

World War II in Asia

Èzhàn Yàzhōu Zhànchǎng 二战亚洲战场
Kàngrì Zhànzhēng 抗日战争

World War II in Asia was very different from World War II in Europe. The Asian war included Japanese colonial expansion into the Asian mainland, which preceded the involvement of European and North American nations, and it was also complicated by civil war in China. For some Asian nations the worldwide aspect of the war was secondary to their own conflicts with Japan.

World War II did not begin in a single place or on a single date. While the European war can be dated to the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Germany had already annexed Austria in 1938. In Asia, the beginning of the war is said to be 7 July 1937, when Japan took military action following the Marco Polo Bridge incident 七七事变 (July Seventh Incident). But Japan had invaded Manchuria six years before. Other aspects of conflict in Asia include the Soviet Union's forced relocation of ethnic Koreans (who had fled from Japanese-occupied Korea into eastern Siberia) to Uzbekistan. In this case 190,000 Koreans were relocated to the west. Although many ethnic Russians had been relocated to the central Asian republics beginning in the 1880s, as a way to counter growing Islamic influence there, such relocations were not part of Soviet wartime relocation policy.

Expansionism by Japan

The conflict which Americans refer to as the War in the Pacific or the Second Sino-Japanese War, which the Chinese call the War of Resistance against Japan, and which the Japanese call the Japan-China War, began at different times, according to which countries were involved. To Americans, the war began with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. The direct conflict between Japan and China began more than four years before that. But the colonial efforts and military actions that precipitated this period began with the termination of World War I. At the end of that war Japan had acquired territories in China and the Pacific that had formerly been held by Germany. Japan's expansionist policy had begun even before World War I with acquisition of Taiwan after Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and annexation of Korea in 1910. Japan's goal was strategic security, a “greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere” that stretched 1,600 kilometers from the Japanese islands and that would remove the Western powers from Asia. Western imperialism had undermined China, and Japan by the mid-1930s had begun to eliminate Western influence there by dividing China through the establishment of a puppet government in Manchuria. Armed conflict in China escalated in 1937, however, in what is known in China as the “War of Resistance against Japan.”

In July of that year Japanese forces attacked Beijing; they attacked Shanghai in August. At that time Japan was fighting the army of the Chinese Nationalist Party

(Guomindang) government; the Nationalists leaned more toward the West in matters of foreign policy and trade than did the Chinese Communists, the adversaries of the Nationalists. The Nationalists, unable to stop the Japanese, retreated westward to the city of Nanking (modern Nanjing), where in December Japanese forces captured the city and massacred 300,000 civilians. The Rape of Nanking, more than any other event, created international condemnation of Japan's expansion into Asia and shaped the policies of Japan's opponents.

In southern Asia World War II came to India as a result of British rule there. When Great Britain declared war on Germany, the Indian viceroy followed suit, but the Indian congress did not support him. While war raged in East Asia and Europe, India at first was little more than a supplier of men for the African front and for the British in Singapore as well as a supply base for operations in the Middle East.

India's circumstances changed with Japanese attacks in the Pacific and on the Asian mainland. Indian soldiers who had been sent to reinforce British territories in East Asia were killed or captured by the Japanese after fighting began, causing India to return to British allegiance, at least for a short while.

Entry by the United States

The United States was still formally neutral at this time and was selling Japan oil and steel—materials that Japan needed for its military expansion. The United States had accepted Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula, and ethnic Koreans in the United States were considered to be Japanese. The U.S. interest was on the growing war in Europe, not on Asia. While the United States provided some aid to the Nationalist Chinese, the Soviet Union provided China more operational support with aircraft and pilots until 1939, when those planes and men were recalled to fight Germany. The main U.S. support to China after that was the effort to construct the Burma Road from Lashio, Burma (Myanmar), to Kunming, China, begun in 1938 to provide a western route into China for military supplies. U.S. policy at the time was to avoid conflict in the Pacific because conflict there would divert assets



On 6 February 1945 a U.S. Army soldier and a Chinese soldier, allies in the war, each place the other's flag on the front of their respective jeeps. The first truck convoy in almost three years is just about to cross the China border en route from Ledo, India, to Kunming, China, over the Stilwell Road. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

from the Atlantic. Only in 1940, responding to further Japanese expansion in China, did the United States begin an economic embargo of steel and oil against Japan. This embargo was expanded in mid-1941 to a complete end of all trade with Japan; after that Japan had to seize the sources of materials necessary for its strategic survival.

Japan had continued its strategy of replacing Western influence with its own in Southeast Asia. The French colonial government in Indochina (Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) capitulated to Japan in 1940 after France fell to Germany. Thailand accepted Japan's presence in the region as a means of recovering territory lost to Laos, Cambodia, and Malaya (Malaysia). The outbreak of war with Western forces in December 1941 led to the occupation of Burma, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and began the conquest of the Philippines.

Although most U.S. residents view the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 as the beginning of World War II in Asia, this event occurred thirty-one years after the annexation of Korea, ten years after the establishment of Japanese rule in northern China, four years

A Chinese soldier guards a line of American P-40 fighter planes, painted with the shark-face emblem of the “Flying Tigers,” at an airfield in China, circa 1942.
NATIONAL ARCHIVES.



after the massacre at Nanking (Nanjing), and one year after much of Southeast Asia had come under Japanese domination. But to Japan the initiation of war against the United States was in response to the undeclared war that the United States had begun with its embargo of critical materials.

Early Successes by Japan

Japan's attack on Western holdings in Asia and the Pacific led to impressive early successes. U.S. military power in Hawaii was dealt a severe blow, Hong Kong fell, the Philippines and Burma were taken, and at the outer reaches of Japanese power, the Solomon Islands, the Gilbert Islands, and islands in Alaska's Aleutian chain were captured. The Solomon and Gilbert islands consolidated Japan's holdings acquired by a League of Nations mandate after World War I. By mid-1942 the Western powers were near defeat in Asia and the Pacific. But the same technological forces that had permitted Japan's quick military expansion began to work in favor of the Allies, in part because of what must be considered a stroke of luck that occurred before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Change in Naval Strategy by the United States

U.S. naval strategy before December 1941 had been based on the use of battleships in naval combat, but after the Pearl Harbor attack, the aircraft carrier became the mainstay of U.S. naval strategy. The aircraft carrier had been an untested experiment until it was used with great success by the Japanese navy. At the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy's three aircraft carriers were out of port, but its battleships were in port at Pearl Harbor, where they were destroyed. This circumstance forced the U.S. Navy to adopt a strategy based on the aircraft carrier for the Pacific theater of operations because the main focus of the war was still Europe, and replacements for U.S. battleships would not be available for some time. The new U.S. strategy would have to counter the advances that Japan had already made in the Pacific and would rely on U.S. industrial capacity (after it was mobilized), technological advantage, and innovative tactics.

But Japan's strategy had been one of rapid successes that would give it the advantage in establishing dominance over East Asia before the United States and other Western

Photograph of the hull damage to SS *Morrison R. Waite* after attack by Japanese suicide planes, Leyte Gulf, Phillipine Islands, 29 January 1945.
NATIONAL ARCHIVES.



powers could retaliate. General Tojo Hideki (1884–1948), Japan’s prime minister, had no misperceptions about U.S. capacity; even he recognized that a long war would work against Japan’s long-term goals. As the Allies became capable of maintaining their holdings and then advancing toward the Japanese home islands, the resources available to the Allies (and denied to the Japanese), tactics, and technology swung in favor of the Allies.

Internal Battle for China

Yet on the Asian mainland Japan remained the dominant force. In China the Communists under Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) had been at odds since 1926, and at times this competition undermined Chinese efforts to defeat the Japanese. While Chinese forces avoided total defeat at Shanghai in 1932, Japan was able to establish a puppet government in Manchuria (called Manchuguo). Chiang spent the next five years strengthening his Nationalist army, while the Communists withdrew to north-west China on the Long March (1934–1935) from Jiangxi Province to Shaanxi Province—approximately 9,600 kilometers. Mao rebuilt his forces during the next year and sought a united effort of Communists and Nationalists

against the Japanese. However, Chiang wanted to defeat the Communists first, then deal with the Japanese. In late 1936 one of his own generals kidnapped Chiang while on a visit to Xi’an, and as a condition of Chiang’s release he had work with the Communists to fight the Japanese. Japanese forces subsequently dramatically increased their

Camouflaged and poorly equipped Chinese soldiers repel a charge of 50,000 Japanese along the Salween River near Burma, June 1943.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES.





Mao Zedong, leader of China's Communists, addresses some of his followers, 6 December 1944.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

efforts, leading to the Nanking Massacre and to victories at Guangzhou (Canton) and Wuhan in 1938.

Even as both Chinese factions—the Communists and the Nationalists—worked against the Japanese, each saw their efforts as a means to dominate the other. Chiang Kai-shek believed that Japan would wear down the Communists so that he would be able to deal with them after the Japanese were defeated, and Mao believed that Nationalist

action against the Japanese was an opportunity for his Communist forces to rest. Both sides expanded their forces in preparation for civil war after Japan was defeated.

The United States began to support China only after years of fighting by Chinese forces, but in March 1941 the U.S. Lend-Lease Program (which had been used to support European nations fighting against German Nazi leader Adolph Hitler since 1939) was extended to China. This program and other aid were significantly increased after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor eight months later.

Expansion of the War

The Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor dramatically changed the war for Japan. Despite Japan's early successes in late 1941 and 1942, Japan lacked the resources necessary for a protracted war. An attack on Tokyo by U.S. bombers launched from an aircraft carrier in April 1942 unsettled Japan. This raid, led by Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle, was launched mainly for psychological reasons. For the United States the raid provided some good news after a string of defeats; for Japan the raid showed that not even Tokyo was safe.

The new U.S. aircraft carrier-based strategy, instead of being oriented exclusively against Japanese naval

Conference at Yan'an, the Chinese Communist Party headquarters, before chairman Mao Zedong left for a Chongqing meeting. Central figures are U.S. ambassador Patrick J. Hurley, Colonel I. V. Yeaton, U.S. Army observer, and Mao Zedong, 27 August 1945.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES.





Franklin D. Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-shek, and Winston Churchill in Cairo, Egypt, 25 November 1943. Source: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Public Domain Photographs, 1882–1962. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

forces, used “island-hopping” to advance on the Japanese home islands. After the United States defeated Japanese naval forces at the Battle of Midway and the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942, Allied forces moved through the Gilbert Islands and New Guinea in 1943 and then on to the Marianas Islands and the Philippines in 1944. The Allies, by attacking Japanese strong points that might threaten Allied operations and by seizing those islands necessary for operations while bypassing others, were able to prepare for what would have been the final assault on Japan in 1945.

Farther west the Japanese army had opened a front to invade Burma to counter British and U.S. efforts there. This front expanded in mid-1944 to an attempt to defeat the British and Indian forces in eastern India, resulting in an overextension of Japanese supply lines and the eventual destruction of the Japanese Fifteenth Army.

Also in 1944 the Flying Tigers, a volunteer corps of U.S. fliers in China, began to attack Japanese forces there. Although the Flying Tigers diverted Japanese attention from the war with Chinese forces, Chiang Kai-shek did not capitalize on the diversion, much to the anger of the senior U.S. official in China, Brigadier General Joseph Stillwell. The friction between Stillwell and Chiang soon

caused President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945) to recall Stillwell to the United States.

By 1945 a campaign of strategic bombing of Japanese cities was being waged by the United States from island bases in the Pacific. Attacks by the U.S. Air Corps targeted both Japanese cities and military forces and resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties and massive destruction (as had the Allied attacks on cities in Germany). For example, the firebombing of Tokyo on 9 March 1945 killed as many as 120,000 Japanese. At the time the U.S. policy was one of “total war” against the Japanese population in preparation for a final Allied push against Japan, which was to be a massive amphibious assault against the islands of Kyushu (Operation Olympic) in December 1945 and Honshu (Operation Coronet) in March 1946. For these two assaults the United States had planned to use forces made available by the defeat of Germany—forces that in many cases already were in transit to the Pacific. As many as 5 million soldiers, primarily U.S., would have taken part. The Soviet Union also would take part in the invasion of Japan.

Planning for Operation Olympic had begun in 1944 as Allied forces had moved toward Japan. By early 1945 an estimated 300,000 Japanese soldiers were on the Japanese

home islands of Kyushu and Honshu; by August this estimate had risen to more than a half-million, including a considerable number of combat units. The U.S. experience in attacking islands held by the Japanese was that Japanese soldiers and civilians would fight to the death to avoid capture, leading to heavy casualties among U.S. forces. Estimates for the invasion were as high as 1 million Allied casualties and possibly three times that for Japan. The losses for Japan would include both military and civilian personnel and could have resulted in the end of Japan as a country.

The War Ends

In February 1945 at Yalta in the Crimea the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain held discussions for the Allied focus on Japan. The Yalta Conference resulted in an agreement that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan after Germany was defeated and that upon Japan's defeat those areas in China formerly held by Russia but captured by Japan in 1904 would be ceded to the Soviet Union. President Roosevelt kept the agreement secret from even Vice President Harry Truman (1884–1972) on his return from Yalta, but Roosevelt died within two months. The decision to proceed with the plans made earlier then fell to Truman.

President Truman met with British prime minister Winston Churchill (1875–1975) and Soviet premier Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) at Potsdam, Germany, in July 1945 to discuss further the treatment and disarmament of Japan after it had been defeated. While he was at Potsdam Truman learned of the successful test of a new weapon that might shorten the war. That weapon, of course, was the atomic bomb. Truman informed Churchill, but not Stalin, of the weapon.

The atomic bomb used against Japan eliminated the need for an invasion of Japan. A single U.S. aircraft dropped a single ten-thousand-pound (4,536-kilogram) bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, resulting in an explosion equal to approximately twenty thousand metric tons of conventional explosives. Hiroshima was chosen because it was an industrial target that had not been damaged by earlier attacks, a fact that would allow estimations of the bomb's effectiveness. The bomb



United China Relief was founded in the U.S. to aid Chinese victims of war. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

instantly killed 130,000 people, injured as many, and destroyed four-fifths of the buildings in Hiroshima. Three days later the United States dropped a second atomic bomb, this time on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. By that time the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan and had invaded Manchuria.

Although the two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantly killed approximately 200,000 people, and thousands subsequently died from injuries and radiation poisoning, these attacks were not as damaging as the combined earlier attacks on other major cities. The atomic bomb, for President Truman, was simply a weapon of war, not an element of a greater strategy. It was successful: On 14 August 1945 the Japanese government accepted the guidelines of the Potsdam Declaration. The Soviet Union refused to accept the Japanese proposal because it

did not contain an order to the Japanese military to surrender; the Soviet Union accepted the official signing of the documents on 2 September 1945.

World War II cost more than 2.5 million Japanese and 11 million Chinese lives plus countless others in the occupied nations of the region. Casualties among Allied forces—the United States, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and India—were relatively light; approximately 200,000 were killed in Asia, the majority of them U.S. troops.

Thomas P. DOLAN

Further Reading

- Alperovitz, G. (1967). *Atomic diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Buss, C. A. (1964). *Asia in the modern world*. New York: Macmillan.
- Chang, Iris. (1997). *The rape of Nanking*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dallek, R. (1979). *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American foreign policy, 1932–1943*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Gallagher, M. P. (1963). *The Soviet history of World War II*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger.
- Harries, M., & Harries, S. (1991). *Soldiers of the sun: The rise and fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House.
- Hsü, I. C. Y. (1990). *The rise of modern China* (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kim Young Hum. (1966). *East Asia's turbulent century*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Lattimore, O. (1949). *The situation in Asia*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Lederer, I. J. (Ed.). (1962). *Russian foreign policy: Essays in historical perspective*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- McNelly, T. (Ed.). (1967). *Sources in East Asian history and politics*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Paterson, T. G., Clifford, J. G., Kisatsky, D., Maddock, S. J., & Hagan, K. J. (2000). *American foreign relations* (2 vols.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ulam, A. (1974). *Expansion and coexistence: Soviet foreign policy, 1917–73* (2d ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Van Alstyne, R. W. (1973). *The United States and East Asia*. New York: W. W. Norton.

A mantis stalking a cicada
is unaware of an oriole behind.

螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后

táng láng bǔ chán, huáng què zài hòu