946 took place. Bloody as the fighting had been before, it would have reached new levels of slaughter if the invasions had been carried out.

While the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa continued, the Pacific War entered phase four, the American strategic bombing of Japanese cities, from November 1944 until Japan's surrender in August 1945. American B-29 Superfortress bombers began the systematic pummeling of Japan's major cities. Although the B-29 was developed originally to drop high-explosive bombs from high altitudes, by February 1945, under the leadership of General Curtis LeMay, hundreds of B-29s would fly over defenseless Japanese cities at low altitudes and drop napalm, other incendiary bombs, and even drums of used petroleum products. In one raid on Tokyo on the night of March 9-10, 1945, one hundred thousand people perished (twice the number of those killed in the firebombing of Dresden), mostly from suffocation caused by the intensely burning fires. By the end of the war, Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe, along with other smaller cities, had been incinerated and millions of Japanese were homeless. Indeed, sixty-three of Japan's sixty-six largest cities were at least forty percent destroyed by the American bombing. On August 6, in the final days of the bombing, a B-29 named the Enola Gay obliterated Hiroshima with an atomic bomb. One hundred thousand people died instantly, and tens of thousands later from injuries and radiation sickness. On August 9, another B-29, Bock's Car, dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. When one considers the additional impact of the American submarine blockade, which cut Japan off from all natural resources from its former empire, by the summer of 1945

Japan's industrial machine was essentially at a standstill and millions of people were homeless and on the verge of starvation.

Atomic Bombs

Much has been written about the morality of using the two atomic bombs on Japan. Some critics argue that their use was a crime against humanity, while others argue that they were necessary to end the war. There is no doubt that many people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered grievously because of the nuclear attacks, but whether the use of atomic bombs was qualitatively worse than other wartime massacres (the Rape of Nanjing or the firebombing of Tokyo, for example) is debatable. The Japanese, with their behavior in Nanjing, their brutal counterinsurgency tactics in China, their miserable treatment of allied prisoners-of-war, and their medical experimentation on Chinese prisoners, set a low threshold of acceptable wartime behavior. While one atrocity does not justify another, it may help to explain it. And as for the bombs being unnecessary, it was clear at least by 1944, when General Tōjō was replaced and the kamikaze attacks began in earnest, that the war was lost, and yet the killing continued for another year before Japan surrendered.

On May 7, 1945, the German High Command surrendered unconditionally and the war in Europe ended. On July 16, the leaders of the victorious powers, Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and the new American president, Harry S. Truman, met at Potsdam, in the outskirts of Berlin, to plan an end to the war in Asia. On July 25, the allied leaders called on Japan to surrender unconditionally or face "utter destruction." The Japanese government, concerned that unconditional surrender would place the fate of its monarchy in allied hands, equivocated. On August 6, as we have seen, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and on August 9, the second on Nagasaki. On August 14, Japan agreed to surrender unconditionally. But before we credit the atomic bombs for ending the war, there is one more event of that week that bears relevance.

Soviet Union Enters War

On August 8, 1945, just days before the end of war, the Soviet Union abrogated its neutrality pact, declared war on Japan, and invaded the Japanese colonies in Manchuria and Korea. Many scholars believe that the immediate incentive to surrender was not the atomic bombs, but the fear of Soviet occupation Japanese-controlled territory. It is clear that the Japanese decision-makers, even after a long, bloody war with the United States and its allies, feared the British and Americans much less than they did the Russians. The official surrender took place on the deck of the U.S. battleship Missouri on September 2, 1945: General MacArthur signed the treaty as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, and Admiral Nimitz as the representative of

the United States. Ironically, the occupation authorities, who had received an unconditional surrender from the Japanese, decided in the end to leave the emperor on the throne and not try him as a war criminal.

Why Did the Japanese Lose World War II

Finally, we must address the reasons why the Japanese lost World War II. First, they invaded a country they could not defeat, China. China was too big geographically and had too large a population for the Japanese to bring it under control. China pinned down one million Japanese soldiers, who thus were unavailable to fight elsewhere, for seven years.

Second, although the Japanese signed a neutrality treaty with the Soviet Union in April 1941, and the treaty held until the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and Korea in August 1945, the Japanese feared the Russians and left thousands of troops stationed in Manchuria, who thus were not available to fight elsewhere.

Third, the Japanese military bit off more than it could chew. With hundreds of thousands of men in Manchuria and China, leaders of the army and navy began a war with the allies, who included the world's most powerful nation, the United States.

Fourth, the Japanese were so successful in 1941-1942, that they conquered more territory than they had even planned for, and thus, had to defend a larger area with their troops spread more thinly across the defensive perimeter.

And fifth and finally, the Japanese could not match the industrial capacity and technological development of the United States and its allies. A glance at the tables below illustrates these points. From 1941 until the war's end in 1945, the United States produced four-and-one-half times more airplanes than the Japanese. Even the Soviet Union and the British out-produced the Japanese. In 1941-1942, the primary Japanese fighter plane, the Mitsubishi Zero, was superior to both the United States primary fighter planes in the army and navy. By the war's end, the Japanese still depended on the Zero, or at least on the few that they had left, while both American services had produced far superior planes. The same held true for warships and other kinds of weapons. Japan not only took on a country too large to conquer; it then engaged another country with an industrial capacity too large to defeat.

Table 1, Airplanes Produced, 1941-1945

- United States, 295,486
- Soviet Union, 137,271
- British Empire, 108,560

- Germany, 100,750
- Japan, 67,085

Table 2, U.S. and Japanese Fighter Planes, World War II

- At the time of Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Midway
- Model, Speed, Range
- US Navy, F4F Wildcat, 318 mph, 900 miles
- US Army, P-40, 364 mph, 610 miles
- Japan, Mitsubishi Zero, 360 mph, 1940 miles

1943-1945

- US Navy, F6F Hellcat, 360 mph, 1090 miles
- US Navy, F4U Corsair, 415 mph, 1015 miles
- US Army, P-51 Mustang, 437 mph, 2300 miles
- Japan, Mitsubishi Zero, 360 mph, 1940 miles

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